Sapper

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FOREWORD

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On a certain day in the year of grace 1920, there came into being a special and very select club. There was no entrance fee and no subscription, in which respect it differed from all other clubs. Its membership was limited to six: the *Actor*, the *Barrister*, the *Doctor*, the *Ordinary Man*, the *Soldier*, and the *Writer*. And since each in his own particular trade had achieved what the world calls fame, except the Ordinary Man, who was only ordinary, it was decided that for purposes of convenience they should be entered in the list of members alphabetically according to their trade, and further that they should carry out the only rule of the club in the order of that entry. And the only rule of the club was, that on certain nights, to be mutually agreed on, the member whose turn it was should give to the remaining members an exceedingly good dinner, after which he should tell them a story connected with his own trade, that should be of sufficient interest to keep them awake.

And the only penalty of the club was that if the story was not of sufficient interest to keep the audience awake, the offending member should pay a sum of ten pounds to a deserving charity.

No rule was deemed necessary as to the quality of the dinner: the members had elected themselves with discretion.

I. — THE ACTOR'S STORY, BEING THE PATCH ON THE QUILT

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"The trouble in my game," he began, "is that the greatest plays can never be staged. There would be no money in them. The public demand a plot — a climax: after that the puppets cease strutting, the curtain rings down. But in life — in real life — there's no plot. It's just a series of anti-climaxes strung together like a patchwork quilt, until there comes the greatest anti-climax of all and the quilt is finished."

He passed his hand through his fast-greying hair, and stared for a moment or two at the fire. The Soldier was filling his pipe; the Writer, his legs stretched in front of him, had his hands thrust deep in his trouser pockets.

"It's one of the patches in one of the quilts that my story is about," continued the actor thoughtfully. "Just an episode in the life of a woman — or shall I say, just the life of a woman in an episode?

"You remember that play of mine — *John Pendlesham's Wife*?" He turned to the Barrister, who nodded.

"Very well," he answered. "Molly Travers was your leading lady."

"I was out of England," said the Soldier. "Never saw it."

"It's immaterial." The Actor lit a cigarette. "The play itself has nothing to do with my story, except indirectly. But as you didn't see it, I will just explain this much. I, of course, was John Pendlesham — Molly was my wife, and the third act constituted what, in my opinion, was the finest piece of

emotional acting which that consummate actress has ever done in her career."

The Writer nodded. "I agree. She was superb."

"Night after night the fall of the curtain found her nearly fainting; night after night there was that breathless moment of utter silence followed by a perfect crash of applause. I am mentioning these old facts because her marvellous performance does concern my story directly — even though the play does not.

"We had been running about a month, I suppose, when my story begins. I had just come off after the third act, and was going to my dressing room. For some reason, instead of going by the direct door which led into it from the stage, I went outside into the passage. There were some hands moving furniture or something...

"I think you've all of you been behind at my theatre. First you come to the swing doors out of the street, inside which the watch dog sits demanding callers' business. Then there is another door, and beyond that there are three steps down to my room. And it was just as I was opening my door on that night that I happened to look round.

"Standing at the top of the three stairs was a woman who was staring at me. I only saw her for a moment: then the watch dog intervened, and I went into my room. But I *had* seen her for a moment: I had seen her for long enough to get the look in her eyes.

"We get all sorts and conditions of people behind, as you'd expect — stage-struck girls, actors out of a shop, autograph hunters, beggars. And the watch dog knew my invariable rule: only personal friends and people who had

made an appointment by letter were allowed inside the second door. But a rule cannot legislate for every case.

"Gad! you fellows, it's many years now since that night, but I can still feel, as clearly as if it were yesterday, the message in that girl's eyes. There had been hope and fear and pitiful entreaty: the look of one who had staked everything on a last desperate throw: the look of a mother who is fighting for her child. It was amazing: I couldn't understand it. As I stood just inside my door I couldn't have told you whether she was old or young, plain or pretty. And yet in that one fleeting second this vivid, jumbled message had reached me." The Actor pressed out his cigarette, and there was silence while he lit another one.

"For a moment I hesitated," he continued after a while; "then I rang the bell for the watch dog.

"'Who is that lady I saw outside there?' I asked, as he came in.

"'Won't give no name, sir,' he answered. 'Wants to see you, but I told her the rules.'

"Once again I hesitated; probably I'd exaggerated — put a totally false construction on her expression, probably she was looking for a job like the rest of them. And then I knew that I'd got to see that woman, and that I should have no peace of mind until I'd heard what she had to say. The watch dog was regarding me curiously; plainly he could see no reason whatever for my hesitation. He was a matter-of-fact fellow, was the guardian of the door.

"'Show her in, I'll see her now.' I had my back to him, but I could feel his virtuous indignation. After all, rules are rules.

"'Now, sir?' he echoed.

"'Now; at once.'

"He went out, and I heard him go up the steps.

"'Mr Trayne will see you. Come this way.'

"And then the door opened again, and I turned to face the woman. She was young — quite young, dressed in a kind of cheap suburban frock. Her shoes had been good ones — once, now — well, however skilfully a patch is put on it is still a patch. Her gloves showed traces of much needle and cotton; the little bag she carried was rubbed and frayed. And over the cheap suburban frock she had on a coat which was worn and threadbare.

"'It was good of you to see me, Mr Trayne.'

"She was nervous and her voice shook a little, but she faced me quite steadily.

"'It's a very unusual thing for me to do,' I said. 'But I saw you at the top of the stairs, and...'

"'I know it's unusual,' she interrupted. 'The man outside there told me your rule. But believe me' — she was talking with more assurance now — 'my reason for coming to see you is very unusual also.'

"I pulled up a chair for her. 'What is your reason?' I asked.

"She took a deep breath and began fumbling with her handkerchief.

"'I know you will think me mad,' she began, 'but I don't want to tell you my reason now. I want to wait until after the play is over, and I know you go on at once in the fourth act.'

"'You've seen the play, then?' I remarked.

"'I've seen the play,' was her somewhat astonishing answer, 'every night since the first.'

"'Every night!' I stared at her in surprise. 'But...'

"I must have glanced at her clothes or something and she saw what was in my mind.

"'I suppose you think that I hardly look as if I could afford such luxuries.' She smiled faintly. 'I've only seen it from the gallery and pit, you know. And even that has meant that I've had to go without lunch. But — you see — it was necessary for me to see it: I had to. It was part of my plan — a necessary part.'

"'I don't want to seem dense,' I said gently, 'but I'm afraid I don't quite follow. How can seeing my play thirty odd times be a necessary part of your plan?'

"'That's what I don't want to tell you now,' she repeated, and once more her hands began twisting nervously. 'I want to wait till afterwards, when perhaps you'll — of your kindness — do as I ask you. Oh! Mr Trayne — for God's sake, don't fail me!' She leant forward beseechingly in her chair.

"'My dear child,' I answered quietly — I don't think she can have been much more than twenty,' you haven't told me yet what you want me to do.'

"'I want you to come to a house in Kensington with me,' she said steadily."

Once again the Actor paused, and stared at the fire. Then he gave a short laugh.

"When she said that, I looked at her pretty sharply. Without appearing conceited or anything of that sort, one has occasionally in the course of one's career, received certain flattering attentions from charming women — attentions which — er — one is tempted to conceal from one's wife."

"Precisely," murmured the Ordinary Man. "Precisely."

"And for a moment, I must confess that the thought passed through my mind that this was one of those occasions. And it wasn't until the colour rose to her face and stained it scarlet, that I realised that not only had I made a mistake, but that I had been foolish enough to let her see that I had.

"'My God!' she whispered, 'you don't think — you couldn't think — that I meant...'

"She rose and almost cowered away from me.

"'Why, I'm married.'

"I refrained from remarking that the fact was hardly such a conclusive proof of the absurdity of my unspoken thought as she seemed to imagine. I merely bowed, and said a little formally: 'Please don't jump to conclusions. May I ask why you wish me to come to a house in Kensington with you?'

"The colour ebbed away from her cheeks, and she sat down again.

"'That's the very thing I don't want to tell you, until you come,' she answered very low. 'I know it sounds absurd — it must do, it seems as if I were being unnecessarily mysterious. But I can't tell you, Mr Trayne, I can't tell you... Not yet...'

"And then the call boy knocked, and I had to go on for the last act. In a way I suppose it was absurd of me — but life is made up of impulses. I confess that the whole thing intrigued me. When a woman comes and tells you that she has seen your play every night since it started; that she'd had to go without her lunch to do so; that it was a necessary part of some wonderful plan, and that she wants you to go to a house in Kensington, the least curious man would be

attracted. And from my earliest infancy I've always been engrossed in other people's business...

"'All right,' I said briefly. 'I'll come with you.'

"And then I had to put out my hand to steady her, I thought she was going to faint. Reaction, I thought at the time; later, it struck me that the reason was much more prosaic — lack of food.

"I stopped for a moment till she seemed herself again; then I told her to wait outside.

"'I shall be about half an hour,' I said, 'and then we'll take a taxi, and go down to Kensington. Tell them to give you a chair...'

"And my last impression as I went on to the stage was of a white-faced girl clutching the table, staring at me with great brown eyes that held in them a dawning triumph.

"I think," went on the Actor thoughtfully, that that is where the tragedy of it all really lay. Afterwards she told me that the part of her plan which had seemed most difficult to her was getting my consent to go with her to Kensington. Once that was done, she knew all would be well, she was absolutely and supremely confident. And when I went on to the stage for the fourth act, she felt that success had crowned her efforts, that what was to come after was nothing compared to that which she had already done. The inaccessible stronghold had been stormed, the ogre had proved to be a lamb.

"Well, we went to Kensington. I sent my own car home, and we took a taxi. During the drive she was very silent, and I didn't try to make her talk. Evidently no inkling of the mysterious plan was to be revealed until we arrived at the

address she had given the driver. It was some obscure street that I had never heard of and the name of which I have completely forgotten. I know it was somewhere not far from Barker's.

"The door was opened by a repulsive-looking woman who peered at me suspiciously. And then the girl took her on one side and whispered something in her ear. Apparently it had the desired effect, as the Gorgon retired grumbling to an odoriferous basement, leaving us alone in the hall.

"When she had shut the door the girl turned to me.

"'Will you come upstairs, Mr Trayne. I want you to meet my husband.'

"I bowed. 'Certainly,' I said, and she led the way.

"'So the husband was in the plan,' I reflected as I followed her. Was he a genius with a play that he proposed to read to me? I had suffered from the plays of genius before. Or was he some actor down on his luck? If so, why all the mystery? And then, when I'd made up my mind that it was a mere begging case, we arrived at the room. Just before she turned the handle of the door she again looked at me.

"'My husband is ill, Mr Trayne. You'll excuse his being in bed.'

"Then we went in. Good Lord! you fellows," the Actor leant forward in his chair. "I've been pretty hard up in the old days, but as I stood inside that door I realised for the first time what poverty — real poverty — meant. Mark you, the girl was a lady; the weak, cadaverous-looking fellow propped up in bed with a tattered shawl round his shoulders was a gentleman. And beyond the bed, and one chair, and a

rackety old chest of drawers there wasn't a stick of furniture in the room. There was a curtain in the corner with what looked like a washstand behind it, and a shelf by the bed with two cups and some plates on it. And nothing else except an appalling oleograph of Queen Victoria on the wall.

"'This is Mr Trayne, dear.' She was bending over her husband, and after a moment he looked up at me.

"'It was good of you to come, sir,' he said. 'Very good.' And then he turned to his wife and I heard him say: 'Have you told him yet, Kitty?'

"She shook her head. 'Not yet, darling, I will now.' She left his side and came over to me.

"'Mr Trayne, I know you thought me very peculiar at the theatre. But I was afraid that if I told you what I really wanted you'd have refused to come. You get hundreds and hundreds of people coming to see you who think they can act. Asking you to help them get a job and that sort of thing. Well, I was afraid that if I told you that that was what I wanted, you'd have told me to go away. Perhaps you'd have given me a straw of comfort — taken my address — said you'd let me know if anything turned up. But nothing would have turned up... And, you see, I was rather desperate.'

"The big brown eyes were fixed on me pleadingly, and somehow I didn't feel quite as annoyed as I should have done at what was nothing more nor less than a blatant trick to appeal to my sympathy.

"'Perhaps nothing would have turned up,' I said gently, 'but you must remember that today the stage is a hopelessly overstocked profession. There are hundreds of trained actors and actresses unable to obtain a job.'

"'I know that,' she cried eagerly, 'and that's why I — why I thought out this plan. I thought that if I could *really* convince you that I could act above the average...'

"'And she can, Mr Trayne,' broke in her husband. 'She's good, I know it.'

"'We must leave Mr Trayne to be the judge of that, Harry,' she smiled. 'You see,' she went on to me, 'what I felt was that there is an opening for real talent. There is, isn't there?'

"'Yes,' I agreed slowly. 'There is an opening for *real* talent. But even that is a small one... Have you ever acted before?'

"'A little. In amateur theatricals!'

"I turned away. Amateur theatricals! More heart-burning and disappointment has been caused by those abominable entertain-ments than their misguided originators will ever realise.

"'But don't think I'm relying on that.' The girl was speaking again, and I almost laughed. 'I want you to judge me tonight.'

"I swung round and looked at her. So this was the mysterious plan: I was to witness an impromptu performance, which was to convince me that the second Sarah Bernhardt had been discovered.

"'I couldn't have shown you, you see, in your dressing room. I shouldn't have had time. That's why I asked you to come here.'

"'You have the courage of your convictions anyway,' I said quietly. 'I am perfectly ready to be convinced.'

"'Then will you sit there.' She took off her hat and coat as I sat down on the only available chair, and from underneath his pillow the man produced a paper-covered book.

"'You'll forgive me if I read my lines, Mr Trayne,' he said. 'I find I can't learn them — I can't concentrate.' He passed a thin, emaciated hand over his forehead. 'And it's her you want to see.'

"He turned over the pages weakly; then he began to read. And I — I sat up as if I'd been stung. At last everything was clear: the continual visits to the theatre — everything. The part of all others which they had selected to prove her ability, was the love scene between Molly Travers and myself in the third act of *John Pendlesham's Wife*..."

For a while there was silence, while the Actor thoughtfully lit another cigarette.

"This unknown child," he went on after a moment, "who had acted a little in amateur theatricals, had deliberately challenged London's greatest emotional actress in her most marvellous success before, Heaven help us, *me* — of all people. I suppose if I was writing a story I should say that she triumphed; that as I sat in that bare and hideous room I realised that before me was genius — a second and greater Molly; that from that moment her foot was set on the ladder of fame, and there was no looking back."

The Actor laughed a little sadly. "Unfortunately, I'm not writing a story, I'm telling the truth. I don't know how I sat through the next twenty minutes. It was the most ghastly caricature of Molly that I have ever thought of; the more ghastly because it was so intensely unintentional. Every little gesture was faithfully copied; every little trick and mannerism had been carefully learnt by heart. And this, as I say, to me who acted with that divine genius every night. God! it was awful. That marvellous line of Molly's, when,

standing in the centre of the stage facing me across the table, she said: 'Then you don't want me back?' that line which was made marvellous merely through the consummate restraint with which she said it, sounded from this poor child like a parlourmaid giving notice.

"And then, at last it was over, and I realised I had to say something. They were both staring at me, hope shining clear in the girl's eyes and pride in the man's.

"'She's great, isn't she, Mr Trayne?' he said. 'I've not had the privilege of seeing you and Miss Travers in the part — but I feel that now — why,' he gave a little shaky laugh, 'that it's hardly necessary.'

"You see," said the Actor slowly, "that was the devil of it all. They were both so utterly certain, especially the man. The difficulty had been to get me there; after that it had been easy. I glanced at the poor fellow in the bed, and his thoughts were plain to read. No more grinding poverty, no more unfurnished bed-sitting rooms, and — fame for the woman he loved! And then he spoke again.

"'I'm such a hopeless crock, Mr Trayne, and she' — he took one of her hands in both his own — 'she's had to do all the work. Beastly, grinding work in an office, when she was capable of this.'

"The girl bent over him, and I looked away. It seemed to me that the ground on which I stood was holy."

The Actor gave a short laugh which deceived no one. "I suppose I was an ass," he went on, "but I'd do it again today. 'It was wonderful,' I said, 'quite wonderful.' And because I'm an actor they believed me. Not that he, at any rate, required much convincing — he only wanted his knowledge

confirmed. Of course, when I spoke I didn't realise what I was letting myself in for. I should have done, I suppose, but — I wasn't left long in doubt. If she was wonderful — and had not I, Herbert Trayne, said so — what about a job? At once... With my backing it was easy... Which was all quite true except for the one vital fact of my having lied. But, hang it, you fellows!" he exploded, "could you have told 'em it was the most appalling exhibition of utter futility you'd ever witnessed?"

"No, I couldn't," said the Soldier. "What happened?"

"I can see them now," continued the Actor. "He was holding her hand, and looking up into her face — as a dog looks at the being it adores. And she was smiling a little, and crying a little — tears of pure joy. The strain was over, the lunches had not been missed in vain. And I stood there like a dumb idiot racking my brains for something to say. They thought I was wondering what job to offer her; they were right, I was." The Actor laughed shortly.

"But I'd gone into the morass, and there was nothing for it but to blunder in deeper. The one vital essential was that in no circumstances must the poor child ever be allowed to act. The other was money — and at once. So I offered her then and there a job as Molly Travers' understudy at five pounds a week."

"Great Scott!" The Doctor sat up with a jerk. "Understudy Molly?"

"I explained, of course," went on the Actor, "that there was an understudy already, and that to save unpleasantness it would be better if she didn't come to the theatre, unless I sent for her. That, of course, it was more

than likely that Miss Travers wouldn't be ill during the run of the play, and that in those circumstances I didn't want to offend the present understudy. And when another play came along, we must see what we could do. That, thank Heaven, I knew was some way off yet! It gave me breathing space.

"I gave her a week's salary in advance, and I got away — somehow. I think they were both a little dazed with the wonder of it, and they wanted to be alone. I heard his voice — weak and quavering — as I shut the door.

"'Oh! my very dear girl,' he was whispering — and she was on her knees beside the bed. And I blundered my way downstairs, cursing myself for a sentimental fool. There's whisky on the table, you fellows, Help yourselves."

But no one moved, and the Actor lit another cigarette.

"I saw her occasionally during the next two or three months," he continued, "though I never went to their rooms again. They had moved — I knew that — because I used to post the cheque every week. But the few times I did see her, I gathered that her husband was not getting any better. And one day I insisted on Lawrence, the specialist, going to see him. I couldn't have one of my company being worried, I told her, over things of that sort. I can see her face now as I said 'one of my company'. I don't know what Lawrence said to her, but he rang me up at the theatre that night, and he did not mince his words to me.

"'I give him a month,' he said. 'It's galloping consumption.'

"It was just about a month later that the thing happened which I had been dreading. Molly went down with flu. Her

understudy — the real one — was Violet Dorman, who was unknown then. And, of course it was her chance."

"One moment," interrupted the Barrister. "Did anyone at the theatre know about this girl?"

"Good God! no," cried the Actor. "Not a soul. In this censorious world actions such as mine in that case are apt to be misconstrued, which alone was sufficient to make me keep it dark. No one knew.

"The first night — all was well. Molly went down in the afternoon, and it didn't come out in any of the evening papers. Violet acted magnificently. She wasn't Molly, of course — she isn't now. But it was her chance, and she took it — and took it well. Next morning the papers, naturally, had it in. 'Temporary indisposition of Miss Molly Travers. Part filled at a moment's notice with great credit by Miss Violet Dorman.' She had a press agent and he boomed her for all he was worth. And I read the papers and cursed. Not that I grudged her her success in the slightest, but I was thinking of the afternoon. It was matinée day and the girl must read it in the papers.

"There was only one thing for it — to go round and see her. Whatever happened I had to prevent her coming to the theatre. How I was going to do it without giving the show away I hadn't an idea, but somehow or other it had got to be done. My blundering foolishness — even though it had been for the best — had caused the trouble; it was up to me to try and right it. So I went round and found her with a doctor in the sitting room. He was just going as I came in, and his face was grave.

"'Harry's dying,' she said to me quite simply, and I glanced at the doctor, who nodded.

"Poor child! I crossed over to her side, and though it seems an awful thing to say, my only feeling was one of relief. After what Lawrence had said I knew it was hopeless, and since the poor devil had to go he couldn't have chosen a more opportune moment from my point of view. It solved the difficulty. If he was dying she couldn't come to the theatre, and by the time the funeral was over Molly would be back. I didn't realise that one doesn't get out of things quite as easily as that.

"'I've only just realised how bad he was,' she went on in a flat, dead voice.

"'Does he know,' I asked.

"'No. He thinks he's going to get better. Why didn't you send for me last night, Mr Trayne?'

"It was so unexpected, that I hesitated and stammered.

"'I couldn't get at you in time,' I said finally. 'Miss Travers only became ill late in the afternoon.'

"With a strange look on her face she opened a paper — some cursed rag I hadn't seen.

"'It says here,' she went on slowly, 'that she was confined to her bed all yesterday. Oh! it doesn't matter much, does it?' She put the paper down wearily, and gave the most heart rending little sobbing laugh I've ever heard.

"'What do you mean?' I stammered out.

"'I suppose you did it for the best, Mr Trayne. I suppose I ought to be grateful. But you lied that night — didn't you?'

"I was fingering a book on the table and for the life of me I couldn't think of anything to say. 'He doesn't know,' she

went on. 'He still thinks I'm a God-sent genius. And he mustn't know.'

"'Why should he?' I said. And then I put my hand on her arm. 'Tell me, how did you find out?'

"'You admit it then?'

"'Yes,' I said quietly, 'I admit that I lied. I was so desperately sorry for you.'

"'I mentioned it to someone — a man who knew the stage — about a week ago. He looked at me in blank amazement, and then he laughed. I suppose he couldn't help it: it was so ridiculous. I was furious — furious. But afterwards I began to think, and I asked other people one or two questions — and then that came,' she pointed to the paper, 'and I knew. And now — oh! thank God — he's dying. He mustn't know, Mr Trayne, he mustn't.'

"And at that moment he came into the room — tottered in is a better word.

"'Boy,' she cried in an agony, 'what are you doing?'

"'I thought I heard Mr Trayne's voice,' he whispered, collapsing in the chair. 'I'm much better today, much. Bit weak still—'

" And then he saw the paper, and he leant forward eagerly.

"'Ill,' he cried. 'Molly Travers ill. Why, my dear — but it's your chance.' He read on a bit, and she looked at me desperately. 'But why weren't you there last night? Who is this woman, Violet Dorman?'

"'You see, Tracy,' I said, picking up the paper and putting it out of his reach, 'it was so sudden, Miss Travers' illness, that I couldn't get at your wife in time.'

"'Quite,' he whispered. 'Of course. But there's a matinée this afternoon, isn't there? Oh! I wonder if I'm well enough to go. I'm so much better today.' And then he looked at his wife. 'My dear! my dear — at last!'

"I don't think I've ever seen such pathetic pride and love shining in a man's face before or since.

"'I'm afraid you won't be quite well enough to go,' I muttered.

"'Perhaps it would be wiser not to,' he whispered. 'But to think I shall miss her first appearance. Have you come to fetch her now, Mr Trayne?'

"'Yes, darling,' the girl replied, and her voice sounded as steady as a rock. 'Mr Trayne has come to fetch me. But it's early yet and I want you to go back to bed now...'

"Without a glance at me she helped him from the room and left me standing there. I heard their voices — hers clear and strong, his barely audible. And not for the first time in my life I marvelled at the wonder of a woman who loves. I was to marvel more in a moment or two.

"She came back and shut the door. Then she stood facing me.

"'There's only one way, Mr Trayne, though I think it's going to break my heart. I must go to the theatre.

"'But — your husband...' I stammered.

"'Oh! I'm not really going. I shall be here — at hand — the whole time. Because if the end did come — why then — I *must* be with him. But he's got to think I've gone; I've got to hide from him until after the matinée is over. And then I must tell him' — she faltered a little — 'of my success. I'll keep the papers from him — if it's necessary...' She turned

away and I heard her falter: 'Three hours away from him — when he's dying. Oh, my God!'

The Actor paused, and the Soldier stirred restlessly in his chair. "I left shortly after," he went on at length, "I saw she wanted me to.

"All through the play that afternoon it haunted me — the pathos of it — aye, the horror of it. I pictured that girl hiding somewhere, while in the room above the sands were running out. Longing with all the power of her being to go to him — to snatch every fleeting minute with him — and yet condemned by my stupidity to forfeit her right. And then at last the show was over, and I went to her room again.

"She was by his side, kneeling on the floor, as I came in. As he saw me he struggled up on his elbow, and one could see it was the end.

"'Dear fellow,' I said, 'she was wonderful — just wonderful!'

"And the girl looked up at me through her blinding tears.

"'Just wonderful,' I said again. Five minutes later he died..."

The Actor fell silent.

"Did you ever see her again?" asked the Soldier thoughtfully.

"Never: she disappeared. Just a patch on the quilt as I said. But there was one thread missing. Three years later I received a registered envelope. There was no letter inside, no word of any sort. Just these." He fumbled in his pocket. "There are twenty of them."

He held out his hand, and the Soldier leaning forward saw that it contained a little bundle of five-pound notes.

II. — THE BARRISTER'S STORY, BEING THE DECISION OF SIR EDWARD SHOREHAM

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"This morning," he began, leaning back in his chair and crossing his legs, "I mislaid my cigarette case. I knew it was somewhere in the study, but find it I could not. Finally, having searched all over my writing table, I rang the bell, and somewhat irritably demanded its immediate production. The butler stepped forward and lifted it up from the centre of the blotting pad, where it had been the whole time, literally under my nose. What peculiar temporary kink in the brain had prevented my noticing the very thing I was looking for, when it was lying in the most conspicuous place in which it could possibly have been, I don't know. I leave that to the Doctor. But the point of my parable is this — it decided in my mind the story with which I should bore you fellows tonight."

He paused to light a cigar, then he glanced round at the faces of the other five.

"And if, as I get on with it, you think you recognise the real characters under the fictional names I shall give them, I can't prevent you. But don't ask me to confirm your thoughts."

"Exactly," murmured the Actor. "Fire ahead."

"It was about four years before the war," commenced the Barrister, "that I was stopping for a few nights at a certain house in Park Lane. It was in the middle of the season —