CHAMBERS ROBERT WILLIAM

IN SECRET

Robert Chambers
In Secret

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In Secret:

Содержание

Robert W. Chambers
In Secret

DEDICATION

A grateful nation's thanks are due
To Arethusa and to you–
To her who dauntless at your side
Pneumonia and Flue defied
With phials of formaldehyde!

II

Chief of Police were you, by gosh!
Gol ding it! how you bumped the Boche!
Handed 'em one with club and gun
Until the Hun was on the run:
And that's the way the war was won.

III

Easthampton's pride! My homage take
For Fairest Philadelphia's sake.
Retire in company with Bill;
Rest by the Racquet's window sill
And, undisturbed, consume your pill.

ENVOI

When Cousin Feenix started west
And landed east, he did his best;
And so I've done my prettiest
To make this rhyme long overdue;
For Arethusa and for you.

R. W. C.

CHAPTER I
CUP AND LIP

The case in question concerned a letter in a yellow envelope, which was dumped along with other incoming mail upon one of the many long tables where hundreds of women and scores of men sat opening and reading thousands of letters for the Bureau of P. C.—whatever that may mean.

In due course of routine a girl picked up and slit open the yellow envelope, studied the enclosed letter for a few moments, returned it to its envelope, wrote a few words on a slip of paper, attached the slip to the yellow envelope, and passed it along to the D. A. C.—whoever he or she may be.

The D. A. C., in course of time, opened this letter for the second time, inspected it, returned it to the envelope, added a memorandum, and sent it on up to the A. C.—whatever A. C. may signify.

Seated at his desk, the A. C. perused the memoranda, glanced over the letter and the attached memoranda, added his terse comment to the other slips, pinned them to the envelope, and routed it through certain channels which ultimately carried the letter into a room where six silent and preoccupied people sat busy at six separate tables.

Fate had taken charge of that yellow envelope from the

moment it was mailed in Mexico; Chance now laid it on a yellow oak table before a yellow-haired girl; Destiny squinted over her shoulder as she drew the letter from its triply violated envelope and spread it out on the table before her.

A rich, warm flush mounted to her cheeks as she examined the document. Her chance to distinguish herself had arrived at last. She divined it instantly. She did not doubt it. She was a remarkable girl.

The room remained very still. The five other cipher experts of the P. I. Service were huddled over their tables, pencil in hand, absorbed in their several ungodly complications and laborious calculations. But they possessed no Rosetta Stone to aid them in deciphering hieroglyphics; toad-like, they carried the precious stone in their heads, M. D.!

No indiscreet sound interrupted their mental gymnastics, save only the stealthy scrape of a pen, the subdued rustle of writing paper, the flutter of a code-book's leaves thumbed furtively.

The yellow-haired girl presently rose from her chair, carrying in her hand the yellow letter and its yellow envelope with yellow slips attached; and this harmonious combination of colour passed noiselessly into a smaller adjoining office, where a solemn young man sat biting an unlighted cigar and gazing with preternatural sagacity at nothing at all.

Possibly his pretty affianced was the object of his deep revery —he had her photograph in his desk—perhaps official cogitation as D. C. of the E. C. D.—if you understand what I mean?—may

have been responsible for his owlish abstraction.

Because he did not notice the advent of the yellow haired girl until she said in her soft, attractive voice:

"May I interrupt you a moment, Mr. Vaux?"

Then he glanced up.

"Surely, surely," he said. "Hum—hum!—please be seated, Miss Erith! Hum! Surely!"

She laid the sheets of the letter and the yellow envelope upon the desk before him and seated herself in a chair at his elbow. She was VERY pretty. But engaged men never notice such details.

"I'm afraid we are in trouble," she remarked.

He read placidly the various memoranda written on the yellow slips of paper, scrutinised! the cancelled stamps, postmarks, superscription. But when his gaze fell upon the body of the letter his complacent expression altered to one of disgust!

"What's this, Miss Erith?"

"Code-cipher, I'm afraid."

"The deuce!"

Miss Erith smiled. She was one of those girls who always look as though they had not been long out of a bathtub. She had hazel eyes, a winsome smile, and hair like warm gold. Her figure was youthfully straight and supple—But that would not interest an engaged man.

The D. C. glanced at her inquiringly.

"Surely, surely," he muttered, "hum—hum!—" and tried to fix his mind on the letter.

In fact, she was one of those girls who unintentionally and innocently render masculine minds uneasy through some delicate, indefinable attraction which defies analysis.

"Surely," murmured the D. C., "surely! Hum—hum!"

A subtle freshness like the breath of spring in a young orchard seemed to linger about her. She was exquisitely fashioned to trouble men, but she didn't wish to do such a—

Vaux, who was in love with another girl, took another uneasy look at her, sideways, then picked up his unlighted cigar and browsed upon it.

"Yes," he said nervously, "this is one of those accursed code-ciphers. They always route them through to me. Why don't they notify the five—"

"Are you going to turn THIS over to the Postal Inspection Service?"

"What do you think about it, Miss Erith? You see it's one of those hopeless arbitrary ciphers for which there is no earthly solution except by discovering and securing the code book and working it out that way."

She said calmly, but with heightened colour:

"A copy of that book is, presumably, in possession of the man to whom this letter is addressed."

"Surely—surely. Hum—hum! What's his name, Miss Erith?"—glancing down at the yellow envelope. "Oh, yes—Herman Lauffer—hum!"

He opened a big book containing the names of enemy aliens

and perused it, frowinng. The name of Herman Lauffer was not listed. He consulted other volumes containing supplementary lists of suspects and undesirables—lists furnished daily by certain services unnecessary to mention.

"Here he is!" exclaimed Vaux; "—Herman Lauffer, picture-framer and gilder! That's his number on Madison Avenue!"—pointing to the type-written paragraph. "You see he's probably already under surveillance-one of the several services is doubtless keeping tabs on him. I think I'd better call up the—"

"Please!—Mr. Vaux!" she pleaded.

He had already touched the telephone receiver to unhook it. Miss Erith looked at him appealingly; her eyes were very, very hazel.

"Couldn't we handle it?" she asked.

"WE?"

"You and I!"

"But that's not our affair, Miss Erith—"

"Make it so! Oh, please do. Won't you?"

Vaux's arm fell to the desk top. He sat thinking for a few minutes. Then he picked up a pencil in an absent-minded manner and began to trace little circles, squares, and crosses on his pad, stringing them along line after line as though at hazard and apparently thinking of anything except what he was doing.

The paper on which he seemed to be so idly employed lay on his desk directly under Miss Erith's eyes; and after a while the girl began to laugh softly to herself.

"Thank you, Mr. Vaux," she said. "This is the opportunity I have longed for."

Vaux looked up at her as though he did not understand. But the girl laid one finger on the lines of circles, squares, dashes and crosses, and, still laughing, read them off, translating what he had written:

"You are a very clever girl. I've decided to turn this case over to you. After all, your business is to decipher cipher, and you can't do it without the book."

They both laughed.

"I don't see how you ever solved that," he said, delighted to tease her.

"How insulting!—when you know it is one of the oldest and most familiar of codes—the 1-2-3 and *a-b-c* combination!"

"Rather rude of you to read it over my shoulder, Miss Erith. It isn't done—"

"You meant to see if I could! You know you did!"

"Did I?"

"Of course! That old 'Seal of Solomon' cipher is perfectly transparent."

"Really? But how about THIS!"—touching the sheets of the Lauffer letter—"how are you going to read this sequence of Arabic numerals?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said the girl, candidly.

"But you request the job of trying to find the key?" he suggested ironically.

"There is no key. You know it."

"I mean the code book."

"I would like to try to find it."

"How are you going to go about it?"

"I don't know yet."

Vaux smiled. "All right; go ahead, my dear Miss Erith. You're officially detailed for this delightful job. Do it your own way, but do it—"

"Thank you so much!"

"—In twenty-four hours," he added grimly. "Otherwise I'll turn it over to the P.I."

"Oh! That IS brutal of you!"

"Sorry. But if you can't get the code-book in twenty-four hours I'll have to call in the Service that can."

The girl bit her lip and held out her hand for the letter.

"I can't let it go out of my office," he remarked. "You know that, Miss Erith."

"I merely wish to copy it," she said reproachfully. Her eyes were hazel.

"I ought not to let you take a copy out of this office," he muttered.

"But you will, won't you?"

"All right. Use that machine over there. Hum—hum!"

For twenty minutes the girl was busy typing before the copy was finally ready. Then, comparing it and finding her copy accurate, she returned the original to Mr. Vaux, and rose with

that disturbing grace peculiar to her every movement.

"Where may I telephone you when you're not here?" she inquired diffidently, resting one slim, white hand on his desk.

"At the Racquet Club. Are you going out?"

"Yes."

"What! You abandon me without my permission?"

She nodded with one of those winsome smiles which incline young men to revery. Then she turned and walked toward the cloak room.

The D. C. was deeply in love with somebody else, yet he found it hard to concentrate his mind for a while, and he chewed his unlighted cigar into a pulp. Alas! Men are that way. Not sometimes. Always.

Finally he shoved aside the pile of letters which he had been trying to read, unhooked the telephone receiver, called a number, got it, and inquired for a gentleman named Cassidy.

To the voice that answered he gave the name, business and address of Herman Lauffer, and added a request that undue liberties be taken with any out going letters mailed and presumably composed and written by Mr. Lauffer's own fair hand.

"Much obliged, Mr. Vaux," cooed Cassidy, in a voice so suave that Vaux noticed its unusual blandness and asked if that particular Service already had "anything on Lauffer."

"Not soon but yet!" replied Mr. Cassidy facetiously, "thanks ENTIRELY to your kind tip, Mr. Vaux."

And Vaux, suspicious of such urbane pleasantries, rang off and resumed his mutilated cigar.

"Now, what the devil does Cassidy know about Herman Lauffer," he mused, "and why the devil hasn't his Bureau informed us?" After long pondering he found no answer. Besides, he kept thinking at moments about Miss Erith, which confused him and diverted his mind from the business on hand.

So, in his perplexity, he switched on the electric foot-warmer, spread his fur overcoat over his knees, uncorked a small bottle and swallowed a precautionary formaldehyde tablet, unlocked a drawer of his desk, fished out a photograph, and gazed intently upon it.

It was the photograph of his Philadelphia affianced. Her first name was Arethusa. To him there was a nameless fragrance about her name. And sweetly, subtly, gradually the lovely phantasm of Miss Evelyn Erith faded, vanished into the thin and frigid atmosphere of his office.

That was his antidote to Miss Erith—the intent inspection of his fiancee's very beautiful features as inadequately reproduced by an expensive and fashionable Philadelphia photographer.

It did the business for Miss Erith every time.

The evening was becoming one of the coldest ever recorded in New York. The thermometer had dropped to 8 degrees below zero and was still falling. Fifth Avenue glittered, sheathed in frost; traffic police on post stamped and swung their arms to keep from freezing; dry snow underfoot squeaked when trodden on;

crossings were greasy with glare ice.

It was, also, one of those meatless, wheatless, heatless nights when the privation which had hitherto amused New York suddenly became an ugly menace. There was no coal to be had and only green wood. The poor quietly died, as usual; the well-to-do ventured a hod and a stick or two in open grates, or sat huddled under rugs over oil or electric stoves; or migrated to comfortable hotels. And bachelors took to their clubs. That is where Clifford Vaux went from his chilly bachelor lodgings. He fled in a taxi, buried cheek-deep in his fur collar, hating all cold, all coal companies, and all Kaisers.

In the Racquet Club he found many friends similarly self-dispossessed, similarly obsessed by discomfort and hatred. But there seemed to be some steam heat there, and several open fires; and when the wheatless, meatless meal was ended and the usual coteries drifted to their usual corners, Mr. Vaux found himself seated at a table with a glass of something or other at his elbow, which steamed slightly and had a long spoon in it; and he presently heard himself saying to three other gentlemen: "Four hearts."

His voice sounded agreeably in his own ears; the gentle glow of a lignum-vitae wood fire smote his attenuated shins; he balanced his cards in one hand, a long cigar in the other, exhaled a satisfactory whiff of aromatic smoke, and smiled comfortably upon the table.

"Four hearts," he repeated affably. "Does anybody—"

The voice of Doom interrupted him:

"Mr. Vaux, sir—"

The young man turned in his easy-chair and beheld behind him a club servant, all over silver buttons.

"The telephone, Mr. Vaux," continued that sepulchral voice.

"All right," said the young man. "Bill, will you take my cards?"—he laid his hand, face down, rose and left the pleasant warmth of the card-room with a premonitory shiver.

"Well?" he inquired, without cordiality, picking up the receiver.

"Mr. Vaux?" came a distinct voice which he did not recognise.

"Yes," he snapped, "who is it?"

"Miss Erith."

"Oh—er—surely—surely! GOOD-evening, Miss Erith!"

"Good-evening, Mr. Vaux. Are you, by any happy chance, quite free this evening?"

"Well—I'm rather busy—unless it is important—hum—hum! —in line of duty, you know—"

"You may judge. I'm going to try to secure that code-book to-night."

"Oh! Have you called in the—"

"No!"

"Haven't you communicated with—"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Because there's too much confusion already—too much

petty jealousy and working at cross-purposes. I have been thinking over the entire problem. You yourself know how many people have escaped through jealous or over-zealous officers making premature arrests. We have six different secret-service agencies, each independent of the other and each responsible to its own independent chief, all operating for the Government in New York City. You know what these agencies are—the United States Secret Service, the Department of Justice Bureau of Investigation, the Army Intelligence Service, Naval Intelligence Service, Neutrality Squads of the Customs, and the Postal Inspection. Then there's the State Service and the police and several other services. And there is no proper co-ordination, no single head for all these agencies. The result is a ghastly confusion and shameful inefficiency.

"This affair which I am investigating is a delicate one, as you know. Any blundering might lose us the key to what may be a very dangerous conspiracy. So I prefer to operate entirely within the jurisdiction of our own Service—"

"What you propose to do is OUTSIDE of our province!" he interrupted.

"I'm not so sure. Are you?"

"Well—hum—hum!—what is it you propose to do to-night?"

"I should like to consult my Chief of Division."

"Meaning me?"

"Of course."

"When?"

"Now!"

"Where are you just now, Miss Erith?"

"At home. Could you come to me?"

Vaux shivered again.

"Where d-do you live?" he asked, with chattering teeth.

She gave him the number of a private house on 83d Street just off Madison Avenue. And as he listened he began to shiver all over in the anticipated service of his country.

"Very well," he said, "I'll take a taxi. But this has Valley Forge stung to death, you know."

She said:

"I took the liberty of sending my car to the Racquet Club for you. It should be there now. There's a foot-warmer in it."

"Thank you so much," he replied with a burst of shivers. "I'll b-b-be right up."

As he left the telephone the doorman informed him that an automobile was waiting for him.

So, swearing under his frosty breath, he went to the cloak-room, got into his fur coat, walked back to the card-room and gazed wrathfully upon the festivities.

"What did my hand do, Bill?" he inquired glumly, when at last the scorer picked up his pad and the dealer politely shoved the pack toward his neighbour for cutting.

"You ruined me with your four silly hearts," replied the man who had taken his cards. "Did you think you were playing coon-can?"

"Sorry, Bill. Sit in for me, there's a good chap. I'm not likely to be back to-night—hang it!"

Perfunctory regrets were offered by the others, already engrossed in their new hands; Vaux glanced unhappily at the tall, steaming glass, which had been untouched when he left, but which was now merely half full. Then, with another lingering look at the cheerful fire, he sighed, buttoned his fur coat, placed his hat firmly upon his carefully parted hair, and walked out to perish bravely for his native land.

On the sidewalk a raccoon-furred chauffeur stepped up with all the abandon of a Kadiak bear:

"Mr. Vaux, sir?"

"Yes."

"Miss Erith's car."

"Thanks," grunted Vaux, climbing into the pretty coupe and cuddling his shanks under a big mink robe, where, presently, he discovered a foot-warmer, and embraced it vigorously between his patent-leather shoes.

It had now become the coldest night on record in New York City.

Fortunately he didn't know that; he merely sat there and hated Fate.

Up the street and into Fifth Avenue glided the car and sped northward through the cold, silvery lustre of the arc-lights hanging like globes of moonlit ice from their frozen stalks of bronze.

The noble avenue was almost deserted; nobody cared to face such terrible cold. Few motors were abroad, few omnibuses, and scarcely a wayfarer. Every sound rang metallic in the black and bitter air; the windows of the coupe clouded from his breath; the panels creaked.

At the Plaza he peered fearfully out upon the deserted Circle, where the bronze lady of the fountain, who is supposed to represent Plenty, loomed high in the electric glow, with her magic basket piled high with icicles.

"Yes, plenty of ice," sneered Vaux. "I wish she'd bring us a hod or two of coal."

The wintry landscape of the Park discouraged him profoundly.

"A man's an ass to linger anywhere north of the equator," he grumbled. "Dickybirds have more sense." And again he thought of the wood fire in the club and the partly empty but steaming glass, and the aroma it had wafted toward him; and the temperature it must have imparted to "Bill."

He was immersed in arctic gloom when at length the car stopped. A butler admitted him to a brown-stone house, the steps of which had been thoughtfully strewn with furnace cinders.

"Miss Erith?"

"Yes, sir."

"Announce Mr. Vaux, partly frozen."

"The library, if you please, sir," murmured the butler, taking hat and coat.

So Vaux went up stairs with the liveliness of a crippled spider, and Miss Erith came from a glowing fireside to welcome him, giving him a firm and slender hand.

"You ARE cold," she said. "I'm so sorry to have disturbed you this evening."

He said:

"Hum—hum—very kind—m'sure—hum—hum!"

There were two deep armchairs before the blaze; Miss Erith took one, Vaux collapsed upon the other.

She was disturbingly pretty in her evening gown. There were cigarettes on a little table at his elbow, and he lighted one at her suggestion and puffed feebly.

"Which?" she inquired smilingly.

He understood: "Irish, please."

"Hot?"

"Thank you, yes."

When the butler had brought it, the young man began to regret the Racquet Club less violently.

"It's horribly cold out," he said. "There's scarcely a soul on the streets."

She nodded brightly:

"It's a wonderful night for what we have to do. And I don't mind the cold very much."

"Are you proposing to go OUT?" he asked, alarmed.

"Why, yes. You don't mind, do you?"

"Am *I* to go, too?"

"Certainly. You gave me only twenty-four hours, and I can't do it alone in that time."

He said nothing, but his thoughts concentrated upon a single unprintable word.

"What have you done with the original Lauffer letter, Mr. Vaux?" she inquired rather nervously.

"The usual. No invisible ink had been used; nothing microscopic. There was nothing on the letter or envelope, either, except what we saw."

The girl nodded. On a large table behind her chair lay a portfolio. She turned, drew it toward her, and lifted it into her lap.

"What have you discovered?" he inquired politely, basking in the grateful warmth of the fire.

"Nothing. The cipher is, as I feared, purely arbitrary. It's exasperating, isn't it?"

He nodded, toasting his shins.

"You see," she continued, opening the portfolio, "here is my copy of this wretched cipher letter. I have transferred it to one sheet. It's nothing but a string of Arabic numbers interspersed with meaningless words. These numbers most probably represent, in the order in which they are written, first the number of the page of some book, then the line on which the word is to be found—say, the tenth line from the top, or maybe from the bottom—and then the position of the word—second from the left or perhaps from the right."

"It's utterly impossible to solve that unless you have the book,"

he remarked; "therefore, why speculate, Miss Erith?"

"I'm going to try to find the book."

"How?"

"By breaking into the shop of Herman Lauffer."

"House-breaking? Robbery?"

"Yes."

Vaux smiled incredulously:

"Granted that you get into Lauffer's shop without being arrested, what then?"

"I shall have this cipher with me. There are not likely to be many books in the shop of a gilder and maker of picture frames. I shall, by referring to this letter, search what books I find there for a single coherent sentence. When I discover such a sentence I shall know that I have the right book."

The young man smoked reflectively and gazed into the burning coals.

"So you propose to break into his shop to-night and steal the book?"

"There seems to be nothing else to do, Mr. Vaux."

"Of course," he remarked sarcastically, "we could turn this matter over to the proper authorities—"

"I WON'T! PLEASE don't!"

"Why not?"

"Because I have concluded that it IS part of our work. And I've begun already. I went to see Lauffer. I took a photograph to be framed."

"What does he look like?"

"A mink—an otter—one of those sharp-muzzled little animals!—Two tiny eyes, rather close together, a long nose that wrinkles when he talks, as though he were sniffing at you; a ragged, black moustache, like the furry muzzle-bristles of some wild thing—that is a sketch of Herman Lauffer."

"A pretty man," commented Vaux, much amused.

"He's little and fat of abdomen, but he looks powerful."

"Prettier and prettier!"

They both laughed. A pleasant steam arose from the tall glass at his elbow.

"Well," she said, "I have to change my gown—"

"Good Lord! Are we going now?" he remonstrated.

"Yes. I don't believe there will be a soul on the streets."

"But I don't wish to go at all," he explained. "I'm very happy here, discussing things."

"I know it. But you wouldn't let me go all alone, would you, Mr. Vaux?"

"I don't want you to go anywhere."

"But I'm GOING!"

"Here's where I perish," groaned Vaux, rising as the girl passed him with her pretty, humorous smile, moving lithely, swiftly as some graceful wild thing passing confidently through its own domain.

Vaux gazed meditatively upon the coals, glass in one hand, cigarette in the other. Patriotism is a tough career.

"This is worse than inhuman," he thought. "If I go out on such an errand to-night I sure am doing my bitter bit. … Probably some policeman will shoot me—unless I freeze to death. This is a vastly unpleasant affair…. Vastly!"

He was still caressing the fire with his regard when Miss Erith came back.

She wore a fur coat buttoned to the throat, a fur toque, fur gloves. As he rose she naively displayed a jimmy and two flashlights.

"I see," he said, "very nice, very handy! But we don't need these to convict us."

She laughed and handed him the instruments; and he pocketed them and followed her downstairs.

Her car was waiting, engine running; she spoke to the Kadiak chauffeur, got in, and Vaux followed.

"You know," he said, pulling the mink robe over her and himself, "you're behaving very badly to your superior officer."

"I'm so excited, so interested! I hope I'm not lacking in deference to my honoured Chief of Division. Am I, Mr. Vaux?"

"You certainly hustle me around some! This is a crazy thing we're doing."

"Oh, I'm sorry!"

"You're an autocrat. You're a lady-Nero! Tell me, Miss Erith, were you ever afraid of anything on earth?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Lightning and caterpillars."

"Those are probably the only really dangerous things I never feared," he said. "You seem to be young and human and feminine. Are you?"

"Oh, very."

"Then why aren't you afraid of being shot for a burglar, and why do you go so gaily about grand larceny?"

The girl's light laughter was friendly and fearless.

"Do you live alone?" he inquired after a moment's silence.

"Yes. My parents are not living."

"You are rather an unusual girl, Miss Erith."

"Why?"

"Well, girls of your sort are seldom as much in earnest about their war work as you seem to be," he remarked with gentle irony.

"How about the nurses and drivers in France?"

"Oh, of course. I mean nice girls, like yourself, who do near-war work here in New York—"

"You ARE brutal!" she exclaimed. "I am mad to go to France! It is a sacrifice—a renunciation for me to remain in New York. I understand nursing and I know how to drive a car; but I have stayed here because my knowledge of ciphers seemed to fit me for this work."

"I was teasing you," he said gently.

"I know it. But there is SO much truth in what you say about near-war work. I hate that sort of woman…. Why do you laugh?"

"Because you're just a child. But you are full of ability and

possibility, Miss Erith."

"I wish my ability might land me in France!"

"Surely, surely," he murmured.

"Do you think it will, Mr. Vaux?"

"Maybe it will," he said, not believing it. He added: "I think, however, your undoubted ability is going to land us both in jail."

At which pessimistic prognosis they both began to laugh. She was very lovely when she laughed.

"I hope they'll give us the same cell," she said. "Don't you?"

"Surely," he replied gaily.

Once he remembered the photograph of Arethusa in his desk at headquarters, and thought that perhaps he might need it before the evening was over.

"Surely, surely," he muttered to himself, "hum—hum!"

Her coupe stopped in Fifty-sixth Street near Madison Avenue.

"The car will wait here," remarked the girl, as Vaux helped her to descend. "Lauffer's shop is just around the corner." She took his arm to steady herself on the icy sidewalk. He liked it.

In the bitter darkness there was not a soul to be seen on the street; no tramcars were approaching on Madison Avenue, although far up on the crest of Lenox Hill the receding lights of one were just vanishing.

"Do you see any policemen?" she asked in a low voice.

"Not one. They're all frozen to death, I suppose, as we will be in a few minutes."

They turned into Madison Avenue past the Hotel Essex. There

was not a soul to be seen. Even the silver-laced porter had retired from the freezing vestibule. A few moments later Miss Erith paused before a shop on the ground floor of an old-fashioned brownstone residence which had been altered for business.

Over the shop-window was a sign: "H. Lauffer, Frames and Gilding." The curtains of the shop-windows were lowered. No light burned inside.

Over Lauffer's shop was the empty show-window of another shop—on the second floor—the sort of place that milliners and tea-shop keepers delight in—but inside the blank show-window was pasted the sign "To Let."

Above this shop were three floors, evidently apartments. The windows were not lighted.

"Lauffer lives on the fourth floor," said Miss Erith. "Will you please give me the jimmy, Vaux?"

He fished it out of his overcoat pocket and looked uneasily up and down the deserted avenue while the girl stepped calmly into the open entryway. There were two doors, a glass one opening on the stairs leading to the upper floors, and the shop door on the left.

She stooped over for a rapid survey, then with incredible swiftness jimmied the shop door.

The noise of the illegal operations awoke the icy and silent avenue with a loud, splitting crash! The door swung gently inward.

"Quick!" she said. And he followed her guiltily inside.

The shop was quite warm. A stove in the rear room still emitted heat and a dull red light. On the stove was a pot of glue, or some other substance used by gilders and frame makers. Steam curled languidly from it; also a smell not quite as languid.

Vaux handed her an electric torch, then flashed his own. The next moment she found a push button and switched on the lights in the shop. Then they extinguished their torches.

Stacks of frames in raw wood, frames in "compo," samples gilded and in natural finish littered the untidy place. A few process "mezzotints" hung on the walls. There was a counter on which lay twine, shears and wrapping paper, and a copy of the most recent telephone directory. It was the only book in sight, and Miss Erith opened it and spread her copy of the cipher-letter beside it. Then she began to turn the pages according to the numbers written in her copy of the cipher letter.

Meanwhile, Vaux was prowling. There were no books in the rear room; of this he was presently assured. He came back into the front shop and began to rummage. A few trade catalogues rewarded him and he solemnly laid them on the counter.

"The telephone directory is NOT the key," said Miss Erith, pushing it aside. A few moments were sufficient to convince them that the key did not lie within any of the trade catalogues either.

"Have you searched very carefully?" she asked.

"There's not another book in the bally shop."

"Well, then, Lauffer must have it in his apartment upstairs."

"Which apartment is it?"

"The fourth floor. His name is under a bell on a brass plate in the entry. I noticed it when I came in." She turned off the electric light; they went to the door, reconnoitred cautiously, saw nobody on the avenue. However, a tramcar was passing, and they waited; then Vaux flashed his torch on the bell-plate.

Under the bell marked "Fourth Floor" was engraved Herman Lauffer's name.

"You know," remonstrated Vaux, "we have no warrant for this sort of thing, and it means serious trouble if we're caught."

"I know it. But what other way is there?" she inquired naively. "You allowed me only twenty-four hours, and I WON'T back out!"

"What procedure do you propose now?" he asked, grimly amused, and beginning to feel rather reckless himself, and enjoying the feeling. "What do you wish to do?" he repeated. "I'm game."

"I have an automatic pistol," she remarked seriously, tapping her fur-coat pocket, "—and a pair of handcuffs—the sort that open and lock when you strike a man on the wrist with them. You know the kind?"

"Surely. You mean to commit assault and robbery in the first degree upon the body of the aforesaid Herman?"

"I-is that it?" she faltered.

"It is."

She hesitated:

"That is rather dreadful, isn't it?"

"Somewhat. It involves almost anything short of life imprisonment.

But *I* don't mind."

"We couldn't get a search-warrant, could we?"

"We have found nothing, so far, in that cipher letter to encourage us in applying for any such warrant," he said cruelly.

"Wouldn't the excuse that Lauffer is an enemy alien and not registered aid us in securing a warrant?" she insisted.

"He is not an alien. I investigated that after you left this afternoon. His parents were German but he was born in Chicago. However, he is a Hun, all right—I don't doubt that…. What do you propose to do now?"

She looked at him appealingly:

"Won't you allow me more than twenty-four hours?"

"I'm sorry."

"Why won't you?"

"Because I can't dawdle over this affair."

The girl smiled at him in her attractive, resolute way:

"Unless we find that book we can't decipher this letter. The letter comes from Mexico,—from that German-infested Republic. It is written to a man of German parentage and it is written in cipher. The names of Luxburg, Caillaux, Bolo, Bernstorff are still fresh in our minds. Every day brings us word of some new attempt at sabotage in the United States. Isn't there ANY way, Mr. Vaux, for us to secure the key to this cipher

letter?"

"Not unless we go up and knock this man Lauffer on the head. Do you want to try it?"

"Couldn't we knock rather gently on his head?"

Vaux stifled a laugh. The girl was so pretty, the risk so tremendous, the entire proceeding so utterly outrageous that a delightful sense of exhilaration possessed him.

"Where's that gun?" he said.

She drew it out and handed it to him.

"Is it loaded?"

"Yes."

"Where are the handcuffs?"

She fished out the nickel-plated bracelets and he pocketed his torch. A pleasant thrill passed through the rather ethereal anatomy of Mr. Vaux.

"All right," he said briskly. "Here's hoping for adjoining cells!"

To jimmy the glass door was the swiftly cautious work of a moment or two. Then the dark stairs rose in front of them and Vaux took the lead. It was as cold as the pole in there, but Vaux's blood was racing now. And alas! the photograph of Arethusa was in his desk at the office!

On the third floor he flashed his torch through an empty corridor and played it smartly over every closed door. On the fourth floor he took his torch in his left hand, his pistol in his right.

"The door to the apartment is open!" she whispered.

It was. A lamp on a table inside was still burning. They had a glimpse of a cheap carpet on the floor, cheap and gaudy furniture. Vaux extinguished and pocketed his torch, then, pistol lifted, he stepped noiselessly into the front room.

It seemed to be a sort of sitting-room, and was in disorder; cushions from a lounge lay about the floor; several books were scattered near them; an upholstered chair had been ripped open and disembowelled, and its excelsior stuffing strewn broadcast.

"This place looks as though it had been robbed!" whispered Vaux.

"What the deuce do you suppose has happened?"

They moved cautiously to the connecting-door of the room in the rear. The lamplight partly illuminated it, revealing it as a bedroom.

Bedclothes trailed to the floor, which also was littered with dingy masculine apparel flung about at random. Pockets of trousers and of coats had been turned inside out, in what apparently had been a hasty and frantic search.

The remainder of the room was in disorder, too; underwear had been pulled from dresser and bureau; the built-in wardrobe doors swung ajar and the clothing lay scattered about, every pocket turned inside out.

"For heaven's sake," muttered Vaux, "what do you suppose this means?"

"Look!" she whispered, clutching his arm and pointing to the

fireplace at their feet.

On the white-tiled hearth in front of the unlighted gas-logs lay the stump of a cigar.

From it curled a thin thread of smoke.

They stared at the smoking stub on the hearth, gazed fearfully around the dimly lighted bedroom, and peered into the dark dining-room beyond.

Suddenly Miss Erith's hand tightened on his sleeve.

"Hark!" she motioned.

He heard it, too—a scuffling noise of heavy feet behind a closed door somewhere beyond the darkened dining-room.

"There's somebody in the kitchenette!" she whispered.

Vaux produced his pistol; they stole forward into the dining-room; halted by the table.

"Flash that door," he said in a low voice.

Her electric torch played over the closed kitchen door for an instant, then, at a whispered word from him, she shut it off and the dining-room was plunged again into darkness.

And then, before Vaux or Miss Erith had concluded what next was to be done, the kitchen door opened; and, against the dangling lighted bulb within, loomed a burly figure wearing hat and overcoat and a big bass voice rumbled through the apartment:

"All right, all right, keep your shirt on and I'll get your coat and vest for you—"

Then Miss Erith flashed her torch full in the man's face, blinding him. And Vaux covered him with levelled pistol.

Even then the man made a swift motion toward his pocket, but at Vaux's briskly cheerful warning he checked himself and sullenly and very slowly raised both empty hands.

"All right, all right," he grumbled. "It's on me this time. Go on; what's the idea?"

"W-well, upon my word!" stammered Vaux, "it's Cassidy!"

"F'r the love o' God," growled Cassidy, "is that YOU, Mr. Vaux!" He lowered his arms sheepishly, reached out and switched on the ceiling light over the dining-room table. "Well, f'r—" he began; and, seeing Miss Erith, subsided.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Vaux, disgusted with this glaring example of interference from another service.

"What am I doing?" repeated Cassidy with a sarcastic glance at Miss Erith. "Faith, I'm pinching a German gentleman we've been watching these three months and more. Is that what you're up to, too?"

"Herman Lauffer?"

"That's the lad, sir. He's in the kitchen yonder, dressing f'r to take a little walk. I gotta get his coat and vest. And what are you doing here, sir?"

"How did YOU get in?" asked Miss Erith, flushed with chagrin and disappointment.

"With keys, ma'am."

"Oh, Lord!" said Vaux, "we jimmied the door. What do you think of that, Cassidy?"

"Did you so?" grinned Cassidy, now secure in his triumphant

priority and inclined to become friendly.

"I never dreamed that your division was watching Lauffer," continued Vaux, still red with vexation. "It's a wonder we didn't spoil the whole affair between us."

"It is that!" agreed Cassidy with a wider grin. "And you can take it from me, Mr. Vaux, we never knew that the Postal Inspection was on to this fellow at all at all until you called me to stop outgoing letters."

"What have you on him?" inquired Vaux.

Cassidy laughed:

"Oh, listen then! Would you believe this fellow was tryin' the old diagonal trick? Sure it was easy; I saw him mail a letter this afternoon and I got it. I'd been waiting three months for him to do something like that. But he's a fox—he is that, Mr. Vaux! Do you want to see the letter? I have it on me—"

He fished it out of his inside pocket and spread it on the dining table under the light.

"You know the game," he remarked, laying a thick forefinger on the diagonal line bisecting the page. "All I had to do was to test the letter by drawing that line across it from corner to corner. Read the words that the line cuts through. Can you beat it?"

Vaux and Miss Erith bent over the letter, read the apparently innocent message it contained, then read the words through which the diagonal line had been drawn.

Then Cassidy triumphantly read aloud the secret and treacherous information which the letter contained:

"SEVEN UNITED STATES TRANSPORTS TO-DAY NEW YORK (BY THE) NORTHERN ROUTE. INFORM OUR U-BOATS. URGENCY REQUIRES INSTANT MEASURES. TEN MORE ARE TO SAIL FROM HERE NEXT WEEK."

"The dirty Boche!" added Cassidy. "Dugan has left for Mexico to look up this brother of his and I'm lookin' up this snake, so I guess there's no harm done so far."

"New York.

"January 3rd. 1916.

"My dear Brother:

"For seven long weeks I have awaited a letter from you. The United-States mails from Mexico seem to be interrupted. Imagine my transports of joy when at last I hear from you today. You and I, dear brother, are the only ones left of our family—you in Vera Cruz. I in New-York—you in a hot Southern climate, I in a Northern, amid snow and ice, where the tardy sun does not route me from my bed till late in the morning.

"However, I inform you with pleasure that I am well. I rejoice that our good health is mutual. After all, the dear old U. S. suits me. Of course railroads or boats could carry me to a warm climate, in case urgency required it. But I am quite well now, and my health requires merely prudence. However, if I am again ill at any instant, I shall leave for Florida, where all tho proper measures can be taken to combat my rheumatism.

"Ten days ago I was in bed, and unable to do more than move

my left arm. But the doctors are confident that my malady is not going to return. If it does threaten to return I shall sail for Jacksonville at once, and from there go to Miami, and not return here until the warm and balmy weather of next spring has lasted at least a week. Affectionataly your brother.

"Herman."

He pocketed the letter and went into the bedroom to get a coat and vest for the prisoner. Miss Erith looked at Vaux.

"Cassidy seems to know nothing about the code-cipher," she whispered. "I think he rummaged on general principles, not in search of any code-book."

She looked around the dining-room. The doors of the yellow oak sideboard were open, but no book was there among the plated knives and forks and the cheap dishes.

Cassidy came back with the garments he had been looking for—an overcoat, coat and vest—and he carried them into the kitchenette, whither presently Vaux followed him.

Cassidy had just unlocked the handcuffs from the powerful wrists of a dark, stocky, sullen man who stood in his shirt-sleeves near a small deal table.

"Lauffer?" inquired Vaux, dryly.

"It sure is, ain't it, Herman?" replied Cassidy facetiously. "Now, then, me Dutch bucko, climb into your jeans, if YOU please—there's a good little Boche!"

Vaux gazed curiously at the spy, who returned his inspection coolly enough while he wrinkled his nose at him, and his beady

eyes roamed over him.

When the prisoner had buttoned his vest and coat, Cassidy snapped on the bracelets again, whistling cheerily under his breath.

As they started to leave the kitchenette, Vaux, who brought up the rear, caught sight of a large, thick book lying on the pantry shelf. It was labelled "Perfect Cook-Book," but he picked it up, shoved it into his overcoat pocket en passant, and followed Cassidy and his prisoner into the dining-room.

Here Cassidy turned humorously to him and to Miss Erith.

"I've cleaned up the place," he remarked, "but you're welcome to stay here and rummage if you want to. I'm sending one of our men back to take possession as soon as I lock up this bird."

"All right. Good luck," nodded Vaux.

Cassidy tipped his derby to Miss Erith, bestowed a friendly grin on Vaux.

"Come along, old sport!" he said genially to Lauffer; and he walked away with his handcuffed prisoner, whistling "Garryowen."

"Wait!" motioned Vaux to Miss Erith. He went to the stairs, listened to the progress of agent and prey, heard the street-door clash, then hastened back to the lighted dining-room, pulling the "Perfect Cook-Book" from his pocket.

"I found that in the kitchenette," he remarked, laying it before her on the table. "Maybe that's the key?"

"A cook-book!" She smiled, opened it. "Why—why, it's a

DICTIONARY!" she exclaimed excitedly.

"A dictionary!"

"Yes! Look! Stormonth's English Dictionary!"

"By ginger!" he said. "I believe it's the code-book! Where is your cipher letter, Miss Erith!"

The girl produced it with hands that trembled a trifle, spread it out under the light. Then she drew from her pocket a little pad and a pencil.

"Quick," she said, "look for page 17!"

"Yes, I have it!"

"First column!"

"Yes."

"Now try the twentieth word from the top!"

He counted downward very carefully.

"It is the word 'anagraph,'" he said; and she wrote it down.

"Also, we had better try the twentieth word counting from the bottom of the page up," she said. "It might possibly be that."

"The twentieth word, counting from the bottom of the column upward, is the word 'an,'" he said. She wrote it.

"Now," she continued, "try page 15, second column, third word from TOP!"

"'Ambrosia' is the word."

"Try the third word from the BOTTOM."

"'American.'"

She pointed to the four words which she had written. Counting from the TOP of the page downward the first two words were

"Anagraph ambrosia." But counting from the BOTTOM upward the two words formed the phrase: "AN AMERICAN."

"Try page 730, first column, seventh word from the bottom," she said, controlling her excitement with an effort.

"The word is 'who.'"

"Page 212, second column, first word!"

"'For.'"

"Page 507, first column, seventh word!"

"'Reasons.'"

"We have the key!" she exclaimed. "Look at what I've written! —'An American who for reasons!' And here, in the cipher letter, it goes on—'of the most'—Do you see?"

"It certainly looks like the key," he said. "But we'd better try another word or two."

"Try page 717, first column, ninth word."

"The word is 'vital.'"

"Page 274, second column, second word."

"'Importance!'"

"It is the key! Here is what I have written: 'An American who for reasons, of the most vital importance!' Quick. We don't want a Secret Service man to find us here, Mr. Vaux! He'd object to our removing this book from Lauffer's apartment. Put it into your pocket and run!" And the pretty Miss Erith turned and took to her heels with Vaux after her.

Through the disordered apartment and down the stairs they sped, out into the icy darkness and around the corner, where her

car stood, engine running, and a blanket over the hood.

As soon as the chauffeur espied them he whisked off the blanket;

Miss Erith said: "Home!" and jumped in, and Vaux followed.

Deep under the fur robe they burrowed, shivering more from sheer excitement than from cold, and the car flew across to Fifth Avenue and then northward along deserted sidewalks and a wintry park, where naked trees and shrubs stood stark as iron in the lustre of the white electric lamps.

"That time the Secret Service made a mess of it," he said with a nervous laugh. "Did you notice Cassidy's grin of triumph?"

"Poor Cassidy," she said.

"I don't know. He butted in."

"All the services are working at cross-purposes. It's a pity."

"Well, Cassidy got his man. That's practically all he came for. Evidently he never heard of a code-book in connection with Lauffer's activities. That diagonal cipher caught him."

"What luck," she murmured, "that you noticed that cook-book in the pantry! And what common sense you displayed in smuggling it!"

"I didn't suppose it was THE book; I just took a chance."

"To take a chance is the best way to make good, isn't it?" she said, laughing. "Oh, I am so thrilled, Mr. Vaux! I shall sit up all night over my darling cipher and my fascinating code-book-dictionary."

"Will you be down in the morning?" he inquired.

"Of course. Then to-morrow evening, if you will come to my house, I shall expect to show you the entire letter neatly deciphered."

"Fine!" he exclaimed as the car stopped before her door.

She insisted on sending him home in her car, and he was very grateful; so when he had seen her safely inside her house with the cook-book-dictionary clasped in her arms and a most enchanting smile on her pretty face, he made his adieux, descended the steps, and her car whirled him swiftly homeward through the arctic night.

CHAPTER II
THE SLIP

When Clifford Vaux arrived at a certain huge building now mostly devoted to Government work connected with the war, he found upon his desk a dictionary camouflaged to represent a cook-book; and also Miss Erith's complete report. And he lost no time in opening and reading the latter document:

"CLIFFORD VAUX, ESQ.,

"D. C. of the E. C. D.,

"P. I. Service. (Confidential)

"Sir:

"I home the honour to report that the matter with which you have entrusted me is now entirely cleared up.

"This short preliminary memorandum is merely to refresh your memory concerning the particular case herewith submitted in detail.

"In re Herman Laufer:

"The code-book, as you recollect, is Stormonth's English Dictionary, XIII Edition, published by Wm. Blackwood & Sons, Edinburgh and London, MDCCCXCVI. This book I herewith return to you.

"The entire cipher is, as we guessed, arbitrary and stupidly capricious. Phonetic spelling is indulged in occasionally—I

should almost say humorously—were it not a Teuton mind which evolved the phonetic combinations which represent proper names not found in that dictionary—names like Holzminden and New York, for example.

"As for the symbols and numbers, they are not at all obscure. Reference to the dictionary makes the cipher perfectly clear.

"In Stormonth's Dictionary you will notice that each page has two columns; each column a varying number of paragraphs; some of the paragraphs contain more than one word to be defined.

"In the cipher letter the first number of any of the groups of figures which are connected by dashes (—) and separated by vertical (|) represents the page in Stormonth's Dictionary on which the word is to be found.

"The second number represents the column (1 or 2) in which the word is to be found.

"The third number indicates the position of the word, counting from the bottom of the page upward, in the proper column.

"Roman numerals which sometimes follow, enclosed in a circle, give the position of the word in the paragraph, if it does not, as usual, begin the paragraph.

"The phonetic spelling of Holzminden is marked by an asterisk when first employed. Afterward only the asterisk (*) is used, instead of the cumbersome phonetic symbol.

"Minus and plus signs are namely used to subtract or to add letters or to connect syllables. Reference to the code-book makes

all this clear enough.

"In the description of the escaped prisoner, Roman numerals give his age; Roman and Arabic his height in feet and inches.

"Arabic numerals enclosed in circles represent capital letters as they occur in the middle of a page in the dictionary—as S, for example, is printed in the middle of the page; and all words beginning with S follow in proper sequence.

"With the code-book at your elbow the cipher will prove to be perfectly simple. Without the code it is impossible for any human being to solve such a cipher, as you very well know.

"I herewith append the cipher letter, the method of translation, and the complete message.

"Respectfully,

"EVELYN ERITH: E. C. D."

Complete Translation of Cipher Letter with Parenthetical Suggestions by Miss Erith.

To

B 60-02,

An American, who for reasons of the most vital importance has been held as an English (civilian?) civic prisoner in the mixed civilian (concentration) camp at Holzminden, has escaped. It is now feared that he has made his way safely to New York. (Memo: Please note the very ingenious use of phonetics to spell out New York. E. E.)

(His) name (is) Kay McKay and he has been known as Kay McKay of Isla—a Scotch title—he having inherited from his

grandfather (a) property in Scotland called Isla, which is but a poor domain (consisting of the river) Isla and the adjoining moors and a large white-washed manor (house) in very poor repair.

After his escape from Holzminden it was at first believed that McKay had been drowned in (the River) Weser. Later it was ascertained that he sailed for an American port via a Scandinavian liner sometime (in) October.

(This is his) description: Age 32; height 5 feet 8 1/2 inches; eyes brown; hair brown; nose straight; mouth regular; face oval; teeth white and even—no dental work; small light-brown moustache; no superficial identification marks.

The bones in his left foot were broken many years ago, but have been properly set. Except for an hour or so every two or three months, he suffers no lameness.

He speaks German without accent; French with an English accent.

Until incarcerated (in Holzminden camp) he had never been intemperate. There, however, through orders from Berlin, he was tempted and encouraged in the use of intoxicants—other drink, indeed, being excluded from his allowance—so that after the second year he had become more or less addicted (to the use of alcohol).

Unhappily, however, this policy, which had been so diligently and so thoroughly pursued in order to make him talkative and to surprise secrets from him when intoxicated (failed to produce

the so properly expected results and) only succeeded in making of the young man a hopeless drunkard.

Sterner measures had been decided on, and, in fact, had already been applied, when the prisoner escaped by tunnelling.

Now, it is most necessary to discover this McKay (man's whereabouts and to have him destroyed by our agents in New York). Only his death can restore to the (Imperial German) Government its perfect sense of security and its certainty of (ultimate) victory.

The necessity (for his destruction) lies in the unfortunate and terrifying fact that he is cognisant of the Great Secret! He should have been executed at Holzminden within an hour (of his incarceration).

This was the urgent advice of Von Tirpitz. But unfortunately High Command intervened with the expectation (of securing from the prisoner) further information (concerning others who, like himself, might possibly have become possessed in some measure of a clue to the Great Secret)? E. E.

The result is bad. (That the prisoner has escaped without betraying a single word of information useful to us.) E. E.

Therefore, find him and have him silenced without delay. The security of the Fatherland depends on this (man's immediate death).

M 17. (Evidently the writer of the letter) E. E.

For a long time Vaux sat studying cipher and translation. And at last he murmured:

"Surely, surely. Fine—very fine…. Excellent work. But—WHAT is the Great Secret?"

There was only one man in America who knew.

And he had landed that morning from the Scandinavian steamer, Peer Gynt, and, at that very moment, was standing by the bar of the Hotel Astor, just sober enough to keep from telling everything he knew to the bartenders, and just drunk enough to talk too much in a place where the enemy always listens.

He said to the indifferent bartender who had just served him:

"'F you knew what I know 'bout Germany, you'd be won'ful man! I'M won'ful man. I know something! Going tell, too. Going see 'thorities this afternoon. Going tell 'em great secret!… Grea' milt'ry secret! Tell 'em all 'bout it! Grea' secresh! Nobody knows grea'-sekresh 'cep m'self! Whaddya thinka that? Gimme l'il Hollanschnapps n'water onna side!"

Hours later he was, apparently, no drunker—as though he could not manage to get beyond a certain stage of intoxication, no matter how recklessly he drank.

"'Nother Hollenschnapps," he said hazily. "Goin' see 'thorities 'bout grea' sekresh! Tell 'em all 'bout it. Anybody try stop me, knockem down. Thassa way…. N-n-nockem out!—stan' no nonsense! Ge' me?"

Later he sauntered off on slightly unsteady legs to promenade himself in the lobby and Peacock Alley.

Three men left the barroom when he left. They continued to keep him in view.

Although he became no drunker, he grew politer after every drink—also whiter in the face—and the bluish, bruised look deepened under his eyes.

But he was a Chesterfield in manners; he did not stare at any of the lively young persons in Peacock Alley, who seemed inclined to look pleasantly at him; he made room for them to pass, hat in hand.

Several times he went to the telephone desk and courteously requested various numbers; and always one of the three men who had been keeping him in view stepped into the adjoining booth, but did not use the instrument.

Several times he strolled through the crowded lobby to the desk and inquired whether there were any messages or visitors for Mr. Kay McKay; and the quiet, penetrating glances of the clerks on duty immediately discovered his state of intoxication but nothing else, except his extreme politeness and the tense whiteness of his face.

Two of the three men who were keeping him in view tried, at various moments, to scrape acquaintance with him in the lobby, and at the bar; and without any success.

The last man, who had again stepped into an adjoining booth while McKay was telephoning, succeeded, by inquiring for McKay at the desk and waiting there while he was being paged.

The card on which this third man of the trio had written bore the name Stanley Brown; and when McKay hailed the page and perused the written name of his visitor he walked carefully back

to the lobby—not too fast, because he seemed to realise that his legs, at that time, would not take kindly to speed.

In the lobby the third man approached him:

"Mr. McKay?"

"Mr. Brown?"

"A. I. O. agent," said Brown in a low voice. "You telephoned to Major Biddle, I believe."

McKay inspected him with profound gravity:

"How do," he said. "Ve' gla', m'sure. Ve' kind 'f'you come way up here see me. But I gotta see Major Biddle."

"I understand. Major Biddle has asked me to meet you and bring you to him."

"Oh. Ve' kind, 'm'sure. Gotta see Major. Confidential. Can' tell anybody 'cep Major."

"The Major will meet us at the Pizza, this evening," explained Brown. "Meanwhile, if you will do me the honour of dining with me—"

"Ve' kind. Pleasure, 'm'sure. Have li'l drink, Mr. Brown?"

"Not here," murmured Brown. "I'm not in uniform, but I'm known."

"Quite so. Unnerstan' perfec'ly. Won'do. No."

"Had you thought of dressing for dinner?" inquired Mr. Brown carelessly.

McKay nodded, went over to the desk and got his key. But when he returned to Brown he only laughed and shoved the key into his pocket.

"Forgot," he explained. "Just came over. Haven't any clothes. Got these in Christiania. Ellis Island style. 'S'all I've got. Good overcoat though." He fumbled at his fur coat as he stood there, slightly swaying.

"We'll get a drink where I'm not known," said Brown. "I'll find a taxi."

"Ve' kind," murmured McKay, following him unsteadily to the swinging doors that opened on Long Acre, now so dimly lighted that it was scarcely recognisable.

An icy blast greeted them from the darkness, refreshing McKay for a moment; but in the freezing taxi he sank back as though weary, pulling his beaver coat around him and closing his battered eyes.

"Had a hard time," he muttered. "Feel done in. … Prisoner. … Gottaway. . . . Three months making Dutch border…. Hell. Tell Major all 'bout it. Great secret."

"What secret is that?" asked Brown, peering at him intently through the dim light, where he swayed in the corner with every jolt of the taxi.

"Sorry, m'dear fellow. Mussn' ask me that. Gotta tell Major n'no one else."

"But I am the Major's confidential—"

"Sorry. You'll 'scuse me, 'm'sure. Can't talk Misser Brow! —'gret 'ceedingly 'cessity reticence. Unnerstan'?"

The taxi stopped before a vaguely lighted saloon on Fifty-ninth Street east of Fifth Avenue. McKay opened his eyes,

looked around him in the bitter darkness, stumbled out into the snow on Brown's arm.

"A quiet, cosy little cafe," said Brown, "where I don't mind joining you in something hot before dinner."

"Thasso? Fine! Hot Scotch we' good 'n'cold day. We'll havva l'il drink keep us warm 'n'snug."

A few respectable-looking men were drinking beer in the cafe as they entered a little room beyond, where a waiter came to them and took Brown's orders.

Hours later McKay seemed to be no more intoxicated than he had been; no more loquacious or indiscreet. He had added nothing to what he had already disclosed, boasted no more volubly about the "great secret," as he called it.

Now and then he recollected himself and inquired for the "Major," but a drink always sidetracked him.

It was evident, too, that Brown was becoming uneasy and impatient to the verge of exasperation, and that he was finally coming to the conclusion that he could do nothing with the man McKay as far as pumping was concerned.

Twice, on pretexts, he left McKay alone in the small room and went into the cafe, where his two companions of the Hotel Astor were seated at a table, discussing sardine sandwiches and dark brew.

"I can't get a damned thing out of him," he said in a low voice. "Who the hell he is and where he comes from is past me. Had I better fix him and take his key?"

"Yess," nodded one of the other men, "it iss perhaps better that we search now his luggage in his room."

"I guess that's all we can hope for from this guy. Say! He's a clam. And he may be only a jazzer at that."

"He comes on the Peer Gynt this morning. We shall not forget that alretty, nor how he iss calling at those telephones all afternoon."

"He may be a nosey newspaper man—just a fresh souse," said Brown. "All the same I think I'll fix him and we'll go see what he's got in his room."

The two men rose, paid their reckoning, and went out; Brown returned to the small room, where McKay sat at the table with his curly brown head buried in his arms.

He did not look up immediately when Brown returned—time for the latter to dose the steaming tumbler at the man's elbow, and slip the little bottle back into his pocket.

Then, thinking McKay might be asleep, he nudged him, and the young man lifted his marred and dissipated visage and extended one hand for his glass.

They both drank.

"Wheresa Major?" inquired McKay. "Gotta see him rightaway. Great secreksh—"

"Take a nap. You're tired."

"Yess'm all in," muttered the other. "Had a hard time—prisoner—three—three months hiding—" His head fell on his arms again.

Brown rose from his chair, bent over him, remained poised above his shoulder for a few moments. Then he coolly took the key from McKay's overcoat pocket and very deftly continued the search, in spite of the drowsy restlessness of the other.

But there were no papers, no keys, only a cheque-book and a wallet packed with new banknotes and some foreign gold and silver. Brown merely read the name written in the new cheque-book but did not take it or the money.

Then, his business with McKay being finished, he went out, paid the reckoning, tipped the waiter generously, and said:

"My friend wants to sleep for half an hour. Let him alone until I come back for him."

Brown had been gone only a few moments when McKay lifted his head from his arms with a jerk, looked around him blindly, got to his feet and appeared in the cafe doorway, swaying on unsteady legs.

"Gotta see the Major!" he said thickly. "'M'not qui' well. Gotta —"

The waiter attempted to quiet him, but McKay continued on toward the door, muttering that he had to find the Major and that he was not feeling well.

They let him go out into the freezing darkness. Between the saloon and the Plaza Circle he fell twice on the ice, but contrived to find his feet again and lurch on through the deserted street and square.

The black cold that held the city in its iron grip had driven

men and vehicles from the streets. On Fifth Avenue scarcely a moving light was to be seen; under the fuel-conservation order, club, hotel and private mansion were unlighted at that hour. The vast marble mass of the Plaza Hotel loomed enormous against the sky; the New Netherlands, the Savoy, the Metropolitan Club, the great Vanderbilt mansion, were darkened. Only a few ice-dimmed lamps clustered around the Plaza fountain, where the bronze goddess, with her basket of ice, made a graceful and shadowy figure under the stars.

The young man was feeling very ill now. His fur overcoat had become unbuttoned and the bitter wind that blew across the Park seemed to benumb his body and fetter his limbs so that he could barely keep his feet.

He had managed to cross Fifth Avenue, somehow; but now he stumbled against the stone balustrade which surrounds the fountain, and he rested there, striving to keep his feet.

Blindness, then deafness possessed him. Stupefied, instinct still aided him automatically in his customary habit of fighting; he strove to beat back the mounting waves of lethargy; half-conscious, he still fought for consciousness.

After a while his hat fell off. He was on his knees now, huddled under his overcoat, his left shoulder resting against the balustrade. Twice one arm moved as though seeking something. It was the mind's last protest against the betrayal of the body. Then the body became still, although the soul still lingered within it.

But now it had become a question of minutes—not many minutes. Fate had knocked him out; Destiny was counting him out—had nearly finished counting. Then Chance stepped into the squared circle of Life. And Kay McKay was in a very bad way indeed when a coupe, speeding northward through the bitter night, suddenly veered westward, ran in to the curb, and stopped; and Miss Erith's chauffeur turned in his seat at the wheel to peer back through the glass at his mistress, whose signal he had just obeyed.

Then he scrambled out of his seat and came around to the door, just as Miss Erith opened it and hurriedly descended.

"Wayland," she said, "there's somebody over there on the sidewalk. Can't you see?—there by the marble railing?—by the fountain! Whoever it is will freeze to death. Please go over and see what is the matter."

The heavily-furred chauffeur ran across the snowy oval. Miss Erith saw him lean over the shadowy, prostrate figure, shake it; then she hurried over too, and saw a man, crouching, fallen forward on his face beside the snowy balustrade.

Down on her knees in the snow beside him dropped Miss Erith, calling on Wayland to light a match.

"Is he dead, Miss?"

"No. Listen to him breathe! He's ill. Can't you hear the dreadful sounds he makes? Try to lift him, if you can. He's freezing here!"

"I'm thinkin' he's just drunk an' snorin,' Miss."

"What of it? He's freezing, too. Carry him to the carl."

Wayland leaned down, put both big arms under the shoulders of the unconscious man, and dragged him, upright, holding him by main strength.

"He's drunk, all right, Miss," the chauffeur remarked with a sniff of disgust.

That he had been drinking was evident enough to Miss Erith now. She picked up his hat; a straggling yellow light from the ice-bound lamps fell on McKay's battered features.

"Get him into the car," she said, "he'll die out here in this cold."

The big chauffeur half-carried, half-dragged the inanimate man to the car and lifted him in. Miss Erith followed.

"The Samaritan Hospital—that's the nearest," she said hastily. "Drive as fast as you can, Wayland."

McKay had slid to the floor of the coupe; Miss Erith turned on the ceiling light, drew the fur robe around him, and lifted his head to her knees, holding it there supported between her gloved hands.

The light fell full on his bruised visage, on the crisp brown hair dusted with snow, which lay so lightly on his temples, making him seem very frail and boyish in his deathly pallor.

His breathing grew heavier, more laboured; the coupe reeked with the stench of alcohol; and Miss Erith, feeling almost faint, opened the window a little way, then wrapped the young man's head in the skirt of her fur coat and covered his icy hands with

her own.

The ambulance entrance to the Samaritan Hospital was dimly illuminated. Wayland, turning in from Park Avenue, sounded his horn, then scrambled down from the box as an orderly and a watchman appeared under the vaulted doorway. And in a few moments the emergency case had passed out of Miss Erith's jurisdiction.

But as her car turned homeward, upon her youthful mind was stamped the image of a pale, bruised face—of a boyish head reversed upon her knees—of crisp, light-brown hair dusted with particles of snow.

Within the girl's breast something deep was stirring—something unfamiliar—not pain—not pity—yet resembling both, perhaps. She had no other standard of comparison.

After she reached home she called up the Samaritan Hospital for information, and learned that the man was suffering from the effects of alcohol and chloral—the latter probably an overdose self-administered—because he had not been robbed. Miss Erith also learned that there were five hundred dollars in new United States banknotes in his pockets, some English sovereigns, a number of Dutch and Danish silver pieces, and a new cheque-book on the Schuyler National Bank, in which was written what might be his name.

"Will he live?" inquired Miss Erith, solicitous, as are people concerning the fate of anything they have helped to rescue.

"He seems to be in no danger," came the answer. "Are you

interested in the patient, Miss Erith?"

"No—that is—yes. Yes, I am interested."

"Shall we communicate with you in case any unfavourable symptoms appear?"

"Please do!"

"Are you a relative or friend?"

"N-no. I am very slightly interested—in his recovery. Nothing more."

"Very well. But we do not find his name in any directory. We have attempted to communicate with his family, but nobody of that name claims him. You say you are personally interested in the young man?"

"Oh, no," said Miss Erith, "except that I hope he is not going to die…. He seems so—young—f-friendless—"

"Then you have no personal knowledge of the patient?"

"None whatever…. What did you say his name is?"

"McKay."

For a moment the name sounded oddly familiar but meaningless in her ears. Then, with a thrill of sudden recollection, she asked again for the man's name.

"The name written in his cheque-book is McKay."

"McKay!" she repeated incredulously. "What else?"

"Kay."

"WHAT!!"

"That is the name in the cheque-book—Kay McKay."

Dumb, astounded, she could not utter a word.

"Do you know anything about him, Miss Erith?" inquired the distant voice.

"Yes—yes!… I don't know whether I do…. I have heard the —that name—a similar name—" Her mind was in a tumult now. Could such a thing happen? It was utterly impossible!

The voice on the wire continued:

"The police have been here but they are not interested in the case, as no robbery occurred. The young man is still unconscious, suffering from the chloral. If you are interested, Miss Erith, would you kindly call at the hospital to-morrow?"

"Yes…. Did you say that there was FOREIGN money in his pockets?"

"Dutch and Danish silver and English gold."

"Thank you…. I shall call to-morrow. Don't let him leave before I arrive."

"What?"

"I wish to see him. Please do not permit him to leave before I get there. It—it is very important—vital—in case he is the man —the Kay McKay in question."

"Very well. Good-night."

Miss Erith sank back in her armchair, shivering even in the warm glow from the hearth.

"Such things can NOT happen!" she said aloud. "Such things do not happen in life!"

And she told herself that even in stories no author would dare—not even the veriest amateur scribbler—would presume to

affront intelligent readers by introducing such a coincidence as this appeared to be.

"Such things do NOT happen!" repeated Miss Erith firmly.

Such things, however, DO occur.

Was it possible that the Great Secret, of which the Lauffer cipher letter spoke, was locked within the breast of this young fellow who now lay unconscious in the Samaritan Hospital?

Was this actually the escaped prisoner? Was this the man who, according to instructions in the cipher, was to be marked for death at the hands of the German Government's secret agents in America?

And, if this truly were the same man, was he safe, at least for the present, now that the cipher letter had been intercepted before it had reached Herman Lauffer?

Hour after hour, lying deep in her armchair before the fire, Miss Erith crouched a prey to excited conjectures, not one of which could be answered until the man in the Samaritan Hospital had recovered consciousness.

Suppose he never recovered consciousness. Suppose he should die—

At the thought Miss Erith sprang from her chair and picked up the telephone.

With fast-beating heart she waited for the connection. Finally she got it and asked the question.

"The man is dying," came the calm answer. A pause, then: "I understand the patient has just died."

Miss Erith strove to speak but her voice died in her throat. Trembling from head to foot, she placed the telephone on the table, turned uncertainly, fell into the armchair, huddled there, and covered her face with both hands.

For it was proving worse—a little worse than the loss of the Great Secret—worse than the mere disappointment in losing it —worse even than a natural sorrow in the defeat of an effort to save life.

For in all her own life Miss Erith had never until that evening experienced the slightest emotion when looking into the face of any man.

But from the moment when her brown eyes fell upon the pallid, dissipated, marred young face turned upward on her knees in the car—in that instant she had known for the first time a new and indefinable emotion—vague in her mind, vaguer in her heart —yet delicately apparent.

But what this unfamiliar emotion might be, so faint, so vague, she had made no effort to analyse…. It had been there; she had experienced it; that was all she knew.

It was almost morning before she rose, stiff with cold, and moved slowly toward her bedroom.

Among the whitening ashes on her hearth only a single coal remained alive.

CHAPTER III
TO A FINISH

The hospital called her on the telephone about eight o'clock in the morning:

"Miss Evelyn Erith, please?"

"Yes," she said in a tired voice, "who is it?"

"Is this Miss Erith?"

"Yes."

"This is the Superintendent's office, Samaritan, Hospital, Miss Dalton speaking."

The girl's heart contracted with a pang of sheer pain. She closed her eyes and waited. The voice came over the wire again:

"A wreath of Easter lilies with your card came early—this morning.

I'm very sure there is a mistake—"

"No," she whispered, "the flowers are for a patient who died in the hospital last night—a young man whom I brought there in my car—Kay McKay."

"I was afraid so—"

"What!"

"McKay isn't dead! It's another patient. I was sure somebody here had made a mistake."

Miss Erith swayed slightly, steadied herself with a desperate

effort to comprehend what the voice was telling her.

"There was a mistake made last night," continued Miss Dalton. "Another patient died—a similar case. When I came on duty a few moments ago I learned what had occurred. The young man in whom you are interested is conscious this morning. Would you care to see him before he is discharged?"

Miss Erith said, unsteadily, that she would.

She had recovered her self-command but her knees remained weak and her lips tremulous, and she rested her forehead on both hands which had fallen, tightly clasped, on the table in front of her. After a few moments she felt better and she rang up her D. C., Mr. Vaux, and explained that she expected to be late at the office. After that she got the garage on the wire, ordered her car, and stood by the window watching the heavily falling snow until her butler announced the car's arrival.

The shock of the message informing her that this man was still alive now rapidly absorbed itself in her reviving excitement at the prospect of an approaching interview with him. Her car ran cautiously along Park Avenue through the driving snow, but the distance was not far and in a few minutes the great red quadrangle of the Samaritan Hospital loomed up on her right. And even before she was ready, before she quite had time to compose her mind in preparation for the questions she had begun to formulate, she was ushered into a private room by a nurse on duty who detained her a moment at the door:

"The patient is ready to be discharged," she whispered, "but

we have detained him at your request. We are so sorry about the mistake."

"Is he quite conscious?"

"Entirely. He's somewhat shaken, that is all. Otherwise he shows no ill effects."

"Does he know how he came here?"

"Oh, yes. He questioned us this morning and we told him the circumstances."

"Does he know I have arrived?"

"Yes, I told him."

"He did not object to seeing me?" inquired Miss Erith. A slight colour dyed her face.

"No, he made no objection. In fact, he seemed interested. He expects you. You may go in."

Miss Erith stepped into the room. Perhaps the patient had heard the low murmur of voices in the corridor, for he lay on his side in bed gazing attentively toward the door. Miss Erith walked straight to the bedside; he looked up at her in silence.

"I am so glad that you are better," she said with an effort made doubly difficult in the consciousness of the bright blush on her cheeks. Without moving he replied in what must have once been an agreeable voice: "Thank you. I suppose you are Miss Erith."

"Yes."

"Then—I am very grateful for what you have done."

"It was so fortunate—"

"Would you be seated if you please?"

She took the chair beside his bed.

"It was nice of you," he said, almost sullenly. "Few women of your sort would bother with a drunken man."

They both flushed. She said calmly: "It is women of my sort who DO exactly that kind of thing."

He gave her a dark and sulky look: "Not often," he retorted: "there are few of your sort from Samaria."

There was a silence, then he went on in a hard voice:

"I'd been drinking a lot… as usual…. But it isn't an excuse when I say that my beastly condition was not due to a drunken stupor. It just didn't happen to be that time."

She shivered slightly. "It happened to be due to chloral," he added, reddening painfully again. "I merely wished you to know."

"Yes, they told me," she murmured.

After another silence, during which he had been watching her askance, he said: "Did you think I had taken that chloral voluntarily?"

She made no reply. She sat very still, conscious of vague pain somewhere in her breast, acquiescent in the consciousness, dumb, and now incurious concerning further details of this man's tragedy.

"Sometimes," he said, "the poor devil who, in chloral, seeks a-refuge from intolerable pain becomes an addict to the drug…. I do not happen to be an addict. I want you to understand that."

The painful colour came and went in the girl's face; he was now watching her intently.

"As a matter of fact, but probably of no interest to you," he continued, "I did not voluntarily take that chloral. It was administered to me without my knowledge—when I was more or less stupid with liquor…. It is what is known as knockout drops, and is employed by crooks to stupefy men who are more or less intoxicated so that they may be easily robbed."

He spoke now so calmly and impersonally that the girl had turned to look at him again as she listened. And now she said: "Were you robbed?"

"They took my hotel key: nothing else."

"Was that a serious matter, Mr. McKay?"

He studied her with narrowing brown eyes.

"Oh, no," he said. "I had nothing of value in my room at the Astor except a few necessaries in a steamer-trunk…. Thank you so much for all your kindness to me, Miss Erith," he added, as though relieving her of the initiative in terminating the interview.

As he spoke he caught her eye and divined somehow that she did not mean to go just yet. Instantly he was on his guard, lying there with partly closed lids, awaiting events, though not yet really suspicious. But at her next question he rose abruptly, supported on one elbow, his whole frame tense and alert under the bed-coverings as though gathered for a spring.

"What did you say?" he demanded.

"I asked you how long ago you escaped from Holzminden camp?" repeated the girl, very pale.

"Who told you I had ever been there?—wherever that is!"

"You were there as a prisoner, were you not, Mr. McKay?"

"Where is that place?"

"In Germany on the River Weser. You were detained there under pretence of being an Englishman before we declared war on Germany. After we declared war they held you as a matter of course."

There was an ugly look in his eyes, now: "You seem to know a great deal about a drunkard you picked up in the snow near the Plaza fountain last night."

"Please don't speak so bitterly."

Quite unconsciously her gloved hand crept up on her fur coat until it rested over her heart, pressing slightly against her breast. Neither spoke for a few moments. Then:

"I do know something about you, Mr. McKay," she said. "Among other things I know that—that if you have become—become intemperate—it is not your fault…. That was vile of them-unutterably wicked-to do what they did to you—"

"Who are you?" he burst out. "Where have you learned-heard such things? Did I babble all this?"

"You did not utter a sound!"

"Then—in God's name—"

"Oh, yes, yes!" she murmured, "in God's name. That is why you and I are here together—in God's name and by His grace. Do you know He wrought a miracle for you and me—here in New York, in these last hours of this dreadful year that is dying very fast now?

"Do you know what that miracle is? Yes, it's partly the fact that you did not die last night out there on the street. Thirteen degrees below zero! … And you did not die…. And the other part of the miracle is that I of all people in the world should have found you!… That is our miracle."

Somehow he divined that the girl did not mean the mere saving of his life had been part of this miracle. But she had meant that, too, without realising she meant it.

"Who are you?" he asked very quietly.

"I'll tell you: I am Evelyn Erith, a volunteer in the C. E. D. Service of the United States."

He drew a deep breath, sank down on his elbow, and rested his head on the pillow.

"Still I don't see how you know," he said. "I mean—the beastly details—"

"I'll tell you some time. I read the history of your case in an intercepted cipher letter. Before the German agent here had received and decoded it he was arrested by an agent of another Service. If there is anything more to be learned from him it will be extracted.

"But of all men on earth you are the one man I wanted to find. There is the miracle: I found you! Even now I can scarcely force myself to believe it is really you."

The faintest flicker touched his eyes.

"What did you want of me?" he inquired.

"Help."

"Help? From such a man as I? What sort of help do you expect from a drunkard?"

"Every sort. All you can give. All you can give."

He looked at her wearily; his face had become pallid again; the dark hollows of dissipation showed like bruises.

"I don't understand," he said. "I'm no good, you know that. I'm done in, finished. I couldn't help you with your work if I wanted to. There's nothing left of me. I am not to be depended on."

And suddenly, in his eyes of a boy, his self-hatred was revealed to her in one savage gleam.

"No good," he muttered feverishly, "not to be trusted—no will-power left…. It was in me, I suppose, to become the drunkard I am—"

"You are NOT!" cried the girl fiercely. "Don't say it!"

"Why not? I am!"

"You can fight your way free!" His laugh frightened her.

"Fight? I've done that. They tried to pump me that way, too—tried to break me—break my brain to pieces—by stopping my liquor…. I suppose they thought I might really go insane, as they gave it back after a while—after a few centuries in hell—and tried to make me talk by other methods—

"Don't, please." She turned her head swiftly, unable to control her quivering face.

"Why not?"

"I can't bear it."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shock you."

"I know." She sat for a while with head averted; and presently spoke, sitting so:

"We'll fight it, anyway," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"If you'll let me—"

After a silence she turned and looked at him. He stammered, very red:

"I don't quite know why you speak to me so."

She herself was not entirely clear on that point, either. After all, her business with this man was to use him in the service of her Government."

"What is THE GREAT SECRET?" she asked calmly.

After a long while he said, lying there very still: "So you have even heard about that."

"I have heard about it; that is all."

"Do you know what it is?"

"All I know about it is that there is such a thing—something known to certain Germans, and by them spoken of as THE GREAT SECRET. I imagine, of course, that it is some vital military secret which they desire to guard."

"Is that all you know about it?"

"No, not all." She looked at him gravely out of very clear, honest eyes:

"I know, also, that the Berlin Government has ordered its agents to discover your whereabouts, and to'silence' you."

He gazed at her quite blandly for a moment, then, to her

amazement, he laughed—such a clear, untroubled, boyish laugh that her constrained expression softened in sympathy.

"Do you think that Berlin doesn't mean it?" she asked, brightening a little.

"Mean it? Oh, I'm jolly sure Berlin means it!"

"Then why—"

"Why do I laugh?"

"Well—yes. Why do you? It does not strike me as very humorous."

At that he laughed again—laughed so whole-heartedly, so delightfully, that the winning smile curved her own lips once more.

"Would you tell me why you laugh?" she inquired.

"I don't know. It seems so funny—those Huns, those Boches, already smeared from hair to feet with blood—pausing in their wholesale butchery to devise a plan to murder ME!"

His face altered; he raised himself on one elbow:

"The swine have turned all Europe into a bloody wallow. They're belly-deep in it—Kaiser and knecht! But that's only part of it. They're destroying souls by millions!… Mine is already damned."

Miss Erith sprang to her feet: "I tell you not to say such a thing!" she cried, exasperated. "You're as young as I am! Besides, souls are not slain by murder. If they perish it's suicide, ALWAYS!"

She began to pace the white room nervously, flinging open her

fur coat as she turned and came straight back to his bed again. Standing there and looking down at him she said:

"We've got to fight it out. The country needs you. It's your bit and you've got to do it. There's a cure for alcoholism—Dr. Langford's cure. Are you afraid because you think it may hurt?"

He lay looking up at her with hell's own glimmer in his eyes again:

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said. "You talk of cures, and I tell you that I'm half dead for a drink right now! And I'm going to get up and dress and get it!"

The expression of his features and his voice and words appalled her, left her dumb for an instant. Then she said breathlessly:

"You won't do that!"

"Yes I will."

"No."

"Why not?" he demanded excitedly.

"You owe me something."

"What I said was conventional. I'm NOT grateful to you for saving the sort of life mine is!"

"I was not thinking of your life."

After a moment he said more quietly: "I know what you mean…. Yes, I am grateful. Our Government ought to know."

"Then tell me, now."

"You know," he said brutally, "I have only your word that you are what you say you are."

She reddened but replied calmly: "That is true. Let me show you my credentials."

From her muff she drew a packet, opened it, and laid the contents on the bedspread under his eyes. Then she walked to the window and stood there with her back turned looking out at the falling snow.

After a few minutes he called her. She went back to the bedside, replaced the packet in her muff, and stood waiting in silence.

He lay looking up at her very quietly and his bruised young features had lost their hard, sullen expression.

"I'd better tell you all I know," he said, "because there is really no hope of curing me… you don't understand… my will-power is gone. The trouble is with my mind itself. I don't want to be cured…. I WANT what's killing me. I want it now, always, all the time. So before anything happens to me I'd better tell you what I know so that our Government can make the proper investigation. Because what I shall tell you is partly a surmise. I leave it to you to judge—to our Government."

She drew from her muff a little pad and a pencil and seated herself on the chair beside him.

"I'll speak slowly," he began, but she shook her head, saying that she was an expert stenographer. So he went on:

"You know my name—Kay McKay. I was born here and educated at Yale. But my father was Scotch and he died in Scotland. My mother had been dead many years. They lived on

a property called Isla which belonged to my grandfather. After my father's death my grandfather allowed me an income, and when I had graduated from Yale I continued here taking various post-graduate courses. Finally I went to Cornell and studied agriculture, game breeding and forestry—desiring some day to have a place of my own.

"In 1914 I went to Germany to study their system of forestry. In July of that year I went to Switzerland and roamed about in the vagabond way I like—once liked." His visage altered and he cast a side glance at the girl beside him, but her eyes were fixed on her pad.

He drew a deep breath, like a sigh:

"In that corner of Switzerland which is thrust westward between Germany and France there are a lot of hills and mountains which were unfamiliar to me. The flora resembled that of the Vosges—so did the bird and insect life except on the higher mountains.

"There is a mountain called Mount Terrible. I camped on it. There was some snow. You know what happens sometimes in summer on the higher peaks. Well, it happened to me—the whole snow field slid when I was part way across it—and I thought it was all off—never dreamed a man could live through that sort of thing—with the sheer gneiss ledges below!

"It was not a big avalanche—not the terrific thundering sort—rather an easy slipping, I fancy—but it was a devilish thing to lie aboard, and, of course, if there had been precipices where I

slid—" He shrugged.

The girl looked up from her shorthand manuscript; he seemed to be dreamily living over in his mind those moments on Mount Terrible. Presently he smiled slightly:

"I was horribly scared—smothered, choked, half-senseless…. Part of the snow and a lot of trees and boulders went over the edge of something with a roar like Niagara…. I don't know how long afterward it was when I came to my senses.

"I was in a very narrow, rocky valley, up to my neck in soft snow, and the sun beating on my face. … So I crawled out… I wasn't hurt; I was merely lost.

"It took me a long while to place myself geographically. But finally, by map and compass, I concluded that I was in some one of the innumerable narrow valleys on the northern side of Mount Terrible. Basle seemed to be the nearest proper objective, judging from my map…. Can you form a mental picture of that particular corner of Europe, Miss Erith?"

"No."

"Well, the German frontier did not seem to be very far northward—at least that was my idea. But there was no telling; the place where I landed was a savage and shaggy wilderness of firs and rocks without any sign of habitation or of roads.

"The things that had been strapped on my back naturally remained with me—map, binoculars, compass, botanising paraphernalia, rations for two days—that sort of thing. So I was not worried. I prowled about, experienced agreeable shivers by

looking up at the mountain which had dumped me down into this valley, and finally, after eating, I started northeast by compass.

"It was a rough scramble. After I had been hiking along for several hours I realised that I was on a shelf high above another valley, and after a long while I came out where I could look down over miles of country. My map indicated that what I beheld must be some part of Alsace. Well, I lay flat on a vast shelf of rock and began to use my field-glasses."

He was silent so long that Miss Erith finally looked up questioningly. McKay's face had become white and stern, and in his fixed gaze there was something dreadful.

"Please," she faltered, "go on."

He looked at her absently; the colour came back to his face; he shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, yes. What was I saying? Yes—about that vast ledge up there under the mountains… I stayed there three days. Partly because I couldn't find any way down. There seemed to be none.

"But I was not bored. Oh, no. Just anxious concerning my situation. Otherwise I had plenty to look at."

She waited, pencil poised.

"Plenty to look at," he repeated absently. "Plenty of Huns to gaze at. Huns? They were like ants below me, there. They swarmed under the mountain ledge as far as I could see—thousands of busy Boches—busy as ants. There were narrow-gauge railways, too, apparently running right into the mountain; and a deep broad cleft, deep as another valley, and all crawling

with Huns.

"A tunnel? Nobody alive ever dreamed of such a gigantic tunnel, if it was one!… Well, I was up there three days. It was the first of August—thereabouts—and I'd been afield for weeks. And, of course, I'd heard nothing of war—never dreamed of it.

"If I had, perhaps what those thousands of Huns were doing along the mountain wall might have been plainer to me.

"As it was, I couldn't guess. There was no blasting—none that I could hear. But trains were running and some gigantic enterprise was being accomplished—some enterprise that apparently demanded speed and privacy—for not one civilian was to be seen, not one dwelling. But there were endless mazes of fortifications; and I saw guns being moved everywhere.

"Well, I was becoming hungry up on that fir-clad battlement. I didn't know how to get down into the valley. It began to look as though I'd have to turn back; and that seemed a rather awful prospect.

"Anyway, what happened, eventually, was this: I started east through the forest along that pathless tableland, and on the afternoon of the next day, tired out and almost starved, I stepped across the Swiss boundary line—a wide, rocky, cleared space crossing a mountain flank like a giant's road.

"No guards were visible anywhere, no sentry-boxes, but, as I stood hesitating in the middle of the frontier—and just why I hesitated I don't know—I saw half a dozen jagers of a German mounted regiment ride up on the German side of the boundary.

"For a second the idea occurred to me that they had ridden parallel to the ledge to intercept me; but the idea seemed absurd, granted even that they had seen me upon the ledge from below, which I never dreamed they had. So when they made me friendly gestures to come across the frontier I returned their cheery 'Gruss Gott!' and plodded thankfully across. … And their leader, leaning from his saddle to take my offered hand, suddenly struck me in the face, and at the same moment a trooper behind me hit me on the head with the butt of a pistol."

The girl's flying pencil faltered; she lifted her brown eyes, waiting.

"That's about all," he said—"as far as facts are concerned…. They treated me rather badly…. I faced their firing-squads half-a-dozen times. After that bluff wouldn't work they interned me as an English civilian at Holzminden…. They hid me when, at last, an inspection took place. No chance for me to communicate with our Ambassador or with any of the Commission."

He turned to her in his boyish, frank way: "But do you know, Miss Erith, it took me quite a while to analyse the affair and to figure out why they arrested me, lied about me, and treated me so hellishly.

"You see, I was kept in solitary confinement and never had a chance to speak to any of the other civilians interned there at Holzminden. There was no way of suspecting why all this was happening to me except by the attitude of the Huns themselves and their endless questions and threats and cruelties. They were

cruel. They hurt me a lot."

Miss Erith's eyes suddenly dimmed as she watched him, and she hastily bent her head over the pad.

"Well," he went on, "the rest, as I say, is pure surmise. This is my conclusion: I think that for the last forty years the Huns have been busy with an astounding military enterprise. Of course, since 1870, the Boche has expected war, and has been feverishly preparing for it. All the world now knows what they have done—not everything that they have done, however.

"My conclusion is this: that, when Mount Terrible shrugged me off its northern flank, the snow slide carried me to an almost inaccessible spot of which even the Swiss hunters knew nothing. Or, if they did, they considered it impossible to reach from their own territory.

"From Germany it could be reached, but it was Swiss territory. At any rate I think I am the only civilian who has been there, and who has viewed from there this enormous work in which the Huns are engaged.

"And I belive that this mysterious, overwhelmingly enormous work is nothing less than the piercing—not of a mountain or a group of mountains—but of that entire part of Switzerland which lies between Germany and France.

"I believe that a vast military road, deep, deep, under the earth, is being carried by an enormous tunnel from far back on the German side of the frontier, under Mount Terrible, under all the mountains, hills, valleys, forests, rivers—under Switzerland, in

fact—into French territory.

"I believe it has been building since 1871. I believe it is nearly finished, and that it will, on French territory, give egress to a Hun army debouching from Alsace, under Switzerland, into France behind the French lines. That part of the Franco-Swiss frontier is unguarded, unfortified, uninhabited. From there a Hun army can strike the French trenches from the rear—strike Toul, Nancy, Belfort, Verdun—why, the road is open to Paris that way—open to Calais, to England!"

"This is frightful!" cried the girl. "If such a dreadful—"

"Wait! I told you that it is merely a surmise. I don't know. I guess. Why I guess it I have told you…. They were savage with me—those Huns…. They got nothing out of me. I lied steadily, even when drunk. No, they got nothing out of me. I denied I had seen anything. I denied—and truly enough—that anybody had accompanied me. No, they wrenched nothing out of me—not by starving me, not by water torture, not by their firing-squads, not by blows, not even by making of me the drunkard I am."

The pencil fell from Miss Erith's hand and the hand caught McKay's, held it, crushed it.

"You're only a boy," she murmured. "I'm not much more than a girl. We've both got years ahead of us—the best of our lives."

"YOU have."

"You also! Oh, don't, don't look at me that way. I'll help you. We've got work to do, you and I. Don't you see? Don't you understand? Work to do for our Government! Work to do for

America!"

"It's too late for me to—"

"No. You've got to live. You've got to find yourself again. This depends on you. Don't you see it does? Don't you see that you have got to go back there and PROVE what you merely suspect?"

"I simply can't."

"You shall! I'll make this right with you! I'll stick to you! I'll fight to give you back your will-power—your mind. We'll do this together, for our country. I'll give up everything else to make this fight."

He began to tremble.

"I—if I could—"

"I tell you that you shall! We must do our bit, you and I!"

"You don't know—you don't know!" he cried in a bitter voice, then fell trembling again with the sweat of agony on his face.

"No, I don't know," she whispered, clutching his hand to steady him. "But I shall learn."

"You'll learn that a drunkard is a dirty beast!" he cried. "Do you know what I'd do if anybody tried to keep me from drink? ANYBODY!—even you!"

"No, I don't know." She shook her head sorrowfully: "A mindless man becomes a demon, I suppose. … Would you—injure me?"

He was shaking all over now, and presently he sat up in bed and covered his head with one desperate hand.

"You poor boy!" she whispered.

"Keep away from me," he muttered, "I've told you all I know. I'm no further use…. Keep clear of me…. I'm sorry—to be—what I am."

"When I leave what are you going to do?" she asked gently.

"Do? I'll dress and go to the nearest bar."

"Do you need it so much already?"

He nodded his bowed head covered by the hand that gripped his hair: "Yes, I need it—badly."

She rose, loosened his clutch on her slender hand, picked up her muff:

"I'll be waiting for you downstairs," she said simply.

His face expressed sullen defiance as he passed through the waiting-room. Yet he seemed a little taken aback as well as relieved when Miss Erith did not appear among the considerable number of people waiting there for discharged patients. He walked on, buttoning his fur coat with shaky fingers, passed the doorway and stepped out into the falling snow. At the same moment a chauffeur buried in coon-skins moved forward touching his cap:

"Miss Erith's car is here, sir; Miss Erith expects you."

McKay hesitated, scowling now in his perplexity; passed his quivering hand slowly across his face, then turned, and looked at the waiting car drawn up at the gutter. Behind the frosty window Miss Erith gave him a friendly smile. He walked over to the curb, the chauffeur opened the door, and McKay took off his hat.

"Don't ask me," he said in a low voice that trembled slightly

like a sick man's.

"I DO ask you."

"You know what's the matter with me, Miss Erith," he insisted in the same low, unsteady voice.

"Please," she said: and laid one small gloved hand lightly on his arm.

So he entered the car; the chauffeur drew the robe over them, and stood awaiting orders.

"Home," said Miss Erith faintly.

If McKay was astonished he did not betray it. Neither said anything more for a while. The man rested an elbow on the sill, his troubled, haggard face on his hand; the girl kept her gaze steadily in front of her with a partly resolute, partly scared expression. The car went up Park Avenue and then turned westward.

When it stopped the girl said: "You will give me a few moments in my library with you, won't you?"

The visage he turned to her was one of physical anguish. They sat confronting each other in silence for an instant; then he rose with a visible effort and descended, and she followed.

"Be at the garage at two, Wayland," she said, and ascended the snowy stoop beside McKay.

The butler admitted them. "Luncheon for two," she said, and mounted the stairs without pausing.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.