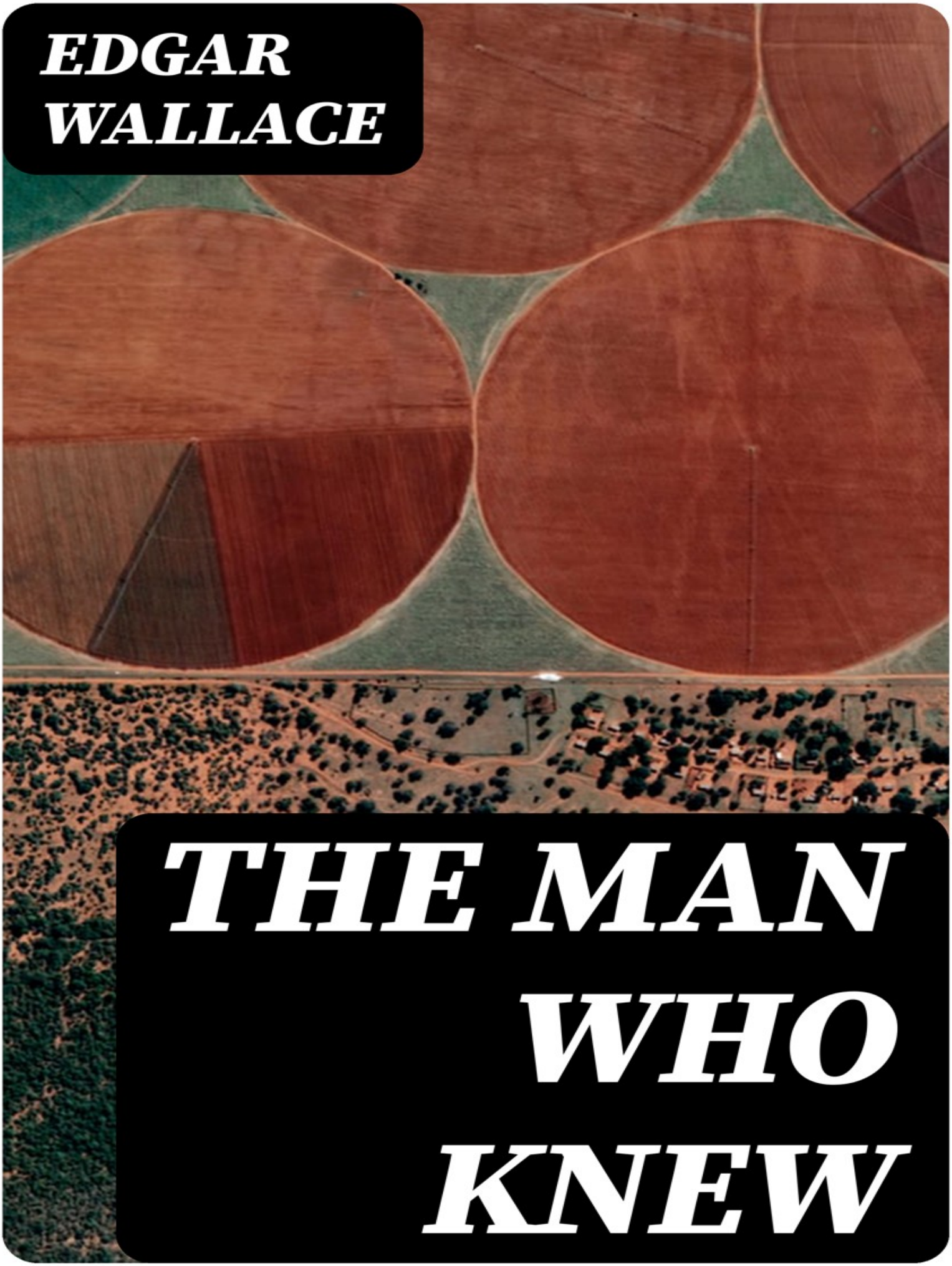
EDGAR WALLACE



THE MAN WHO KNEW

Edgar Wallace

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EAN 8596547305361

DigiCat, 2022
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CHAPTER I

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THE MAN IN THE LABORATORY

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The room was a small one, and had been chosen for its remoteness from the dwelling rooms. It had formed the billiard room, which the former owner of Weald Lodge had added to his premises, and John Minute, who had neither the time nor the patience for billiards, had readily handed over this damp annex to his scientific secretary.

Along one side ran a plain deal bench which was crowded with glass stills and test tubes. In the middle was as plain a table, with half a dozen books, a microscope under a glass shade, a little wooden case which was opened to display an array of delicate scientific instruments, a Bunsen burner, which was burning bluely under a small glass bowl half filled with a dark and turgid concoction of some kind.

The face of the man sitting at the table watching this unsavory stew was hidden behind a mica and rubber mask, for the fumes which were being given off by the fluid were neither pleasant nor healthy. Save for a shaded light upon the table and the blue glow of the Bunsen lamp, the room was in darkness. Now and again the student would take a glass rod, dip it for an instant into the boiling liquid, and, lifting it, would allow the liquid drop by drop to fall from the rod on to a strip of litmus paper. What he saw was evidently satisfactory, and presently he turned out the Bunsen lamp,

walked to the window and opened it, and switched on an electric fan to aid the process of ventilation.

He removed his mask, revealing the face of a good-looking young man, rather pale, with a slight dark mustache and heavy, black, wavy hair. He closed the window, filled his pipe from the well-worn pouch which he took from his pocket, and began to write in a notebook, stopping now and again to consult some authority from the books before him.

In half an hour he had finished this work, had blotted and closed his book, and, pushing back his chair, gave himself up to reverie. They were not pleasant thoughts to judge by his face. He pulled from his inside pocket a leather case and opened it. From this he took a photograph. It was the picture of a girl of sixteen. It was a pretty face, a little sad, but attractive in its very weakness. He looked at it for a long time, shaking his head as at an unpleasant thought.

There came a gentle tap at the door, and quickly he replaced the photograph in his case, folded it, and returned it to his pocket as he rose to unlock the door.

John Minute, who entered, sniffed suspiciously.

"What beastly smells you have in here, Jasper!" he growled. "Why on earth don't they invent chemicals that are more agreeable to the nose?"

Jasper Cole laughed quietly.

"I'm afraid, sir, that nature has ordered it otherwise," he said.

"Have you finished?" asked his employer.

He looked at the still warm bowl of fluid suspiciously.

"It is all right, sir," said Jasper. "It is only noxious when it is boiling. That is why I keep the door locked."

"What is it?" asked John Minute, scowling down at the unoffending liquor.

"It is many things," said the other ruefully. "In point of fact, it is an experiment. The bowl contains one or two elements which will only mix with the others at a certain temperature, and as an experiment it is successful because I have kept the unmixable elements in suspension, though the liquid has gone cold."

"I hope you will enjoy your dinner, even though it has gone cold," grumbled John Minute.

"I didn't hear the bell, sir," said Jasper Cole. "I'm awfully sorry if I've kept you waiting."

They were the only two present in the big, black-looking dining room, and dinner was as usual a fairly silent meal. John Minute read the newspapers, particularly that portion of them which dealt with the latest fluctuations in the stock market.

"Somebody has been buying Gwelo Deeps," he complained loudly.

Jasper looked up.

"Gwelo Deeps?" he said. "But they are the shares—"

"Yes, yes," said the other testily; "I know. They were quoted at a shilling last week; they are up to two shillings and threepence. I've got five hundred thousand of them; to be exact," he corrected himself, "I've got a million of them, though half of them are not my property. I am almost tempted to sell."

"Perhaps they have found gold," suggested Jasper.

John Minute snorted.

"If there is gold in the Gwelo Deeps there are diamonds on the downs," he said scornfully. "By the way, the other five hundred thousand shares belong to May."

Jasper Cole raised his eyebrows as much in interrogation as in surprise.

John Minute leaned back in his chair and manipulated his gold toothpick.

"May Nuttall's father was the best friend I ever had," he said gruffly. "He lured me into the Gwelo Deeps against my better judgment We sank a bore three thousand feet and found everything except gold."

He gave one of his brief, rumbling chuckles.

"I wish that mine had been a success. Poor old Bill Nuttall! He helped me in some tight places."

"And I think you have done your best for his daughter, sir."

"She's a nice girl," said John Minute, "a dear girl. I'm not taken with girls." He made a wry face. "But May is as honest and as sweet as they make them. She's the sort of girl who looks you in the eye when she talks to you; there's no damned nonsense about May."

Jasper Cole concealed a smile.

"What the devil are you grinning at?" demanded John Minute.

"I also was thinking that there was no nonsense about her," he said.

John Minute swung round.

"Jasper," he said, "May is the kind of girl I would like you to marry; in fact, she *is* the girl I would like you to marry."

"I think Frank would have something to say about that," said the other, stirring his coffee.

"Frank!" snorted John Minute. "What the devil do I care about Frank? Frank has to do as he's told. He's a lucky young man and a bit of a rascal, too, I'm thinking. Frank would marry anybody with a pretty face. Why, if I hadn't interfered—"

Jasper looked up.

"Yes?"

"Never mind," growled John Minute.

As was his practice, he sat a long time over dinner, half awake and half asleep. Jasper had annexed one of the newspapers, and was reading it. This was the routine which marked every evening of his life save on those occasions when he made a visit to London. He was in the midst of an article by a famous scientist on radium emanation, when John Minute continued a conversation which he had broken off an hour ago.

"I'm worried about May sometimes."

Jasper put down his paper.

"Worried! Why?"

"I am worried. Isn't that enough?" growled the other. "I wish you wouldn't ask me a lot of questions, Jasper. You irritate me beyond endurance."

"Well, I'll take it that you're worried," said his confidential secretary patiently, "and that you've good reason."

"I feel responsible for her, and I hate responsibilities of all kinds. The responsibilities of children—"

He winced and changed the subject, nor did he return to it for several days.

Instead he opened up a new line.

"Sergeant Smith was here when I was out, I understand," he said.

"He came this afternoon—yes."

"Did you see him?"

Jasper nodded.

"What did he want?"

"He wanted to see you, as far as I could make out. You were saying the other day that he drinks."

"Drinks!" said the other scornfully. "He doesn't drink; he eats it. What do you think about Sergeant Smith?" he demanded.

"I think he is a very curious person," said the other frankly, "and I can't understand why you go to such trouble to shield him or why you send him money every week."

"One of these days you'll understand," said the other, and his prophecy was to be fulfilled. "For the present, it is enough to say that if there are two ways out of a difficulty, one of which is unpleasant and one of which is less unpleasant, I take the less unpleasant of the two. It is less unpleasant to pay Sergeant Smith a weekly stipend than it is to be annoyed, and I should most certainly be annoyed if I did not pay him."

He rose up slowly from the chair and stretched himself.

"Sergeant Smith," he said again, "is a pretty tough proposition. I know, and I have known him for years. In my business, Jasper, I have had to know some queer people, and I've had to do some queer things. I am not so sure that they would look well in print, though I am not sensitive as to what newspapers say about me or I should have been in my

grave years ago; but Sergeant Smith and his knowledge touches me at a raw place. You are always messing about with narcotics and muck of all kinds, and you will understand when I tell you that the money I give Sergeant Smith every week serves a double purpose. It is an opiate and a prophy—"

"Prophylactic," suggested the other.

"That's the word," said John Minute. "I was never a whale at the long uns; when I was twelve I couldn't write my own name, and when I was nineteen I used to spell it with two n's."

He chuckled again.

"Opiate and prophylactic," he repeated, nodding his head. "That's Sergeant Smith. He is a dangerous devil because he is a rascal."

"Constable Wiseman—" began Jasper.

"Constable Wiseman," snapped John Minute, rubbing his hand through his rumpled gray hair, "is a dangerous devil because he's a fool. What has Constable Wiseman been here about?"

"He didn't come here," smiled Jasper. "I met him on the road and had a little talk with him."

"You might have been better employed," said John Minute gruffly. "That silly ass has summoned me three times. One of these days I'll get him thrown out of the force."

"He's not a bad sort of fellow," soothed Jasper Cole. "He's rather stupid, but otherwise he is a decent, well-conducted man with a sense of the law."

"Did he say anything worth repeating?" asked John Minute.

"He was saying that Sergeant Smith is a disciplinarian."

"I know of nobody more of a disciplinarian than Sergeant Smith," said the other sarcastically, "particularly when he is getting over a jag. The keenest sense of duty is that possessed by a man who has broken the law and has not been found out. I think I will go to bed," he added, looking at the clock on the mantelpiece. "I am going up to town to-morrow. I want to see May."

"Is anything worrying you?" asked Jasper.

"The bank is worrying me," said the old man.

Jasper Cole looked at him steadily.

"What's wrong with the bank?"

"There is nothing wrong with the bank, and the knowledge that my dear nephew, Frank Merrill, esquire, is accountant at one of its branches removes any lingering doubt in my mind as to its stability. And I wish to Heaven you'd get out of the habit of asking me 'why' this happens or 'why' I do that."

Jasper lit a cigar before replying:

"The only way you can find things out in this world is by asking questions."

"Well, ask somebody else," boomed John Minute at the door.

Jasper took up his paper, but was not to be left to the enjoyment its columns offered, for five minutes later John Minute appeared in the doorway, minus his tie and coat, having been surprised in the act of undressing with an idea which called for development.

"Send a cable in the morning to the manager of the Gwelo Deeps and ask him if there is any report. By the way,

you are the secretary of the company. I suppose you know that?"

"Am I?" asked the startled Jasper.

"Frank was, and I don't suppose he has been doing the work now. You had better find out or you will be getting me into a lot of trouble with the registrar. We ought to have a board meeting."

"Am I the directors, too?" asked Jasper innocently.

"It is very likely," said John Minute. "I know I am chairman, but there has never been any need to hold a meeting. You had better find out from Frank when the last was held."

He went away, to reappear a quarter of an hour later, this time in his pajamas.

"That mission May is running," he began, "they are probably short of money. You might inquire of their secretary. *They* will have a secretary, I'll be bound! If they want anything send it on to them."

He walked to the sideboard and mixed himself a whisky and soda.

"I've been out the last three or four times Smith has called. If he comes to-morrow tell him I will see him when I return. Bolt the doors and don't leave it to that jackass, Wilkins."

Jasper nodded.

"You think I am a little mad, don't you, Jasper?" asked the older man, standing by the sideboard with the glass in his hand.

"That thought has never occurred to me," said Jasper. "I think you are eccentric sometimes and inclined to

exaggerate the dangers which surround you."

The other shook his head.

"I shall die a violent death; I know it. When I was in Zululand an old witch doctor 'tossed the bones.' You have never had that experience?"

"I can't say that I have," said Jasper, with a little smile.

"You can laugh at that sort of thing, but I tell you I've got a great faith in it. Once in the king's kraal and once in Echowe it happened, and both witch doctors told me the same thing—that I'd die by violence. I didn't use to worry about it very much, but I suppose I'm growing old now, and living surrounded by the law, as it were, I am too law-abiding. A law-abiding man is one who is afraid of people who are not law-abiding, and I am getting to that stage. You laugh at me because I'm jumpy whenever I see a stranger hanging around the house, but I have got more enemies to the square yard than most people have to the county. I suppose you think I am subject to delusions and ought to be put under restraint. A rich man hasn't a very happy time," he went on, speaking half to himself and half to the young man. "I've met all sorts of people in this country and been introduced as John Minute, the millionaire, and do you know what they say as soon as my back is turned?"

Jasper offered no suggestion.

"They say this," John Minute went on, "whether they're young or old, good, bad, or indifferent: 'I wish he'd die and leave me some of his money.'"

Jasper laughed softly.

"You haven't a very good opinion of humanity."

"I have no opinion of humanity," corrected his chief, "and I am going to bed."

Jasper heard his heavy feet upon the stairs and the thud of them overhead. He waited for some time; then he heard the bed creak. He closed the windows, personally inspected the fastenings of the doors, and went to his little office study on the first floor.

He shut the door, took out the pocket case, and gave one glance at the portrait, and then took an unopened letter which had come that evening and which, by his deft handling of the mail, he had been able to smuggle into his pocket without John Minute's observance.

He slit open the envelope, extracted the letter, and read:

> DEAR SIR: Your esteemed favor is to hand. We have to thank you for the check, and we are very pleased that we have given you satisfactory service. The search has been a very long and, I am afraid, a very expensive one to yourself, but now that discovery has been made I trust you will feel rewarded for your energies.

The note bore no heading, and was signed "J. B. Fleming."

Jasper read it carefully, and then, striking a match, lit the paper and watched it burn in the grate.

CHAPTER II

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THE GIRL WHO CRIED

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The northern express had deposited its passengers at King's Cross on time. All the station approaches were crowded with hurrying passengers. Taxicabs and "growlers" were mixed in apparently inextricable confusion. There was a roaring babble of instruction and counter-instruction from police-men, from cab drivers, and from excited porters. Some of the passengers hurried swiftly across the broad asphalt space and disappeared down the stairs toward the underground station. Others waited for unpunctual friends with protesting and frequent examination of their watches.

One alone seemed wholly bewildered by the noise and commotion. She was a young girl not more than eighteen, and she struggled with two or three brown paper parcels, a hat-box, and a bulky hand-bag. She was among those who expected to be met at the station, for she looked helplessly at the clock and wandered from one side of the building to the other till at last she came to a standstill in the center, put down all her parcels carefully, and, taking a letter from a shabby little bag, opened it and read.

Evidently she saw something which she had not noticed before, for she hastily replaced the letter in the bag, scrambled together her parcels, and walked swiftly out of the station. Again she came to a halt and looked round the darkened courtyard.

"Here!" snapped a voice irritably. She saw a door of a taxicab open, and came toward it timidly.

"Come in, come in, for heaven's sake!" said the voice.

She put in her parcels and stepped into the cab. The owner of the voice closed the door with a bang, and the taxi moved on.

"I've been waiting here ten minutes," said the man in the cab.

"I'm so sorry, dear, but I didn't read—"

"Of course you didn't read," interrupted the other brusquely.

It was the voice of a young man not in the best of tempers, and the girl, folding her hands in her lap, prepared for the tirade which she knew was to follow her act of omission.

"You never seem to be able to do anything right," said the man. "I suppose it is your natural stupidity."

"Why couldn't you meet me inside the station?" she asked with some show of spirit.

"I've told you a dozen times that I don't want to be seen with you," said the man brutally. "I've had enough trouble over you already. I wish to Heaven I'd never met you."

The girl could have echoed that wish, but eighteen months of bullying had cowed and all but broken her spirit.

"You are a stone around my neck," said the man bitterly. "I have to hide you, and all the time I'm in a fret as to whether you will give me away or not. I am going to keep you under my eye now," he said. "You know a little too much about me."

"I should never say a word against you," protested the girl.

"I hope, for your sake, you don't," was the grim reply.

The conversation slackened from this moment until the girl plucked up courage to ask where they were going.

"Wait and see," snapped the man, but added later: "You are going to a much nicer home than you have ever had in your life, and you ought to be very thankful."

"Indeed I am, dear," said the girl earnestly.

"Don't call me 'dear,'" snarled her husband.

The cab took them to Camden Town, and they descended in front of a respectable-looking house in a long, dull street. It was too dark for the girl to take stock of her surroundings, and she had scarcely time to gather her parcels together before the man opened the door and pushed her in.

The cab drove off, and a motor cyclist who all the time had been following the taxi, wheeled his machine slowly from the corner of the street where he had waited until he came opposite the house. He let down the supports of his machine, went stealthily up the steps, and flashed a lamp upon the enamel numbers over the fanlight of the door. He jotted down the figures in a notebook, descended the steps again, and, wheeling his machine back a little way, mounted and rode off.

Half an hour later another cab pulled up at the door, and a man descended, telling the driver to wait. He mounted the steps, knocked, and after a short delay was admitted.

"Hello, Crawley!" said the man who had opened the door to him. "How goes it?"

"Rotten," said the newcomer. "What do you want me for?"

His was the voice of an uncultured man, but his tone was that of an equal.

"What do you think I want you for?" asked the other savagely.

He led the way to the sitting room, struck a match, and lit the gas. His bag was on the floor. He picked it up, opened it, and took out a flask of whisky which he handed to the other.

"I thought you might need it," he said sarcastically.

Crawley took the flask, poured out a stiff tot, and drank it at a gulp. He was a man of fifty, dark and dour. His face was lined and tanned as one who had lived for many years in a hot climate. This was true of him, for he had spent ten years of his life in the Matabeleland mounted police.

The young man pulled up a chair to the table.

"I've got an offer to make to you," he said.

"Is there any money in it?"

The other laughed.

"You don't suppose I should make any kind of offer to you that hadn't money in it?" he answered contemptuously.

Crawley, after a moment's hesitation, poured out another drink and gulped it down.

"I haven't had a drink to-day," he said apologetically.

"That is an obvious lie," said the younger man; "but now to get to business. I don't know what your game is in England, but I will tell you what mine is. I want a free hand, and I can only have a free hand if you take your daughter away out of the country."

"You want to get rid of her, eh?" asked the other, looking at him shrewdly.

The young man nodded.

"I tell you, she's a millstone round my neck," he said for the second time that evening, "and I am scared of her. At any moment she may do some fool thing and ruin me."

Crawley grinned.

"'For better or for worse,'" he quoted, and then, seeing the ugly look in the other man's face, he said: "Don't try to frighten me, Mr. Brown or Jones, or whatever you call yourself, because I can't be frightened. I have had to deal with worse men than you and I'm still alive. I'll tell you right now that I'm not going out of England. I've got a big game on. What did you think of offering me?"

"A thousand pounds," said the other.

"I thought it would be something like that," said Crawley coolly. "It is a flea-bite to me. You take my tip and find another way of keeping her quiet. A clever fellow like you, who knows more about dope than any other man I have met, ought to be able to do the trick without any assistance from me. Why, didn't you tell me that you knew a drug that sapped the will power of people and made them do just as you like? That's the knockout drop to give her. Take my tip and try it."

"You won't accept my offer?" asked the other.

Crawley shook his head.

"I've got a fortune in my hand if I work my cards right," he said. "I've managed to get a position right under the old devil's nose. I see him every day, and I have got him scared. What's a thousand pounds to me? I've lost more than a

thousand on one race at Lewes. No, my boy, employ the resources of science," he said flippantly. "There's no sense in being a dope merchant if you can't get the right dope for the right case."

"The less you say about my doping, the better," snarled the other man. "I was a fool to take you so much into my confidence."

"Don't lose your temper," said the other, raising his hand in mock alarm. "Lord bless us, Mr. Wright or Robinson, who would have thought that the nice, mild-mannered young man who goes to church in Eastbourne could be such a fierce chap in London? I've often laughed, seeing you walk past me as though butter wouldn't melt in your mouth and everybody saying what a nice young man Mr. So-and-so is, and I have thought, if they only knew that this sleek lad—"

"Shut up!" said the other savagely. "You are getting as much of a danger as this infernal girl."

"You take things too much to heart," said the other. "Now I'll tell you what I'll do. I am not going out of England. I am going to keep my present menial job. You see, it isn't only the question of money, but I have an idea that your old man has got something up his sleeve for me, and the only way to prevent unpleasant happenings is to keep close to him."

"I have told you a dozen times he has nothing against you," said the other emphatically. "I know his business, and I have seen most of his private papers. If he could have caught you with the goods, he would have had you long ago. I told you that the last time you called at the house and I saw you. What! Do you think John Minute would pay blackmail if he could get out of it? You are a fool!"