

EDGAR WALLACE



The Daffodil
Mystery

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The Daffodil Mystery

Edgar Wallace

CHAPTER I

AN OFFER REJECTED

"I am afraid I don't understand you, Mr. Lyne."

Odette Rider looked gravely at the young man who lolled against his open desk. Her clear skin was tinted with the faintest pink, and there was in the sober depths of those grey eyes of hers a light which would have warned a man less satisfied with his own genius and power of persuasion than Thornton Lyne.

He was not looking at her face. His eyes were running approvingly over her perfect figure, noting the straightness of the back, the fine poise of the head, the shapeliness of the slender hands.

He pushed back his long black hair from his forehead and smiled. It pleased him to believe that his face was cast in an intellectual mould, and that the somewhat unhealthy pastiness of his skin might be described as the "pallor of thought."

Presently he looked away from her through the big bay window which overlooked the crowded floor of Lyne's Stores.

He had had this office built in the entresol and the big windows had been put in so that he might at any time overlook the most important department which it was his good fortune to control.

Now and again, as he saw, a head would be turned in his direction, and he knew that the attention of all the girls was concentrated upon the little scene, plainly visible from the floor below, in which an unwilling employee was engaged.

She, too, was conscious of the fact, and her discomfort and dismay increased. She made a little movement as if to go, but he stopped her.

"You don't understand, Odette," he said. His voice was soft and melodious, and held the hint of a caress. "Did you read my little book?" he asked suddenly.

She nodded.

"Yes, I read—some of it," she said, and the colour deepened on her face.

He chuckled.

"I suppose you thought it rather curious that a man in my position should bother his head to write poetry, eh?" he asked. "Most of it was written before I came into this beastly shop, my dear—before I developed into a tradesman!"

She made no reply, and he looked at her curiously.

"What did you think of them?" he asked.

Her lips were trembling, and again he mistook the symptoms.

"I thought they were perfectly horrible," she said in a low voice. "Horrible!"

He raised his eyebrows.

"How very middle-class you are, Miss Rider!" he scoffed.

"Those verses have been acclaimed by some of the best critics in the country as reproducing all the beauties of the old Hellenic poetry."

She went to speak, but stopped herself and stood with lips compressed.

Thornton Lyne shrugged his shoulders and strode to the other end of his luxuriously equipped office.

"Poetry, like cucumbers, is an acquired taste," he said after a while. "You have to be educated up to some kind of literature. I daresay there will come a time when you will be grateful that I have given you an opportunity of meeting beautiful thoughts dressed in beautiful language."

She looked up at this.

"May I go now, Mr. Lyne?" she asked.

"Not yet," he replied coolly. "You said just now you didn't understand what I was talking about. I'll put it plainer this

time. You're a very beautiful girl, as you probably know, and you are destined, in all probability, to be the mate of a very average suburban-minded person, who will give you a life tantamount to slavery. That is the life of the middle-class woman, as you probably know. And why would you submit to this bondage? Simply because a person in a black coat and a white collar has mumbled certain passages over you—passages which have neither meaning nor, to an intelligent person, significance. I would not take the trouble of going through such a foolish ceremony, but I would take a great deal of trouble to make you happy."

He walked towards her slowly and laid one hand upon her shoulder. Instinctively she shrank back and he laughed.

"What do you say?"

She swung round on him, her eyes blazing but her voice under control.

"I happen to be one of those foolish, suburban-minded people," she said, "who give significance to those mumbled words you were speaking about. Yet I am broad-minded enough to believe that the marriage ceremony would not make you any happier or more unhappy whether it was performed or omitted. But, whether it were marriage or any other kind of union, I should at least require a man."

He frowned at her.

"What do you mean?" he asked, and the soft quality of his voice underwent a change.

Her voice was full of angry tears when she answered him.

"I should not want an erratic creature who puts horrid sentiments into indifferent verse. I repeat, I should want a man."

His face went livid.

"Do you know whom you are talking to?" he asked, raising his voice.

"I am talking to Thornton Lyne," said she, breathing quickly, "the proprietor of Lyne's Stores, the employer of Odette Rider who draws three pounds every week from

him."

He was breathless with anger.

"Be careful!" he gasped. "Be careful!"

"I am speaking to a man whose whole life is a reproach to the very name of man!" she went on speaking rapidly. "A man who is sincere in nothing, who is living on the brains and reputation of his father, and the money that has come through the hard work of better men.

"You can't scare me," she cried scornfully, as he took a step towards her. "Oh, yes, I know I'm going to leave your employment, and I'm leaving to-night!"

The man was hurt, humiliated, almost crushed by her scorn. This she suddenly realised and her quick woman's sympathy checked all further bitterness.

"I'm sorry I've been so unkind," she said in a more gentle tone. "But you rather provoked me, Mr. Lyne."

He was incapable of speech and could only shake his head and point with unsteady finger to the door.

"Get out," he whispered.

Odette Rider walked out of the room, but the man did not move. Presently, however, he crossed to the window and, looking down upon the floor, saw her trim figure move slowly through the crowd of customers and assistants and mount the three steps which led to the chief cashier's office.

"You shall pay for this, my girl!" he muttered.

He was wounded beyond forgiveness. He was a rich man's son and had lived in a sense a sheltered life. He had been denied the advantage which a public school would have brought to him and had gone to college surrounded by sycophants and poseurs as blatant as himself, and never once had the cold breath of criticism been directed at him, except in what he was wont to describe as the "reptile Press."

He licked his dry lips, and, walking to his desk, pressed a bell. After a short wait—for he had purposely sent his

secretary away—a girl came in.

"Has Mr. Tarling come?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, he's in the board-room. He has been waiting a quarter of an hour."

He nodded.

"Thank you," he said.

"Shall I tell him——"

"I will go to him myself," said Lyne.

He took a cigarette out of his gold case, struck a match and lit it. His nerves were shaken, his hands were trembling, but the storm in his heart was soothing down under the influence of this great thought. Tarling! What an inspiration! Tarling, with his reputation for ingenuity, his almost sublime uncanny cleverness. What could be more wonderful than this coincidence?

He passed with quick steps along the corridor which connected his private den with the board-room, and came into that spacious apartment with outstretched hand.

The man who turned to greet him may have been twenty-seven or thirty-seven. He was tall, but lithe rather than broad. His face was the colour of mahogany, and the blue eyes turned to Lyne were unwinking and expressionless.

That was the first impression which Lyne received.

He took Lyne's hand in his—it was as soft as a woman's. As they shook hands Lyne noticed a third figure in the room.

He was below middle height and sat in the shadow thrown by a wall pillar. He too rose, but bowed his head.

"A Chinaman, eh?" said Lyne, looking at this unexpected apparition with curiosity. "Oh, of course, Mr. Tarling, I had almost forgotten that you've almost come straight from China. Won't you sit down?"

He followed the other's example, threw himself into a chair and offered his cigarette case.

"The work I am going to ask you to do I will discuss later," he said. "But I must explain, that I was partly attracted to you by the description I read in one of the newspapers of

how you had recovered the Duchess of Henley's jewels and partly by the stories I heard of you when I was in China. You're not attached to Scotland Yard, I understand?"

Tarling shook his head.

"No," he said quietly. "I was regularly attached to the police in Shanghai, and I had intended joining up with Scotland Yard; in fact, I came over for that purpose. But several things happened which made me open my own detective agency, the most important of which happenings, was that Scotland Yard refused to give me the free hand I require!"

The other nodded quickly.

China rang with the achievements of Jack Oliver Tarling, or, as the Chinese criminal world had named him in parody of his name, "Lieh Jen," "The Hunter of Men."

Lyne judged all people by his own standard, and saw in this unemotional man a possible tool, and in all probability a likely accomplice.

The detective force in Shanghai did curious things by all accounts, and were not too scrupulous as to whether they kept within the strict letter of the law. There were even rumours that "The Hunter of Men" was not above torturing his prisoners, if by so doing he could elicit confessions which could implicate some greater criminal. Lyne did not and could not know all the legends which had grown around the name of "The Hunter" nor could he be expected in reason to differentiate between the truth and the false.

"I pretty well know why you've sent for me," Tarling went on. He spoke slowly and had a decided drawl. "You gave me a rough outline in your letter. You suspect a member of your staff of having consistently robbed the firm for many years. A Mr. Milburgh, your chief departmental manager." Lyne stopped him with a gesture and lowered his voice.

"I want you to forget that for a little while, Mr. Tarling," he said. "In fact, I am going to introduce you to Milburgh, and maybe, Milburgh can help us in my scheme. I do not say that Milburgh is honest, or that my suspicions were

unfounded. But for the moment I have a much greater business on hand, and you will oblige me if you forget all the things I have said about Milburgh. I will ring for him now."

He walked to a long table which ran half the length of the room, took up a telephone which stood at one end, and spoke to the operator.

"Tell Mr. Milburgh to come to me in the board-room, please," he said.

Then he went back to his visitor.

"That matter of Milburgh can wait," he said. "I'm not so sure that I shall proceed any farther with it. Did you make inquiries at all? If so, you had better tell me the gist of them before Milburgh comes."

Tarling took a small white card from his pocket and glanced at it.

"What salary are you paying Milburgh?"

"Nine hundred a year," replied Lyne.

"He is living at the rate of five thousand," said Tarling. "I may even discover that he's living at a much larger rate. He has a house up the river, entertains very lavishly——"

But the other brushed aside the report impatiently.

"No, let that wait," he cried. "I tell you I have much more important business. Milburgh may be a thief——"

"Did you send for me, sir?"

He turned round quickly. The door had opened without noise, and a man stood on the threshold of the room, an ingratiating smile on his face, his hands twining and intertwining ceaselessly as though he was washing them with invisible soap.

CHAPTER II

THE HUNTER DECLINES HIS QUARRY

"This is Mr. Milburgh," said Lyne awkwardly.

If Mr. Milburgh had heard the last words of his employer, his face did not betray the fact. His smile was set, and not only curved the lips but filled the large, lustreless eyes. Tarling gave him a rapid survey and drew his own conclusions. The man was a born lackey, plump of face, bald of head, and bent of shoulder, as though he lived in a perpetual gesture of abasement.

"Shut the door, Milburgh, and sit down. This is Mr. Tarling. Er—Mr. Tarling is—er—a detective."

"Indeed, sir?"

Milburgh bent a deferential head in the direction of Tarling, and the detective, watching for some change in colour, some twist of face—any of those signs which had so often betrayed to him the convicted wrongdoer—looked in vain.

"A dangerous man," he thought.

He glanced out of the corner of his eye to see what impression the man had made upon Ling Chu. To the ordinary eye Ling Chu remained an impassive observer. But Tarling saw that faint curl of lip, an almost imperceptible twitch of the nostrils, which invariably showed on the face of his attendant when he "smelt" a criminal.

"Mr. Tarling is a detective," repeated Lyne. "He is a gentleman I heard about when I was in China—you know I was in China for three months, when I made my tour round the world?" he asked Tarling.

Tarling nodded.

"Oh yes, I know," he said. "You stayed at the Bund Hotel. You spent a great deal of time in the native quarter, and you had rather an unpleasant experience as the result of making an experiment in opium smoking."

Lyne's face went red, and then he laughed.

"You know more about me than I know about you, Tarling," he said, with a note of asperity in his voice, and turned again to his subordinate.

"I have reason to believe that there has been money stolen in this business by one of my cashiers," he said.

"Impossible, sir!" said the shocked Mr. Milburgh. "Wholly impossible! Who could have done it? And how clever of you to have found it out, sir! I always say that you see what we old ones overlook even though it's right under our noses!"

Mr. Lyne smiled complacently.

"It will interest you to know, Mr. Tarling," he said, "that I myself have some knowledge of and acquaintance with the criminal classes. In fact, there is one unfortunate protégé of mine whom I have tried very hard to reform for the past four years, who is coming out of prison in a couple of days. I took up this work," he said modestly, "because I feel it is the duty of us who are in a more fortunate position, to help those who have not had a chance in the cruel competition of the world."

Tarling was not impressed.

"Do you know the person who has been robbing you?" he asked.

"I have reason to believe it is a girl whom I have summarily dismissed to-night, and whom I wish you to watch."

The detective nodded.

"This is rather a primitive business," he said with the first faint hint of a smile he had shown. "Haven't you your own shop detective who could take that job in hand? Petty larceny is hardly in my line. I understood that this was bigger work——"

He stopped, because it was obviously impossible to explain just why he had thought as much, in the presence of the man whose conduct, originally, had been the subject of his inquiries.

"To you it may seem a small matter. To me, it is very important," said Mr. Lyne profoundly. "Here is a girl, highly respected by all her companions and consequently a great influence on their morals, who, as I have reason to believe, has steadily and persistently falsified my books, taking money from the firm, and at the same time has secured the goodwill of all with whom she has been brought into contact. Obviously she is more dangerous than another individual who succumbs to a sudden temptation. It may be necessary to make an example of this girl, but I want you clearly to understand, Mr. Tarling, that I have not sufficient evidence to convict her; otherwise I might not have called you in."

"You want me to get the evidence, eh?" said Tarling curiously.

"Who is the lady, may I venture to ask, sir?"

It was Milburgh who interposed the question.

"Miss Rider," replied Lyne.

"Miss Rider!"

Milburgh's face took on a look of blank surprise, as he gasped the words.

"Miss Rider—oh, no, impossible!"

"Why impossible?" demanded Mr. Lyne sharply.

"Well, sir, I meant——" stammered the manager, "it is so unlikely—she is such a nice girl——"

Thornton Lyne shot a suspicious glance at him.

"You have no particular reason for wishing to shield Miss Rider, have you?" he asked coldly.

"No, sir, not at all. I beg of you not to think that," appealed the agitated Mr. Milburgh, "only it seems so—extraordinary."

"All things are extraordinary that are out of the common," snapped Lyne. "It would be extraordinary if you were accused of stealing, Milburgh. It would be very extraordinary indeed, for example, if we discovered that

you were living a five-thousand pounds life on a nine-hundred pounds salary, eh?"

Only for a second did Milburgh lose his self-possession. The hand that went to his mouth shook, and Tarling, whose eyes had never left the man's face, saw the tremendous effort which he was making to recover his equanimity.

"Yes, sir, that would be extraordinary," said Milburgh steadily.

Lyne had lashed himself again into the old fury, and if his vitriolic tongue was directed at Milburgh, his thoughts were centred upon that proud and scornful face which had looked down upon him in his office.

"It would be extraordinary if you were sent to penal servitude as the result of my discovery that you had been robbing the firm for years," he growled, "and I suppose everybody else in the firm would say the same as you—how extraordinary!"

"I daresay they would, sir," said Mr. Milburgh, his old smile back, the twinkle again returning to his eyes, and his hands rubbing together in ceaseless ablutions. "It would sound extraordinary, and it would be extraordinary, and nobody here would be more surprised than the unfortunate victim—ha! ha!"

"Perhaps not," said Lyne coldly. "Only I want to say a few words in your presence, and I would like you to give them every attention. You have been complaining to me for a month past," he said speaking with deliberation, "about small sums of money being missing from the cashier's office."

It was a bold thing to say, and in many ways a rash thing. He was dependent for the success of his hastily-formed plan, not only upon Milburgh's guilt, but upon Milburgh's willingness to confess his guilt. If the manager agreed to stand sponsor to this lie, he admitted his own speculations, and Tarling, to whom the turn of the conversation had at

first been unintelligible, began dimly to see the drift it was taking.

"I have complained that sums of money have been missing for the past month?" repeated Milburgh dully.

The smile had gone from his lips and eyes. His face was haggard—he was a man at bay.

"That is what I said," said Lyne watching him. "Isn't that the fact?"

There was a long pause, and presently Milburgh nodded.

"That is the fact, sir," he said in a low voice.

"And you have told me that you suspected Miss Rider of defalcations?"

Again the pause and again the man nodded.

"Do you hear?" asked Lyne triumphantly.

"I hear," said Tarling quietly. "Now what do you wish me to do? Isn't this a matter for the police? I mean the regular police."

Lyne frowned.

"The case has to be prepared first," he said. "I will give you full particulars as to the girl's address and her habits, and it will be your business to collect such information as will enable us to put the case in the hands of Scotland Yard."

"I see," said Tarling and smiled again. Then he shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't come into this case, Mr. Lyne."

"Can't come in?" said Lyne in astonishment. "Why not?"

"Because it's not my kind of job," said Tarling. "The first time I met you I had a feeling that you were leading me to one of the biggest cases I had ever undertaken. It shows you how one's instincts can lead one astray," he smiled again, and picked up his hat.

"What do you mean? You're going to throw up a valuable client?"

"I don't know how valuable you're likely to be," said Tarling, "but at the present moment the signs are not particularly encouraging. I tell you I do not wish to be

associated with this case, Mr. Lyne, and I think there the matter can end."

"You don't think it's worth while, eh?" sneered Lyne. "Yet when I tell you that I am prepared to give you a fee of five hundred guineas——"

"If you gave me a fee of five thousand guineas, or fifty thousand guineas, I should still decline to be associated with this matter," said Tarling, and his words had the metallic quality which precludes argument.

"At any rate, I am entitled to know why you will not take up this case. Do you know the girl?" asked Lyne loudly.

"I have never met the lady and probably never shall," said Tarling. "I only know that I will not be concerned with what is called in the United States of America a 'frame up.'"

"Frame up?" repeated the other.

"A frame up. I dare say you know what it means—I will put the matter more plainly and within your understanding. For some reason or other you have a sudden grudge against a member of your staff. I read your face, Mr. Lyne, and the weakness of your chin and the appetite of your mouth suggest to me that you are not over scrupulous with the women who are in your charge. I guess rather than know that you have been turned down with a dull, sickening thud by a decent girl, and in your mortification you are attempting to invent a charge which has no substance and no foundation.

"Mr. Milburgh," he turned to the other, and again Mr. Milburgh ceased to smile, "has his own reasons for complying with your wishes. He is your subordinate, and moreover, the side threat of penal servitude for him if he refuses has carried some weight."

Thornton Lyne's face was distorted with fury.

"I will take care that your behaviour is widely advertised," he said. "You have brought a most monstrous charge against me, and I shall proceed against you for slander. The

truth is that you are not equal to the job I intended giving you and you are finding an excuse for getting out."

"The truth is," replied Tarling, biting off the end of a cigar he had taken from his pocket, "that my reputation is too good to be risked in associating with such a dirty business as yours. I hate to be rude, and I hate just as much to throw away good money. But I can't take good money for bad work, Mr. Lyne, and if you will be advised by me, you will drop this stupid scheme for vengeance which your hurt vanity has suggested—it is the clumsiest kind of frame up that was ever invented—and also you will go and apologise to the young lady, whom, I have no doubt, you have grossly insulted."

He beckoned to his Chinese satellite and walked leisurely to the door. Incoherent with rage, shaking in every limb with a weak man's sense of his own impotence, Lyne watched him until the door was half-closed, then, springing forward with a strangled cry, he wrenched the door open and leapt at the detective.

Two hands gripped his arm and lifting him bodily back into the room, pushed him down into a chair. A not unkindly face blinked down at him, a face relieved from utter solemnity by the tiny laughter lines about the eyes.

"Mr. Lyne," said the mocking voice of Tarling, "you are setting an awful example to the criminal classes. It is a good job your convict friend is in gaol."

Without another word he left the room.

CHAPTER III

THE MAN WHO LOVED LYNE

Two days later Thornton Lyne sat in his big limousine which was drawn up on the edge of Wandsworth Common, facing the gates of the gaol.

Poet and *poseur* he was, the strangest combination ever seen in man.

Thornton Lyne was a store-keeper, a Bachelor of Arts, the winner of the Mangate Science Prize and the author of a slim volume. The quality of the poetry therein was not very great—but it was undoubtedly a slim volume printed in queerly ornate type with old-fashioned esses and wide margins. He was a store-keeper because store-keeping supplied him with caviare and peaches, a handsome little two-seater, a six-cylinder limousine for state occasions, a country house and a flat in town, the decorations of which ran to a figure which would have purchased many stores of humbler pretensions than Lyne's Serve First Emporium.

To the elder Lyne, Joseph Emanuel of that family, the inception and prosperity of Lyne's Serve First Emporium was due. He had devised a sale system which ensured every customer being attended to the moment he or she entered one of the many departments which made up the splendid whole of the emporium. It was a system based upon the age-old principle of keeping efficient reserves within call.

Thornton Lyne succeeded to the business at a moment when his slim volume had placed him in the category of the gloriously misunderstood. Because such reviewers as had noticed his book wrote of his "poetry" using inverted commas to advertise their scorn, and because nobody bought the volume despite its slimness, he became the idol of men and women who also wrote that which nobody read,

and in consequence developed souls with the celerity that a small boy develops stomachache.

For nothing in the wide world was more certain to the gloriously misunderstood than this: the test of excellence is scorn. Thornton Lyne might in different circumstances have drifted upward to sets even more misunderstood—yea, even to a set superior to marriage and soap and clean shirts and fresh air—only his father died of a surfeit, and Thornton became the Lyne of Lyne's Serve First.

His first inclination was to sell the property and retire to a villa in Florence or Capri. Then the absurdity, the rich humour of an idea, struck him. He, a scholar, a gentleman and a misunderstood poet, sitting in the office of a store, appealed to him. Somebody remarked in his hearing that the idea was "rich." He saw himself in "character" and the part appealed to him. To everybody's surprise he took up his father's work, which meant that he signed cheques, collected profits and left the management to the Soult and the Neys whom old Napoleon Lyne had relied upon in the foundation of his empire.

Thornton wrote an address to his 3,000 employees—which address was printed on decided antique paper in queerly ornate type with wide margins. He quoted Seneca, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius and the "Iliad." The "address" secured better and longer reviews in the newspapers than had his book.

He had found life a pleasant experience—all the more piquant because of the amazement of innumerable ecstatic friends who clasped their hands and asked awefully: "How *can* you—a man of your temperament...!"

Life might have gone on being pleasant if every man and woman he had met had let him have his own way. Only there were at least two people with whom Thornton Lyne's millions carried no weight.

It was warm in his limousine, which was electrically heated. But outside, on that raw April morning, it was

bitterly cold, and the shivering little group of women who stood at a respectful distance from the prison gates, drew their shawls tightly about them as errant flakes of snow whirled across the open. The common was covered with a white powder, and the early flowers looked supremely miserable in their wintry setting.

The prison clock struck eight, and a wicket-gate opened. A man slouched out, his jacket buttoned up to his neck, his cap pulled over his eyes. At sight of him, Lyne dropped the newspaper he had been reading, opened the door of the car and jumped out, walking towards the released prisoner.

"Well, Sam," he said, genially "you didn't expect me?"

The man stopped as if he had been shot, and stood staring at the fur-coated figure. Then:

"Oh, Mr. Lyne," he said brokenly. "Oh, guv'nor!" he choked, and tears streamed down his face, and he gripped the outstretched hand in both of his, unable to speak.

"You didn't think I'd desert you, Sam, eh?" said Mr. Lyne, all aglow with consciousness of his virtue.

"I thought you'd given me up, sir," said Sam Stay huskily.

"You're a gentleman, you are, sir, and I ought to be ashamed of myself!"

"Nonsense, nonsense, Sam! Jump into the car, my lad. Go along. People will think you're a millionaire."

The man gulped, grinned sheepishly, opened the door and stepped in, and sank with a sigh of comfort into the luxurious depths of the big brown cushions.

"Gawd! To think that there are men like you in the world, sir! Why, I believe in angels, I do!"

"Nonsense Sam. Now you come along to my flat, and I'm going to give you a good breakfast and start you fair again."

"I'm going to try and keep straight, sir, I am s'help me!"

It may be said in truth that Mr. Lyne did not care very much whether Sam kept straight or not. He might indeed have been very much disappointed if Sam had kept to the

straight and narrow path. He "kept" Sam as men keep chickens and prize cows, and he "collected" Sam as other men collect stamps and china. Sam was his luxury and his pose. In his club he boasted of his acquaintance with this representative of the criminal classes—for Sam was an expert burglar and knew no other trade—and Sam's adoration for him was one of his most exhilarating experiences.

And that adoration was genuine. Sam would have laid down his life for the pale-faced man with the loose mouth. He would have suffered himself to be torn limb from limb if in his agony he could have brought ease or advancement to the man who, to him, was one with the gods.

Originally, Thornton Lyne had found Sam whilst that artist was engaged in burgling the house of his future benefactor. It was a whim of Lyne's to give the criminal a good breakfast and to evince an interest in his future. Twice had Sam gone down for a short term, and once for a long term of imprisonment, and on each occasion Thornton Lyne had made a parade of collecting the returned wanderer, driving him home, giving him breakfast and a great deal of worldly and unnecessary advice, and launching him forth again upon the world with ten pounds—a sum just sufficient to buy Sam a new kit of burglar's tools.

Never before had Sam shown such gratitude; and never before had Thornton Lyne been less disinterested in his attentions. There was a hot bath—which Sam Stay could have dispensed with, but which, out of sheer politeness, he was compelled to accept, a warm and luxurious breakfast; a new suit of clothes, with not two, but four, five-pound notes in the pocket.

After breakfast, Lyne had his talk.

"It's no good, sir," said the burglar, shaking his head. "I've tried everything to get an honest living, but somehow I can't get on in the straight life. I drove a taxicab for three

months after I came out, till a busy-fellow ^[A] tumbled to me not having a license, and brought me up under the Prevention of Crimes Act. It's no use my asking you to give me a job in your shop, sir, because I couldn't stick it, I couldn't really! I'm used to the open air life; I like being my own master. I'm one of those fellows you've read about—the word begins with A."

[A] Detective.

"Adventurers?" said Lyne with a little laugh. "Yes, I think you are, Sam, and I'm going to give you an adventure after your own heart."

And then he began to tell a tale of base ingratitude—of a girl he had helped, had indeed saved from starvation and who had betrayed him at every turn. Thornton Lyne was a poet. He was also a picturesque liar. The lie came as easily as the truth, and easier, since there was a certain crudeness about truth which revolted his artistic soul. And as the tale was unfolded of Odette Rider's perfidy, Sam's eyes narrowed. There was nothing too bad for such a creature as this. She was wholly undeserving of sympathy. Presently Thornton Lyne stopped, his eyes fixed on the other to note the effect.

"Show me," said Sam, his voice trembling. "Show me a way of getting even with her, sir, and I'll go through hell to do it!"

"That's the kind of stuff I like to hear," said Lyne, and poured out from the long bottle which stood on the coffee-tray a stiff tot of Sam's favourite brandy. "Now, I'll give you my idea."

For the rest of the morning the two men sat almost head to head, plotting woe for the girl, whose chief offence had been against the dignity of Thornton Lyne, and whose virtue had incited the hate of that vicious man.