from the bottle, and once the popping of a new cork, went on; and on.

Then, suddenly, it died away. And ceased. Tom's voice, bleared and thickened almost out of recognition, said with drunken emphasis:

"H'p! Well, I'm..."

Then Rudd's wheeze: "Tol' 'ee I'd tull 'ee... tull 'ee sum-summat..."

"An' y' hup-have, chum. Nother nip. Jes' nother lil NIP nip."

The sound of a man staggering to unsteady feet. The crash of a falling chair. The tinkle of bottle-neck against tin. Then a sudden shout from Tom:

"Gerrout! G'wan. Gerrout! I'm... I'm goin' bed. I wan' lie down! Gerrout! Take bol! On'g gerrout!"

Then the sound of another chair falling; another pair of lurching feet, more unsteady even than the first. And, "All ri'. All ri', misturr! All ri'! I'm g-goon!" And then unsteady footsteps, a fumbling, the click of the latch and a little squeak of the door, a stumble and a little thud as something heavy fell upon the grass on the far side of the threshold, a muttered cursing. Then, at last, silence, broken by the soft sound of the gently closed door and the click of the falling latch.

And a low whistle from Tom, who said:

"Y' there, Shorty?"

"Am I not!" said the Sailor. He did not move. "Am I comin' up? Or you down?"

"Ye c'n come up," Tom said, and chuckled.

The Sailor came up. And stood a moment blinking at the strong light, unshaded now to his eyes, of the oil lamp upon the table. He said, looking at the bottle beneath this lamp:

"Gin, was it?"

Tom nodded. "His tipple," he said. "An' no such a bad'un."

The Sailor smiled. "Thirsty work, listening. Give us one."

"I will that!" Tom said, and did.

"Ah-h!" said the Sailor. "Good!" He swallowed again, and set down the mug. "And now?"

At the tone Tom raised dark eyebrows until they joined the silver hair above them. He said:

"Didn't ye hear?"

T.H.B.
“Only at the start. When the real stuff began, all I got was a din like Niagara over the wireless.” He paused. “Whisperin’ old ——!” he said bitterly.

Tom smiled. “I c’n save ye trouble. All it was’ll go into a couple words. Not ’s it wasn’t int’restin’. It was. He let on . . . good as, any road . . . he let on how she paid ’im f’r ’strictin’ information ’bout all manner o’ folk. Particular this parson an’ th’ Ridgeway cove. See?”

The Sailor snapped: “What d’you mean; see?”

Tom laughed. “Shirts is better in, Shorty! Sigh better. . . . I mean, d’ye see that Minnie Watkyn . . . that’s Auntie . . . d’ye see what her gane was? I do. Blackmail; that what!”

The Sailor pursed his lips; a faint whistle came from them. “That’ll fit!” he said. “It does fit!” He beamed down upon his host. “It fits like a sow’s skin! She’d squeezed and squeezed. And squeezed. Then one of ’em who’d felt the squeeze worst, sends her that box of chocolates. . . . She rumbles they’re unhealthy, but she doesn’t quite know . . . not to rights . . . which one sent the parcel; so she does this ‘have a choc’late’ stunt on ’em. See? She’s hoping to get at the right bloke. . . . And it’s my belief, skipper, that get at the right bloke she did. ’Cos why? ’Cos then what’d she do? Put the screw on harder, eh? So hard . . . the fool . . . that this bloke gets mad . . . see? . . . and does her in!” He paused and came to the table and poured into his mug another drink. He danced a little dance, for all his bulk light-footed as a ballerina. “That’s it!” he said. “That’s it!”

Tom looked at him with a wide smile. “Ye’re cocksure, Shorty!” he said. “Mebbe right.”

“Right!” The Sailor laughed. “Right. I am right. And now, me lad, sit you down. Ideas, I’ve got.”

They talked. It cost them an hour. At the end of it Tom rose. He stretched and yawned. He said, through the tail of the yawn:

“We’ll try it, then. But I warn ye. It’s mad!”

“Let it be,” the Sailor said. “We’ve got to try it. Got to!” He yawned. “I’m for kip,” he said. “Where do I?”

“Safe enough here,” Tom said. “Wi’ Bet about. . . . How’s Val?”

“Sleepin’ when I left her . . . I’ll go and see. And take her some water.” The Sailor rose. He crossed to the bed and went round it and disappeared, carrying one of Tom’s many
pails. Within five minutes he was back, his boots tied by their laces round his neck. He said, in a voice hushed as if what he had just seen was yet within reach:

"Still sleeping! Like a baby!" That was all; it was the tone and not the words that sent Tom's eyebrows up, and a quick glance from the black eyes beneath them.

In silence the Sailor pushed down the stone and dragged back the bed to its rightful place. Upon its edge, still in silence, he sat himself. He took the boots from his neck and fumbled, with fingers which were not bent upon their work, at the knot in the laces. His eyes did not see this knot, nor did he know that his fingers were foolishly picking at it. His mind was full of a picture. A picture just now seen. A picture of fine, slim curves, and bright gold which was not gold, and a faint, faint flush upon . . . or rather it seemed behind . . . a skin which was young and clearly pale. A picture which had moved him and, by this moving, surprised him. He felt emotions which were foreign to him. Or perhaps not foreign. Rather taking on this appearance from their strangeness. Deep within his consciousness stirred vague stragglings which were not so definite as memory; elusive wraiths of young and poignant emotions, never understood and now further yet from being understood. He only knew of this thing his eyes had seen and this unease which had followed the seeing. And then, utterly without warning, there shot across his mind, effacing this picture, another. He saw himself in a little, low-ceilinged room. He saw himself, stripped to the waist, holding a towel and waiting for a door to open. He saw this and more. He lived over every moment of that night; its ecstasies and quieter joys; its strangeness; its difference, strangely utter difference, from other casual nights. He lived over that morning and pondered the difference, stranger yet, which this had had from those other mornings; its strain, its quaintness, its urgency and big-ness, so far, so very far, from the jaded, satirical, sometimes disgusted, sometimes coldly jocose morning which most of those other mornings had been. He struggled, within himself, without knowing that he struggled, to analyse. He could not. He could not have formed a word towards explanation of these things that gripped him. He only knew dimly of conflict inside himself. His fingers still idly fumbled at the knot in the boot laces. He said, loud enough for Tom to hear, yet without knowing that he had spoken:

"I'm tired, too. *Tired!*"
Tom looked at him. "Have the bed, Shorty. I got plenty blankets."

The Sailor looked up sharply. "Floor's mine!" he said.

He threw the boots, still joined, into a corner. He rose and went to Tom and took the blankets from his arms and the sacks from where they lay at his feet. He turned away and in the corner farthest from the pallet began laying his couch. Tom said suddenly:

"You'll take the bed!"

The Sailor straightened, and turned sharply as his full height was reached. In a single spring he was across the floor and looming vast over his host. He stooped, in a movement simultaneous with the ending of that spring, and one great arm wrapped itself about Tom's thighs while its fellow clipped his shoulders.

The hut's owner was borne to his bed and thrown upon it. The Sailor said:

"Stay there, you old stiff!" He put back his head and laughed, softly still. Tom said, laughing too, but not so softly:

"Ye great big, ugly sonova sea-cook!"

From where again she lay across the threshold, Betty looked on with a bored indulgence. She thought, no doubt, that men at times were stupid enough creatures. She yawned, so that her great head seemed suddenly to split, a gaping crimson cavern dividing the jaws. Only the cock of her left ear showed that, to her at least, life was full of possibilities.

"A'right!" Tom said. "Y'r own way. Lie on floor!"

The Sailor got out of his coat. He said:

"An'that'll do f'r undressin' to-night!" He lay down upon the softness of the quadrupled sacks and blankets. He rolled up the discarded coat, first taking from its pocket pipe and matches and tobacco, and set it where it would become a pillow. He filled the pipe and lit it. He lay down upon his back and smoked at the roof.

Tom, now only in his shirt, went to the table. With a little hiss the lamp went out and the hut was dark. A creaking told of its owner going to bed. There was silence for a while.

Through the darkness, sudden and yet calm, cut the Sailor's voice. He said:

"Queerish sort o' day."

Tom grunted; agreement without words.

"More than queerish!" the Sailor said. He spoke
slowly, musingly almost, for now that the dark had come, and stillness, unexplained strife went on again within him. The pictures had come again; but now the more vivid picture was not that whose original he had seen within this hour. He said, after a silence:

“Lot for you to-morrow.”

“Ah!” Tom said.

The Sailor smoked, to speak again after a time which the darkness somehow doubled. “Quite a tidy bit . . . would you have the time to do a bit of another job. . . . Matter of taking a mess . . .” he broke off. “Taking a letter.”

“Should say.” Tom’s voice was devoid of interest, rather elaborately flat. “Where to?”

In the darkness, forgetting it, the Sailor waved his pipe stem. He said, with a vagueness:

“Close here.” And fell silent. After a moment he added, as if the words had been forced from him: “Matter of keepin’ a promise.”

“Ah!” the voice from the bed was non-committal. “Jest call it to mind in mornin’. We’ll manage.”

“Right,” said the Sailor. Then back once more to unpleasant realities: “Rudd the only company you fell in with to-night?”

A chuckle, more ominous than cheerful, came from the bed. The Sailor sat up with a quick movement.

“Not by a long run, Shorty! Not by a long run. . . . Knew where to find Rudd, I did. An’ when. But I had a bit ramble first.”

The Sailor lay down again. “Say it!” he said.

“Say what?”

“Tell us right away,” the Sailor said, “that there’s talk of a stranger, seen round the time Auntie was plonked; a great big hulking stranger. Nasty looking cove with a ring in his ear and a big stick. Go on; say it!”

Tom laughed. “What’s need? When you said it. All on it.”

“What if I did?” the Sailor growled. “What’re you hummin’ and havin’ at; hesitating. . . . Think I didn’t know they’d be after me as well as Val? You can’t be my size and not be seen. Apart from all else!”

There was a silence then, surprisingly broken by a yawn from the bed. To the Sailor’s ear the yawn rang false. He said:
“Was there aught else?”

Tom said, through another yawn: “Lot o’ froth. Some mebbe int’restin’, some not. . . . Shorty I’m f’r shut eye.”

Silence fell upon the hut. Presently Tom slept; and then, though with troubled mind which made his rest a thing of unease, the Sailor. Across the door, Betty, one ear cocked and one eye wide and unblinking, lay in that state which served her for sleep at such times as these.

CHAPTER VII

There was a smell of frying bacon. Through the now half-open door a shaft of clean, early sunlight came and lay in a swathe of palest gold. Over the fire, intent upon his cooking, bent Tom. Just without the doorway, stretching voluptuously in the sunlight, was Betty. Behind the door the Sailor, kneeling, folded the sacks and blankets which had made his bed.

A little foreign noise came from the doorway and he started, turning like a flash. He stared for a second, then laughed softly. He said:

“Well, strike me!”

The door had been pushed until now it stood three-quarters wide. In the gap, the sun-ray gilding head and forequarters, was the small ass.

Tom straightened and turned. “Thought it were,” he said. “Gibson: take y’self off!”

The donkey looked at him with eyes which seemed mildly inquiring. Tom grinned.

“Sling it!” he roared. “See to ye in a minute. G’wan. Allaybusong!” The small ass turned, with a slow gravity, and walked away and out of sight from the door. Tom laughed. “Allus comes in mornin’s,” he said. “Jest a game like.”

The Sailor said: “This stayin’ up here. . . . Better if I was down soon, eh?”

Tom nodded. “Gettin’ on f’r seven now. . . . Not as there’d be any objection to ye bein’ upside all day, s’long’s door were shut. There ain’t none comes visitin’ . . . . But safe side’s best. An’ that’s down.” He jerked an expressive thumb at the ground.

The Sailor sat and began to draw on his boots. “You be down?” he said.

“Well . . . no. Don’t see why. Sooner I start in, better . . .”
The Sailor nodded. "That's right enough. . . . Got it all clear, eh?"

"I have that, son." Tom came from fireplace to table. In one hand was the frying pan, in the other a fork. "But there was somep'n else; yes? Some message or somep'n."

"Oh . . . ah! . . ." said the Sailor. "Yeah . . ." He left his bootlace tying and sat upright, rubbing with slow fingers at his unshaven jaw.

Tom did not look at him; he doled out, upon the two tin plates on the table, curly rashers of bacon. He went to the fire, set down the pan and came back to the table again with the billy-can which steamed. From it he poured upon the plates and round the bacon a thick, dark gravy with inspiring scent. He dug down into the can with the fork and withdrew, to set them by the bacon, things which had the look of lilliputian dumplings. He said, in a tone whose casualness bore no relation to his guest's last speech:

"S'pose you'd be countin' on it; but they don't care f'r you roun' th' Dog an' Duck."

"Eh?" said the Sailor. His hand left his chin and he slewed round sharply in his chair so that his eyes, no longer clouded, gazed almost fiercely at the bent white head of his host.

"Dog an' Duck," said Tom. "Ye kipped there, 'cordin' t' their tale. . . ."

"What about it?"

"Woman there," Tom said. "Wife o' boss. Y' ought to've heard her!"

"I ought, ought I?" The Sailor spoke slowly; each word seemed separated unduly from its successor.

Tom nodded. "Up to no good, she was sure. Great feller, dressed queer and wi' a ring stuck through is ear. . . . Didn't quite like to take ye in, she didn't. An' she'd heard ye started some rumpus in bar; not till morning or ye wouldn't 'a' stayed. . . ."

"You don't say?" The Sailor's words were precise; his tone vague. The two converging lines that made the triangle of his frown were cut deep between his down-staring eyes.

Tom laughed, still busy with his preparation of the table. "She had you taped, Shorty . . . or thought so."

"Ah!" said the Sailor. "One of the clever ones. . . . Who was she spilling this at?"

"Ol' Pont; village rozzler. So full o' pride jest now he
can’t button his tunic. Ye’d think he was the Big Four in one. I heerd ’em at it in parlour. Half-way they shut door.”

The Sailor rose and brought his chair to the table and sat again. He said, looking down:

“No matter.”

Tom pushed a plate across to him. “I know it’s no matter. I was only tellin’ . . .” He sat himself and began to eat.

In silence they finished the meal. Together they pushed aside their plates, took the last tea from their mugs and pulled out pipes and tobacco. Tom said:

“An’ what’s this message?”

The Sailor was busy with pipe-filling. “Changed mind,” he said. He did not look up.

“There ain’t one then?” Tom said.

“No.” The Sailor put match to pipe-bowl and sucked.

“Right. . . . Now the kid. ’F I get her breakfast, you c’n get on wi’ th’ mountin’.”

“Mountain?” said the Sailor. “What mountain?”

“That paper. You fake that up ’s you said las’ night.”

“Oh . . . ah!” The Sailor cleared a space about him upon the table. He took out his wallet and from it the torn and faded piece of notepaper he had taken from the cold fingers of Auntie. With the point of his knife, razor-sharp for all its seeming clumsiness, he trimmed the paper until it became, without losing more than a very little of the thin and precisely angular writing which covered both its sides, a neat rectangle. He said:

“Where’s the doin’s?”

“Eh?” said Tom. “Oh, yes. Jest a minute.” He went to the fire and from a recess above the hearth took a folded rag. He unwrapped this and took from it four sheets of paper. He brought them to the table and laid them down.

“It’ll pass,” the Sailor said. “Where’s ink? An’ a saucer?” While Tom searched for these he again compared the tints of this paper they had prepared, by judicious wettings and foulings and bakings, with that of the piece his knife had worked upon. They were not, of course, the same tints. But they both seemed old, and of not so varying a colour as to matter.

Tom brought him ink, and a saucer. Also a pen. Into the saucer the Sailor, after a close and final study of the really old paper, poured ink and with this ink mixed ash from his
pipe, stirring the puddle with the pen's rusted nib. He worked for ten minutes in silence; tore up what he had done; began again; after thirty minutes the pen clattered as he threw it down. He said:

"How's that?"

Tom inspected. "None s' bad. Let it dry now."

They let it dry. It looked well. As old, at a pace's distance, as the now neatly squared fragment which had been clutched in the cold, stiff hand of Auntie; and the Sailor's scratchings, at that pace's distance, were by no means unlike the writing. He folded the sheets and put, between them so that it showed when they were straightened, the real fragment. He said:

"It's good. . . . Now what about the kid?"

"I'll get 'er stuff," Tom said. "Then you take it. An' stay below there till I come f'r ye."

Within ten minutes the Sailor stood, holding mug and plate, at the foot of the iron ladder. Above his head, slowly, the stone swung back into place. He groped his way to the end of the narrow passage and came out into the square chamber. Its light now, in early morning, was for some reason a cool and somehow exhilarating green. A strange light, not quite of this world. That was how it seemed to the Sailor. A very strange light; dim yet showing all there was to show with a curious sweet clarity, a clarity which gave to things new and wonderful values. It showed this lair as a green cave of cool and kind excitements to which, as never before they had been felt by man, there was no name. It showed a peace and emptiness which somehow were martial and bravely crowded. It showed, too, blending with all these other half-felt wonders and yet above and about them all, the girl Valentine. But not girl; woman. He had, before and through his troubled sleep of the night, begun semi-consciously to cast that first attitude of mind towards her which held her merely a frightened child. And now, the subconscious having worked, he was conscious that for him she was a child no longer.

She sat upon the edge of her pallet bed. On the ground by the bed was the pail in which, with the soap and towel left last night by the Sailor, she had washed. Her dress was, as it could not help but be, the same; but it seemed to the Sailor's eyes as he drew nearer that it was new and fresh and no longer merely a covering. About her shoulders rippled the hair of the colour of corn. Her head bent, she was drawing
through this glinting mesh of fineness the wide-toothed half of a comb which was a part of that medley filling the pockets of her coat which the Sailor had carried.

He came closer and she turned as she sat, shaking back the shining cascade. She said:

"It's you!" And smiled.

The Sailor stopped in his tracks. Something . . . was it the smile . . . had for the tenth part of a second made it hard for him to breathe. He was astonished. He stood there; holding in one hand two tin plates, one covering its fellow, and in the other hand a mug which steamed. He said:

"'Mornin'. Brought breakfast." But even as the words came and he heard them they sounded in his ears as if spoken by another man.

He shook his shoulders a little. A small, somehow puzzled gesture. He came forward again and stood close to and over her. "Ready?" he said.

She had hairpins in her mouth. She looked up at him and nodded, while the slim long-fingered hands twisted and flashed amongst the pale gold. He saw that to-day the lips were red which before he had only known as pale and sometimes almost grey. And the blue eyes were light and free and unclouded. There was over them no mist or veil; no terror nor even lurking unease behind their depths. He saw that she was taller, or seemed so; more complete. Mature with the irresistible maturity of the very young woman who no longer is imprisoned by the angular walls of self and uncertainty.

The shining cascade became hair again. Smooth, glinting hair which lay close to the small round head and was coiled in thick burnished discs over each small ear. She stood, holding out hands for the plate and mug.

"Sit down," said the Sailor.

She sat. On to her knees he put the plate. He lowered himself cautiously and sat beside her, taking from his pocket a spoon and fork. With care he held the mug of tea so that she might take its handle.

She drank. Over the rim of the mug the blue eyes looked into his, a smile creasing their corners into small and tender wrinkles. The Sailor stared; it came to him, with a soft yet heavy shock, that since his descent of a few moments before something had happened to ease that strange and unaccustomed ache . . . that sore, uneasy hollowness . . . which had inexorably held him, despite all his self-contemptuous
striving to the contrary, since that recounting by Tom of conversation at the Dog and Duck. It was not gone, this childish weakness; not by any means. But now it was not alone. With it, round and about it, was another feeling; a strange excitement, an exaltation of the spirit such as will come to a man who feels, perhaps only subconsciously, that he is near to the realisation of an ideal. He said, the words sounding inanely in his own ears:

“Sleep all right?”

Still sipping, the girl nodded. She took the mug from her lips and set it down by her feet. “Did you?” she said.

“Ah,” said the Sailor. Then, after desperate search for a topic: “How’s the back?”

Sharply the small head with its burnished hair was turned away. Curious, startled almost, he stared and saw with astonished eyes the hot blood surge up under the white skin of neck and cheek, the crimson flush spreading as liquid spreads on absorbent paper.

There was a silence. Then a murmur from the girl:

“Better... Quite, quite better... Really better... There’s nothing, nothing...”

Suddenly, the Sailor understood and was contemptuous with himself for not having seen at once. His understanding of the cause of this embarrassment both amused and pleased him. He knew now that he was not alone bearing within him this strange new excitement. Knew also that the change from child to woman was real and not a thing born of his fancy. He said casually:

“Better yet.”

She nodded, head still turned from him. She seized the knife and fork, and busied herself with the meal. Slowly, very slowly, the flush ebbed away.

The Sailor, covertly watching, was uneasy with mixed emotions. To still them he sought combat with a concrete question.

He pushed the stem of his empty pipe between his teeth and chewed at it.

Why, why and why had she called out to him, as he left the inn, that remark about Tiger-lily? And where did it come in? There was, it seemed, no connection between Auntie and the Dog and Duck. Yet the use by her of that word must mean that connection there was... And who was Tiger-lily? Or what?
He shot a glance at Val beside him. He said suddenly:  
"Just a couple of questions; mind?"
She turned to face him. "Go on," she said.
"Auntie..." he said. "She like her drop?"
The blue eyes, round with inquiry, looked up into his.
He tried again. "Did she drink?" he said.
She shook her head. "She was a 'totaller, Auntie was...
Miss Torr..." A little shiver went over her as her lips whispered this name. "... Miss Torr; when she come she was always teasing at Auntie 'bout it. ... But Auntie never took anything."
"Have it in the house, did she?" put in the Sailor.
"Not hardly ever.... Only when Miss Torr came."
The Sailor frowned. "Quite a while ago that, eh? ...
Know where Auntie got it from when she did get it?"
She nodded. "I do. 'Cos I got it. Down in Mallow, at The George."
"She wasn't... wasn't friends with any of the pub-
keepers round here?" He seemed, so slowly did these words leave his lips, to put this question against his will. While he spoke his eyes were on his feet; but so soon as the sentence was out his gaze was switched to the girl's face.
She shook her head decisively. "No. She was not!"
"Ah!" said the Sailor. "Now what might..."
He was interrupted. In a swift, lithe movement she turned her body so that almost, as he too sat half-turned, she faced him squarely. There came a faint deepening of the colour in her face, the very wraith of a blush, and her hands came up and out, and took each a lapel of the Sailor's coat.
The hands tugged a little, with small unfruitful tugs, at what they held. She said:
"I thought it was two questions you said?"
"And so it was." The Sailor nodded. "I'm sorry."
"Let's stop," she said. "Stop this and... and just talk."
The Sailor smiled. "That'll fit!" he said.
And so he was left, with his riddle more knotted than before, and with that strife, which the elucidating of the riddle was to have helped to slay, in fair way to being inflamed to greater size.
CHAPTER VIII

While below him, Valentine broke her fast, Tom was busy. With a speed and method and thoroughness never achieved by any but the most remarkable of women he put his house in order.

With a quick glance about him he crossed to the door; Betty rose from her post with a whine of eagerness. He opened the door and she was gone, out into the hot, early sunlight. From within the hut he brought out, in two journeys, certain new purchases made upon the evening of the day before and some of that miscellany with which his cart had that day been loaded, piling all against the outer side of the door-jamb. He closed the door behind him now, locking it with a heavy key of strange convolutions which went back, the locking done, into the innermost of myriad pockets.

The cart rested its shafts against the wall to the right of the door. As, his coat off, he righted it, and wheeled it back to where lay the pile of its cargo, he whistled. A curious whistle of three notes. Almost before this sound had died, there came from out of the trees, trotting soberly side by side, the dog Betty and the ass called Gibson.

Betty, her tongue lolling like a strip of red flannel out at one side of her great open mouth, cast herself down upon the sun-warmed grass, almost dry now of its bath of dew. She rolled, with slow and voluptuous ecstasy, upon her back, her flanks and her belly. The small ass, with a most deliberate gravity, paced up to his master, who now stood awaiting him, in his hand a new and shiny-backed dandy-brush of great size and noble bristling.

Gibson was groomed then, submitting to the brush strokes with sympathetic leanings of his weight and an expression of more than ordinary delight in the set of his ears and placid countenance. The grooming done and harness upon him, he backed, with a waddling of his plump posterior, into the shafts which now were held out for him.

And presently the hut stood lonely, the sun beating upon its red and green, while out of the gate which led from the rutted cart-track to the steep slope of the Mallow road there filed, at a sleepy amble which was faster by a good deal than it looked, a man who smoked, a dog who trotted at his heels,
and a little round grey donkey who pulled behind him a green cart which rattled its cargo with a cheerful, tinny clinking.

They turned to their left out of the gate and thus up the hill, going away from Mallow. They went on at their unvarying pace and gained the crest of the hill, where the road wound to the right across the level top of Derwick Shoulder. They followed the road still until they came within a hundred yards or so of the white, low house which stood back from the road on their left hand. Motor cars stood before the fence which bounded the house’s garden, and helmed men in dark uniforms made a sombre group about the little gate to one of whose posts was lashed a pole which bore the sign:

**TEAS.**
Plain 1/6. With fruit and cream 2/.
Minerals.
Tobacco.
Cigarettes.

But the man and the dog and the ass did not have business with this house. Before they reached it there came a narrow track, cutting across the heath-land, which led down to the fringes of the wood that lay, in a deep wide semi-circle, behind the house and below it. Down this track they went and through a gate which led to a fairway through the trees.

They came out of the wood at its other side. And now they were in the square and littered yard of a red-brick farmhouse. In the centre of this space, talking with a slatternly girl in foul apron and fouler dress, was a short, thick-set man wearing the gaiters and clothes of a prosperous small farmer.

The cart, at a word from the donkey’s master, came to halt with a final clanging clatter. The farmer looked up sharply.

"Any jobs, Mist’ Ridgeway?" asked the owner of the cart, touching the brim of his unremarkable hat.

"'Morning." The farmer, with a grunt, dismissed the girl and came over to the cart with heavy tread. "You back?" he said. "Al’ays turnin’ up.” He laughed thickly. "Bad penny, eh, Tom?"

"As you say.” Tom rested an elbow upon Gibson’s neck. "How’s world wi’ you, Mist’ Ridgeway?"

"How isn’t ever?" The farmer beat at his gaitered leg with the stick he was carrying. "How isn’t ever, Mister Tom Whatsyername? So-so. Bloody so-so."
"So-so's better'n some can say, Mist' Ridgeway. . . . Any jobs want doin'?"

The farmer glared, puffing out heavy, crimson cheeks. "How would I know? Eh? Ask 'em in house, lad." He smiled suddenly. It seemed to Tom, watching, that this was a secret smile, springing from some private joy not to be shared with an outside world. He said:

"I'll do that, Mist' Ridgeway. . . . Fine doin's round here, so I'm told."

"Eh?" The farmer looked at him, the smile lingering in its departure.

Tom jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Th' Watkyn woman," he said. "Bad business that!"

The last of the smile left the crimson face, but it seemed to Tom that it was driven. Ridgeway said:

"Ah. Ye're right there, Tom. Y'are that! Bad it is! Very, very bad. . . ."

Tom fumbled for an inner pocket. Fumbling, he came a step nearer so that no more than a few inches separated the two. Dropping his voice, he said:

"Minds me o' that other case. Few year back. . . . I got a bit out o' th' paper 'bout that. . . . Somewher's I got it. . . ." His tone was, most efficiently, that of the village scandal monger. "Dug it out a'smornin'," he said. "Now where th' . . . Ah!" His hand came out from a pocket holding certain folded sheets of paper seeming yellow with age and covered with spidery, ancient handwriting. "P'raps he's slipped among this 'ere. . . ." He opened the sheets, straightening them in such a way that the farmer's eye must fall upon that half-piece so recently made neat by the Sailor's jack-knife. Fumbling and peering, and muttering, "Now where . . ." he yet contrived to see, with those restless bright black eyes, that Ridgeway was either unmoved by the sight of the paper and its writing or else was a man of greater control than he had thought him. He went on with his search, putting back the sheets of paper and delving into further pockets.

"What is all this?" The farmer's tone was irritable.

Tom said: "Jest a bit out of paper. . . . Few year back it was. But I kep' it. An' I dug 'im up s'morning after hearing tell o' th' to-do thisaway. . . ."

But Ridgeway's patience was exhausted. "Can't hang about," he growled. "Wastin' valuable time. . . ." He turned as if to go.
“Sorry, Mist’ Ridgeway! Sorry...” Tom’s voice checked the departure for a moment. “I’m to ask at house ‘f there’s any jobs?”

“That’s right; that’s right.” Again the farmer moved as if to walk away.

Again Tom stopped him. “Nothin’ f’r you personal, Mist’ Ridgeway?” He turned half-round and began fumbling in the cart. He straightened himself suddenly, holding something in his left hand. He said, as he turned back to face the farmer:

“Have a chooclit?” The tone was subtly different from the usual; yet not with a difference which a man, especially a frightened man, could seize upon.

For Ridgeway was now a frightened man. Badly frightened. With a queer suddenness the red faded from the coarse, thick face, leaving the flesh a greenish mottled white. Even the full brutal lips had lost their colour so that now they seemed shapeless, helpless lumps of blubber. A pinched look came round the base of the fleshy nose. The hands, both now clutching the stick, were trembling. The small, hot eyes were arrogant no longer but roving like those of a terrified child. The pale, trembling lips made as if to speak, and two or three times failed. They did, at last, get out the words:

“What... what you mean?”

Tom laughed; a laugh which had in it the falsely genial ring of the respectful mirth of an inferior who so acknowledges himself. It was very well done, that laugh. Slowly, the colour began to creep back to the heavy face; the eyes lost something of their terror, for they saw that, apparently, this man whose words had caused alarm was not, and had not been, aware of their effect.

Tom said, after that deprecatory laugh:

“Jest a side line o’ mine, Mist’ Ridgeway. . . . I puts a few things on cart now and sells ’em to some o’ me clients. . . . Choocits goes well, I find. . . . Good these are; very good!” He held up a long and red rectangular packet.

A laugh came from the farmer’s lips. A shaky, unmirthful sound but charged with relief. “Well, not f’r me!” he said. “’Mornin’ to ye. . . .” He strod away.

“’Mornin’, Mist’ Ridgeway!” Tom called the words after him and stood a moment watching. He lifted his shoulders, almost imperceptibly, and walked to the house and entered and presently came out with a half-dozen of table-
knives, a kettle and a saucepan. He called back over his shoulder, as he put these things into the cart:

"Well, t'morrow then. I'll not forget, missus."

He filled his pipe again and lit it; then, followed by Gibson and the cart and preceded by Betty, went back through the wood and up again on to the white road which lay like a ribbon across the Shoulder's top.

When they left the farm it was perhaps two and a half hours before noon. At noon exactly they were, having loitered a little and worked more by the way, at halt upon the grassy border of the Mallow road, resting in the shadow of a clipped yew hedge which marked the boundary of the graveyard belonging to the little church of St. Barnabas.

This church was strangely alone, the only building, visible from the road, which a man would pass on the four-mile journey from the fringe of Mallow, three-quarters of a mile below to the top of the Shoulder.

The ass, out of his shafts, cropped placidly at the thick grass; the dog was elsewhere upon her unlawful occasions. The man, his grindstone set squarely, by a device of his own, upon the tilted cart, was working his treadle and sharpening knives. He hummed to himself, a drowsy, foreign little air which yet blent pleasantly with the hot, sun-drenched silence of a thousand sounds.

One knife was done; another. The third was begun and half-finished before the chance came about which the sharpener had counted upon. Round the turn, almost right-angled to the left, which the white road between its green walls took some fifty yards below the church, there came a dark, tall figure which toiled up the steepness. A man in the ugly-shaped uniform of black with which the Church, for no explained reason, clothes its officers. A tall man, lean and spare, carrying in his hand the straw hat which but for the heat would have capped his height.

The tune which Tom hummed was silenced. His lips pursed themselves, for the merest instant, into a soundless whistle of pleasure. He bent industrious over the whirring stone.

The clergyman, with long strides, breasted the hill and came at last to the gate in the yew hedge. He halted, looking with his pale eyes, close-set to the fierce, high-bridged nose, at the donkey and the donkey's busy master. Tom, after a moment of the scrutiny, raised his head. His foot came away
from the treadle and the stone slowed, purring, and came at last to easy rest. He said, touching fingers to his hat:

"'Mornin', sir. . . . Should say aft'noon. . . . Grand weather."

"Good-afternoon to you. And it is." The clergyman's voice was deep and pleasant, his enunciation of an unaffected culture.

"That it is," Tom said. "Askin' y'r pardon, sir. . . . But am I speakin' to the Rev'rund Mister Pole?"

The clergyman smiled. A pleasant smile with a flash of good teeth and a curve of humour to the firm lips. "You are," he said.

Tom touched his hat again. "Thought that must be, sir. I'm Tom. . . . I live round these parts three-four month o' th' year. . . . But I only jest got back yes-day, an' you came after I gone beginnin' o' Feb'ry."

"Welcome back." The clergyman smiled again. "Nice donkey you've got there. And very well kept." He half-turned as though to open the gate and pass through. "Well, good-day to you," he said. "I . . ."

Tom took a quick step forward. He put up a hand and pulled off his hat, and the yellow blaze of the sunlight shone oddly on the thick whiteness of the hair which topped the lined, mahogany-tanned face. He said, clutching at the hat with both hands:

"'Scuse me, sir. . . . D'ye happen t' know 'f any work goin' in my line? Pots, sir? Pans? Knives'r scissors?"

His tone was most exactly that of the nervous and respectful but upstanding and honest inferior.

The clergyman turned back to face him. A frown of concentration carved furrows between the curious pale eyes. The under lip thrust itself a little forward. He said at last:

"Really, I don't . . . you might try my landlady, for instance . . . Mrs. Bolton, 10 Crowden Terrace in Mallow. . . . Just behind the High Street. But perhaps you may know her. . . ."

"I don't, sir." Tom's fingers still twisted and plucked at the hat. "I'll try 'er. An' thank 'ee, sir. Very kindly."

The frown disappeared, and once again came the smile. "Nothing at all—er—Tom. Anything I can do . . . I hope I shall see you on Sundays." He gave a slight, a very slight, nod in the direction of the little church behind him.
Harbour

Tom said: "Not a reg'lar churchgoer, sir, I'm 'fraid. But you'll see me, sir. Yes."

"That's right. Additions are welcome, you know." The smile, back yet again, played over Tom, who said:

"Yes, you'll see me, sir. This comin' Sunday too. Even if"—he paused and smiled the sly smile of the inferior risking his little joke—"even if th' rest o' the congergation's too busy..."

"Eh?" said the clergyman sharply. "What do..."

"I on'y meant, Mr. Pole, sir..." Tom became a picture of restrained embarrassment. "I on'y meant... this terr'ble business up yonder, sir. An' th' folk, they're jest talkin' and talkin'. An' doin' no manner o' good by it, to my mind."

The smile was now gone completely, replaced by a look of practised conventional distress. "Yes. Yes. A terrible business. Dreadful...and in this quiet peaceful place..."

He shook his head in grave dejection.

"It is that, sir; indeed it is!" Tom's gravity was very grave. He said after a pause of head-shaking, "Minds me, Mr. Pole, of a sim'lar case three-four year back. 'Twere in all papers...a young girl killed her auntie...In Ireland it was...an' killed 'er wi' jest what they say this poor woman was finished with; one o' them beetles. D'ye call it t' mind, sir?" Tom's gravity held now the proper undercurrent of ghoulish eagerness.

The clergyman bent his head in thought. The long, thin fingers of his right hand rubbed reflectingly at his dark, smooth-shaven jaw. He said:

"No...no...I don't think I...A similar case...most interesting..."

"Happens as how I kep' a cuttin', sir." Tom's eagerness was, in most exactly the due proportion, gaining upon his solemn gravity. He turned excitedly to his cart and began rummaging therein. "Mebbe you'd care t'...now where did I..." His voice came back, a muttered rumble, to the waiting clergyman.

Tom said, suddenly and on a different note:

"Oh..." It was the perfect drop from romance to the hard business of life. He turned again to face the other. He held something in his hand. "'Scuse me, Mr. Pole, sir," he said, and then, with that subtle change and rather rapidly:

"Have a choclit?"
He bent his head with the words, fumbling at the packet in his hands. He watched, but did not appear to watch, the effect of the words.

It was strange. To a less keen eye than Tom's no effect would have been visible. But, for perhaps the tenth part of a second, he saw that the shock of the words was as great or greater than it had been for fat, foolish Ridgeway. He thought: Here's a tough 'un. He said, with a return to his conciliatory, honest-man-with-a-living-to-get manner:

"A side line o' mine, sir. . . . Hope you'll excuse any liberty. . . . I jest thought . . ." He broke off with evidence of confusion arisen from temerity realised too late.

For a moment the pale eyes in the dark face rested upon his; they were unreadable, with somewhere in them now a gleam which had not been there. The mouth below them said, smiling with the words:

"Don't apologise. But, no, thank you. I'm afraid my sweet-eating days are long ago gone."

But Tom, for the correct space, was profuse with apologies. The clergyman waved them down. He said:

"This cutting . . ." He appeared, thought Tom, rather more interested than one would have anticipated.

"Yes, sir . . . jest a minute. . . ." With alacrity he turned back to rummaging in the cart. Frequent exasperated mutterings came from him. He left the cart and, turning, began upon his pockets. He said as he thrust hands here and there about his coat:

"Sorry, sir. I'm gettin' old an' careless like . . . Time was when I never . . . Ah! what's this?" From an inner pocket his hand came away with the folded papers. "May 'a slipped in here," he said. He came a step closer, fumbling.

The sheets opened in his fingers, so that there leapt into prominence the half-sheet which was genuine. He said:

"Don't seem t' be here. . . . Now where . . ." His eyes, apparently cast down upon the papers in his hand, took notes. They saw, at the moment when that unfolding of the sheets had happened, a sudden, sharper gleaming of those light eyes, a frown, a paling of the natural pallor, a sudden and as suddenly checked movement of the whole lean black-clad body . . . a movement which, it seemed, was the beginning, suppressed by tremendous effort, of a snatch. He heard, straining ears as eyes for portents, a quick and hissing intake of the breath, a sound repressed with a speed and completeness as strict as
those which had turned into the slightest of twitches that
grabbing movement. He said, still fiddling with the sheets, but
beginning to fold them:

"No... taint here... I wonder..." He felt with
his left hand, in more pockets, shaking his head. Facing him,
the gleaming pale eyes stared, unwinking, at the top of the
down-bent head.

"'Tisn't no manner o' good..." Tom's tone was crest-
fallen. "Must've mislaid the bl... beggin' y'r parden,
Mr. Pole, sir. That's what I done, though. Mislaid th'
thing!" Slowly, with deliberation, he thrust the sheets of
paper back to their pocket. He raised his head, and his black
eyes sent humble apology into the pale ones which still, with a
steady disconcerting stare, looked down upon him.

There was a heavy silence then. For the first time that
day... probably, too, for many years... Tom felt himself
at a loss. He wanted speech, but it would not come. He
wished to move, but somehow could not. He was not...
or so he thought... afraid. But it was all that he could
do... and that only by summoning strength from sources
which did not usually require tapping... to keep the pose
of the apologetic servitor. In the end it was not he that spoke
first. For, still with that unwinking, curiously gleaming stare,
the clergyman said:

"A pity. I should like to have seen this press-cutting.
Most interesting... It might, too, have been useful in
giving perhaps a hint as to solving the mystery. If, of course,
there is a mystery." His eyes still stared.

Tom twisted at his hat with a nervousness this time not
wholly assumed. He said humbly:

"Very sorry, Mr. Pole... I'm sure..."

"Perhaps," said the pleasant voice, "perhaps, when you
have found the extract, you would let me know?" The eyes
still gleaming, still intent, gave Tom the impression that the
words which had come from the mouth below them were mere
sounds; were not by any means interpretations of the thoughts
behind the high forehead. He said eagerly:

"Why, cert'nly, sir. 'Course I will. Jest so soon's I lays
hand on it. I'll bring it long to ye, Mr. Pole..."

"You could, of course," said the clergyman, "do that.
Very good of you. Very good. Or perhaps... where do
you live? It is part of my duty to visit my parishioners. Near
by, is it?"
Tom told him. If he had not, there would be many who could. Honesty, for this once at least, was the only politic course.

"Thank you," said the clergyman. "Thank you." He stared a moment longer, then turned and took two paces to the low gate set in the yew hedge. His hand on the latch, he said: "Good-afternoon, Tom. I am glad we have met."

Tom, a finger at his forelock, watched while the tall lean figure, rusty black in the glare of the sun, walked with long calm strides up the white-sanded path to disappear through the low porch into the cool, green dimness of the little church.

Slowly, the hand which had saluted fell to his side. He let out his breath with a faint whistle and shook his head slowly. He turned on his heel and with two steps was back by his grindstone. He went on working a while. He became aware that the day was far hotter than he had thought and that his shirt stuck clammily to his back. Now that Pole had gone, the sun, which somehow during his presence had seemed to lose its warmth and clean brightness, bore again heavily down upon him. There was no breeze. Dust from the white road stained the green of the thick grass beneath his feet and the darker tints of the hedge. There was no sound save the click-click of the treadle, the whirr of the stone itself and the rough metallic rasping of the knife-blade upon it. Gibson, twenty yards away, cropped at peace.

Tom finished the knife and threw it into the cart to lie with its fellows. He put two fingers between his lips and a long sharp whistle punctured the silence. He began unfixing the grindstone. Down the road, the ass pricked his ears at the call for him. At a gentle trot he returned, his progress silent upon the coarse thick grass of the road border. He stood behind his master and with a nudge of the head into the small of the bending back, advertised his return to duty.

Presently the man and the ass and the cart were retracing their path up the gradually increasing steepness of the Mallow road. One car passed them, coming down the hill. It was driven by a man in policeman's uniform but for the helmet; beside him sat a companion who was helmed. The closed tonneau had three men behind its windows; two in mufti, the third, obsequiously balanced upon a push-down seat with his back to the car's direction, in the silver-buttoned blue coat and shiny-peeked flat cap of a police inspector.

They passed with a swirl of white dust. Tom, rubbing
this from his eyes and mouth, turned with a shrug of the shoulders and lifted eyebrows to gaze a moment after them. Gibson, who too had suffered from the dust, shook his head angrily, but plodded on, the traces taut, up the hill towards food and drink and a rest. Tom, coming after him, looked about him as he walked. There was no one in sight. He pursed his lips, and his whistle for Betty to come to him rang out twice, sweet and high and clear in the hot still air. There was no sound in answer, no crackling of undergrowth among the dense trees which lined the road upon each side. No sound at all save for the plip-plop of Gibson’s small hooves.

But, fifty yards farther on, a silent shape slid through a gap in the right-hand hedge and stood looking down at them. Tom beckoned, and silently she squatted down the steep bank, neatly jumped the broad ditch and came to him. In her great jaws was clamped a limp thing of soft fur, plump and young and heavy. Tom bent and into his hands she dropped the prize. Again he looked round him; then into the cart put the treasure and covered it with a piece of sacking.

Placidly thereafter they made their way home; the man and the dog and the ass. When Gibson had been unharnessed and rubbed down and watered and fed; when the cart had been unloaded and its cargo properly stored; when Betty had been given to drink and four bucketsful of household water had been drawn from the spring which hid itself in the trees behind the hut; when all these things had been done, Tom’s great watch showed the time as after three.

He put Betty on guard then, at her post across the door. He made a fire and while it was burning up, cleaned and skinned her catch. He was occupied then for half an hour with the business of cooking. Only when two billy-cans steamed upon the stove’s top and the door of the rough, home-made oven was tight closed; only then, and after a word to Betty at which she pricked her ears and kept them rigid thereafter, did he don his coat again and pull the bed away from the stone.

Within ten seconds the trap was closed above him and his boots were clattering upon the iron rungs as he descended.

This clattering roused the two who awaited him. They sat side by side upon the pallet bed. The glinting hair of the girl Val was against the Sailor’s side. Her eyes were closed and a little smile was curved about her mouth. His right arm, a great lithe column, was about her, supporting. His eyes were open; they stared into nothingness and were cloudy with what
he saw there. Thus had they been for perhaps an hour, perhaps more. It was when, after their talk, they had fallen silent that she had suddenly leant to rest against him. That talk, which was his talk, had begun, quite suddenly, after a morning of silence and remarks. She, really, had started that talk. Suddenly, wildly almost, she had faced him. "Tell me things!" she had cried. "You know things. Tell me. Tell me about other places . . . and people. . . ."

He had. Diffident at first. But not for long. Soon he had found, in this recital and the eagerness and charm of his audience, a drug which stilled that unapprehended war within him. . . .

And now, silent and together, they heard the noise of Tom's descent. The Sailor sighed. He withdrew his arm and said:

"Well . . . he's back, Val."

Her eyes opened. Lakes of soft blue. The Sailor stirred, about to stand. But before the stir became a movement she was close to him again. Close and pressed against his side. Her arms came up and went about his neck. Soft, tender, strong little arms. Strong with surprising strength. They pulled, and in answer to their pressure his head came down. He was touched and startled and bewildered.

His lips opened to speak. But words were stopped. Other lips, soft and young and firm, were pressed against them.

And then Tom's footsteps scraping along the dark passage. The arms about his neck loosed their hold. She sat back and away from him. Her eyes were wide. They had in them a look almost of fear, but with other things behind and about and over this.

He got to his feet and stood looking down at her. Tom's voice came from behind him.

"Return o' the Conqueror!" it said cheerfully. "Grub soon."

The Sailor turned slowly. "That's good hearin'," he said. In his own ears the words rang a little unsteady.

CHAPTER IX

In the hut with Betty on guard at the door, two men faced each other across the table.

"Queerish day I been havin' . . ." Tom's words were slow and their tone nearly casual.

"Tell," said the Sailor.
Tom told, omitting nothing. It took him perhaps an hour. He said at the last:

"... An' they're both queer—Parson an' Ridgeway. Bloody queer! Y'ought t' see 'em, Shorty."

"I'r'aps," the Sailor said, "I will."

Tom raised his eyebrows. "Meanin'?"

The Sailor shrugged. "Just that." He puffed at his pipe until clouds of smoke wreathed themselves about his head.

Tom rubbed at his back hair. "Well... it's all crazy, so we may's well be gibberin' too."

The Sailor took his pipe from his mouth. He said:

"You take a walk, will you? Up to Auntie's. And see if the rozzers're goin' to stay there all night."

"They're away a'ready," Tom said slowly. "Passed me in car... But what foolery're you schemin' now?"

The Sailor smiled. "Foolery hell!" he said. "I want a shave." His fingers rasped over the stiff, fair bristles upon cheek and jaw.

Tom said: "Hot water on fire there 'f y' want... But what's this game o' yours? What you at?"

The Sailor rose. He took from his bundle, which lay upon the floor by his feet, a razor and a strop. When he spoke again the strop was fixed to the chair back and the razor was rhythmically flapping it. He said:

"I'm goin' on a visit. That's all. Goin' to poke round that house a bit..."

"Whaffor? You jest tell me that now! What th' hell for?"

The Sailor went on stropping. He smiled. "You great big dub!" he said. "If you don't know, you can do the other thing. But you do! Yes?"

Tom was mildly disgruntled. "Clever!" he said. "'Spose it's letters, eh? 'Y' want more o' what Auntie was grippin', eh?"

The Sailor's grin was wide.

"It's an Idea," Tom said. "But that's all the far it oughter get... D'ye hear me, Shorty?"

The Sailor, setting in a neat row upon the table a mug of hot water, the razor, a brush and soap, was dumb.

"You," said Tom. "Ye're the most annoygravatin' lump of illegitimacy ever I came across... Did—you—hear—what—I—said?" He thumped heavily upon the table with each word.
The Sailor caught up the mug of hot water. "Mind the boudoir!" he said. "Yes; I heard. What you want me to say?"

Tom leaned forward upon his crossed arms. He said, slowly and earnestly:

"That ye're not goin' t' be such a bleeding great fool as t' go trampin' off on a goose chase. Puttin' y'r damn head into th' line's jaws, it'd be."

"But I'm going." The Sailor began to spread lather upon his cheeks.

Tom shook his head. "Go and be damned!" he said with affectionate resignation. "But don't forget ye're famous." He took from his pocket folded newspapers and opened them. He cleared his throat and began.

While he shaved, the Sailor listened. He learnt indirectly, that the death of Auntie—known variously as the Tea-House Tragedy, The Mallow Murder, and The Watkyn Crime had come as manna to a starving Press. He learnt directly that "The County Police had the matter well in hand;" that "interesting developments were to be expected shortly;" that "up to this stage the County Police had not invoked the aid of Scotland Yard;" that "the Police were assiduously seeking information as to the whereabouts of two persons, the eighteen-year-old niece of the murdered woman and a strange man who was upon the day of the murder and that preceding it, known to have been in the neighbourhood. (Here followed a long and remarkably accurate description of the Sailor.) The Police, we understand, have every reason to believe that it will not be many hours before information leading to the discovery of these persons, between whom no connection can so far be traced, is received."

"Put a sock in it!" said the Sailor mildly.

"Had 'nuff?" Tom looked up from behind the sheet.

The Sailor wiped the soap from his razor. "Lot o'—-!" he said. "Means nothing! Hot air; and not so hot at that."

Tom was doubtful. He shook his head. "Mebbe... But ye know they're after ye, so why..."

The Sailor said, interrupting:

"Knew it before. That stuff don't make any difference. Or if it does, it's the other way; means we've got to look lively. Can't stay here forever. Soon as it's dark, I'm off. And I mean that."
“Got a tidy while t' wait afore that,” Tom said. “Goin' down?” He jerked a thumb towards the floor.

The Sailor wiped the remaining soap from his face, and began in silence to put away his tackle. Tom said, looking closely at him from under his brows:

“Goin' down again, are ye? Till it's time?”

The Sailor rolled up his little canvas holdall. “No,” he said after a pause. Then again: “No. Time’l pass.”

It did. In silence they washed, Tom twice fetching fresh supplies of water, the pots and plates, the table and floor, and themselves. In silence, for now the Sailor was so deep in thought that to speak to him seemed waste of a man’s breath, Tom moved the bed and raised the stone and disappeared. He was away a long time, but when he was once more above ground in the hut, found that, at least to all seeming, the Sailor had not stirred hand nor foot nor head.

Tom looked at him. “Val wanted ye,” he said.

“Eh?” said the Sailor, after a pause.

“You heard!” Tom said. “So had t’ tell ’er ye was goin’... out ’s evenin’. Not where, o’ course. Nor why. But anyroad she’s not expectin’ ye now.” He paused a moment; came closer until he stood within a foot of his guest, who huddled, gigantic and precariously balanced, upon the small chair. He said, in a new tone:

“What’s on, Shorty? You an’ the kid...”

The Sailor raised his head, and Tom saw that the time indeed had passed, for so dim now was the dusk light in this small room that he could not, close as he was, read what might have been written upon the face a little below his own.

This time the Sailor did not ape misunderstanding. He said slowly:

“Hard question, that... Might say ‘Nothing’ and not lie... But I won’t. I’ll... I won’t say anything. No answer.” He half-turned in his chair and groped in a side pocket for his tobacco-pouch of oilskin.

Tom turned away to half-sit, half-lean against the table. He said:

“H’m! See here, Shorty! I’ll tell ye... Bit o’ wisdom fr’m...” He broke off suddenly. “No... Let’s leave it...”

The Sailor said: “Getting nice and darkish now.”

"'Tis that.” Tom nodded. “Start in a half-hour 'r so.”

“If it’s dark by then.” The Sailor pulled out his watch.
"Hour, I should say." He put down a hand which pulled aside his open coat and unbuttoned his shirt. "Lookahere, you Tom!" he said. "If anything goes wrong on this job... you'll..."

"Carry on," Tom said.

The Sailor nodded. "So. But with your weather eye on Val. See?" The hand within his shirt came away now, dragging after it a broad, small-buckled belt. "And in case... in case... you'd better take some money." He undid a flap at one end of the belt, which was in effect a long bag, and thrust in two fingers. With a sound of crisp hishing he brought out a white wad.

Tom stood up. "Put it back," he said. "Gwan. Put 'er back, Shorty. I got a plenty meself. What ye think I am?" He laughed a little, putting up a hand for silence. "I know. I know!" he said. "My looks don't tell on me, son. You think... how could ye help... you think pots an' pans 're my livin'. They're not, son. They're jest a 'scuse f'r th' sort o' livin' I like. See? Bits o' tradin', that's me. Sometimes a nag; others dogs; or snappin' up a bit o' land and sellin' it. But I keep quiet, see? Ye get a whole lot o' information tourin' around... No, you keep y'r money, Shorty... 'F there's any squarin' up to do, we'll do it when this job's over... An', Shorty, why d'ye carry money like that? Bank it, son. Bank it!"

The Sailor laughed. "Right, Carnegie!" he said. "But how? Now, I mean. Only been home two days."

"That so?" Tom was surprised. "But there's a tidy sum in that belt, I'd say..."

"You'd say right... Matter o'... well, a very, very tidy sum... My settle-down money, that is. And it wasn't earned without trouble."

"Ah," Tom said. He leaned once more against the table and slowly turned his head to look up at the small rectangle of window. "Gettin' prop'ly dark," he said, for the dusk had now deepened and the black shadows in the corners were stretching out until only in the centre of the hut were shapes discernible. The two men smoked in a silence which grew heavier and a darkness which became darker with every ponderous minute.

At last, with an alertness contrasting, somehow ominously, with his long immobility, the Sailor got to his feet. There was a rustle in the darkness as he replaced beneath his clothes
the money-belt which, since he first had brought it to light, had dangled like a limp dun snake across his knee.

"Ready?" Tom said. He too rose from where he sat.

"Ay... Time, too."

Tom said: "How long 'll ye be?" He stood, his head thrust forward, trying vainly to see more than the giant patch of blacker darkness which was the Sailor.

"How long!" the voice repeated. "Can't say. You expect me when I turn up."

Tom suddenly drove his right fist, with a loud clap, into the palm of his left hand. The Sailor said sharply:

"What's up?"

"Now that's an idea!" Tom's voice was jubilant.

"Take Bet."

"Why..." began the Sailor. Then: "Well, why not?... Not so bad a notion! Will she do as I say?"

"She will. I'll put her." Tom went silent to the door and opened it and Betty, just a shape in the gloom, came silently in. She sat, face turned upward inquiringly, at her master's side while he lit the oil lamp which stood upon the table.

The shadows dissolved. The Sailor, blinking a little, was surprised at the now remembered smallness of the hut; as, for the past hour and more, he had sat, his brain furiously working against his will, in first dimness, then dusk, then darkness, the little room had stretched in his mind's eye. He felt a definite relief at its smallness and snugness and companionship; a relief which showed him, so that his mouth curled in a sneer at himself, that uneasiness, vague but very real, had been with him in the dark and his physical inaction.

He saw that Tom was kneeling now and holding speech with Betty. He heard Tom say:

"Shorty; jest minute!"

He went, so that he now stood over the pair. Tom put out a hand and patted his leg. "With him," he said, and patted the leg again. "With him." He snapped his fingers and Betty, rising from her haunches, thrust forward her head and sniffed at the Sailor's leggings. "With him!" Tom said again; then, to the Sailor: "Make much of 'er, now. She knows... An'she likes you a'ready... So that's that."

For a few minutes the Sailor, kneeling, conversed with the dog, fondling her ears and speaking to her in many-languaged jargon, mostly unprintable but with all the words pitched on
the same, low, almost crooning note. From the table, which again he sat upon, Tom listened. He said, as Betty reached up her great square head to lick the Sailor’s cheek:

"Way wi’ dogs all right!"

There was a laugh in the voice, but something else as well; a little, faintly rasping keenness of which the voice’s owner was unaware. To himself the Sailor secretly smiled. But he got to his feet. He said:

"What about the kid, though? . . . I’m taking Bet. So you’ll be up here. . . ."

"Better alone, she is," Tom said. "Jest now. I asked ’er. She said: ‘I’m sleepy.’ That mebbe so; mebbe not. But she’s after no comp’ny, cept . . . ."

"Right!" the Sailor cut in. "Right." He gave one look about the hut and then turned to the door. Here he paused. "When I come back," he said, "I’ll send Bet ahead. Then you’ll know."

"Right," Tom said. "S’long. Good luck."

"So long," said the Sailor. "Come on, Bet!"

The door closed upon them and Tom was alone. He dropped into the chair which the Sailor had used and sat staring at the door. His lips pursed and a dolorous whistle came faintly from them.

Out in the clear darkness of the warm, moonless night, walked the Sailor and Betty. They kept, silent as shadows, to the wood which lined the Mallow road as far as the crest of the hill.

As he walked, the Sailor’s thoughts were not upon the work before him. That they should have been, he knew. But he also knew, from experience gained this day, that it were worse than useless to essay guiding them into any paths, other than the tangled maze in and around which they were desperately, uncontrolledly playing. . . . In the morning he had, to himself, endeavoured to snap careless mental fingers at that story of Tom’s; that conversation which showed the woman as a cheap and eager Judas whose silver was her reputation. But those fingers would not be snapped. His reason, his sense—these told him, insistently, that there could be no construction other than the obvious to put upon this matter. More, these told him that he was a lucky fellow indeed; for had he not had his pleasure with a lovely woman, which was good, and then discovered her for what she was in time to prevent her doing him injury, which was better. Had he not,
now? said reason and sense. Of course he had. 'So why worry? Why be anything save grateful to Providence? He had had his fill of the evil and beautiful with nothing but pleasure to himself; and, as if this were not enough, now there had come, ready for him, the young and good and lovely; the fairy tale girl dreamt of by boys before they are bestialised; dreamt of, but rarely . . . oh, so rarely! . . . found.

Thus reason and sense. But there are other things than these in the mind of a man. There is the saving grace of imagination; there is humour; there are one hundred and one nameless seeds of other less concrete but surely more real, greater things than reason; matters, dimly felt and unnameable, which are sometimes herded into the ugly verbal pan called "Instinct." And these, too, were at work. Their strife with reason and sense was the warring which had torn him. For imagination, and the dreams of adolescence in its purer moments, had fastened upon the person of the girl called Valentine; she was young and had beauty; she was weak and oppressed and he was her protector. She was very much woman, but woman only to him; a walled city, unsieged and unsacked, whose gates of gold and ivory were open for him alone to enter; gates beyond which lay, it seemed, all the rare treasures and tenderness and adoration which are the texture of those dreams of youth.

Had he been able to put words to his troubles, much of his unease might have been spared him; but he could not. He only knew that he was in a mix with the pair of 'em. He thought: and I'm a bloody fool to be that. Why keep harping back. . . .

And now, suddenly, his mind was wrenched from these paths. Much to his relief. He was now come to the outer fringe of the wood. That is, he was at the top of the slope and upon the edge of the Shoulder's flat top. Being so, there was now no cover for him. The night was moonless, but the high, clear sky was ablaze with stars. Dark it might be, but not so dark that a hunted man could go otherwise than with caution. He lay upon his belly, with Betty, a pale grey wraith, flat beside him. He considered: to decide at last that his way to the white house must be along the half of a circle; that he must cross, as unobtrusively as he might, the stretch of open heath straight ahead of him and gain the shelter of the wood which lay between the road, now curved away to his right in a faintly glimmering ribbon, and the railway line. This was
the wood through which, after coming from the inn, he had first found the house. Yes. He would do that; and get into the house from the back. He whispered: "C'mon, Bet; down!" and began his crawl.

Experience had made of him a hunter as well as a seafarer; one no less than the other. In a time which, though possibly longer than Betty's owner might have taken, was yet most praiseworthy fast, he was within the blackness of the wood behind and beneath the road. Beside him, a soundless, almost invisible solidity, crouched Betty.

"Now for it!" he said to himself. He rose without sound and stretched himself. At his side the dog stood stretching also.

With a care which he almost despised himself for taking, he started off and presently was peering out, from behind a trunk in the outer fringe, at the faint outlines of Auntie's house before him. A twig, crushed by a sudden and for once unheeded movement of his foot, broke with a little crack which rang in his ears like a revolver shot. He started. Betty looked up at him, her great head cocked a little to one side. There was, he thought, something reproving in the attitude. He smiled to himself in the darkness. He lay down again. Beside him, Betty too went down. He put out a hand and pulled at her ears.

The pair began, smoothly and silent as lizards, to crawl forward again. . . . Twenty yards they made; then rested. . . . On again for ten yards and against their raised heads was pressed the dew-wet coldness of the bottom bar of the fence which walled in Auntie's garden. . . . Under this they went, the wood scraping painfully down the Sailor's back. . . .

Another crawl . . . another pause . . . on again. . . .

Then, in the shadow of the larger of the fowl-runs, he got to his knees. With long, tip-toed strides which despite their care made a faint, crushing sound upon the cinder of the path, he covered swiftly the few feet from the fowl-run to the door out of which, it seemed many weeks ago, he had from the tree-tops watched Auntie come with Val for the business of chicken feeding. . . .

The door, as he knew it must be, was locked. He took his hand from the silently-turned knob. He crouched and took Betty's head between his knees and fondled it. He said, as Tom had told him:

"Down! Down! Watch now; watch. Watch!"
She sank down, to be hidden in the deep patch of absolute darkness made by the shade of the broad projecting sill to the low window beside the door. Her head went down on her forepaws, and both her ears, pricked, were swivelled forward like pointing weapons. He bent his mouth to her ear. "Hush!" he said, in a low hissing whisper, as nearly alike to Tom's as he could produce. "Hissh!" He placed his fingers, as he said this, lightly round her muzzle, pressing gently. She lay, quivering a little as dogs will when intent, but otherwise motionless and silent as the darkness which cloaked her.

He rose and stood, a foot upon either side her body, and felt with cautious fingers at the window's middle sash. From his pocket he brought the jack-knife and opened its great blade.

There was a faint, metallic clack as the catch within went back. Praying that it might be quiet, he put his hands to the wood and lifted. With as little noise as might be, the pane went up. . . . Within two minutes more, for his entry must be silent, he stood upon the stone floor of Auntie's scullery. From his pocket now he brought a pair of socks; socks of thick grey wool as heavy almost as felt. He leaned against the edge of the sink and drew these, with silent cursing at their stubbornness, over his boots.

When he moved, it was with as much guard against noise as he had used out there in the open where overlooking or hearing was possible. He believed in taking care. He took care, even in this quiet and greyly empty house; he did not yet bring into use the small, squat, powerful torch which lay, ready to hand, in his right-hand jacket pocket. Fingers brushing the wall, he groped his way to the doorless doorway leading to the passage.

He had known that it would be dark when once he had got inside the house. But somehow he felt, as he put one muffled foot gingerly after the other below his guiding fingers, that darkness so dark as this had never been before.

For it weighed upon him; weighed actually; weighed as if it were indeed, as it seemed, an infinite cloak of dull black velvet, heavy and stifling and impenetrable; a cloak whose folds, at first loose, were being very slowly drawn together about him by invisible threads pulled by unseen hands. . . .

He drew in deep breaths through his nostrils and exhaled them with little sighs. Twice he stopped in his slow, infinitely
careful advance and put his right hand to the pocket where lay his torch, a pressure on whose button-switch would rend this choking curtain with a sharp spear of light. But each time his hand was withdrawn, without the torch. It was as if the curtain which had been born within his own mind was now being forced upon him by a power outside that mind; he felt now that what had seemed perhaps a possibly too-strict application of his motto of Take Care was become a most vital necessity; that for some reason there was near to him danger, danger and more danger. He gained the doorway leading to the passage; his fingers, coming upon the wooden framing, told him that he had. But he did not immediately pass through. He stood, still breathing deeply but with silence, pressed against the jamb of the door that was not there. He was fearful, and angry that fearful he should be. His head ached, with hot bands encircling and pressing it, from the straining of his ears to hear sounds that would not come.

For how long he stood like that, he could not afterwards have told. Perhaps seconds; perhaps minutes or tens of minutes. But he did move at last. Out into the stone-floored passage he felt his way. His hands, for a moment stretching uncertainly before him like faulty antennæ, came up at last against the wall they sought. . .

A step every thirty seconds. . . . One step. . . . Two. . . . Three. . . . A pause. Then, with more confidence, three steps together. . . . How far now? His mind strove with memory of the house as he knew it. He should . . . surely, surely, by this time . . . he must be within a pace or so of Auntie’s room. Without moving his feet, he leaned forward and thrust out an arm, not taking the palm of his hand from the wall, as far as it would go.

The fingers found nothing save the cold plaster which all the time had been beneath them. . . . He took two more steps; small, shuffling steps, and tried again. . . .

And, as if synchronised by some device of diabolism, it was at the moment when his fingers found the wood of the edge of Auntie’s door that there came the scream. A hoarse, bubbling, rattling scream:


“Christ!” muttered the Sailor. His hand dropped. He leaned heavily against the wall with his shoulder. His heart beat at his ribs with quick, heavy blows. His back was cold
with fear and the drenching sweat of fear. His lips were dry
and his tongue so stiff that it would not obey the order to moisten
them. In agonised helplessness he waited; waited for some-
ting he dared not put name to. . . . Already he saw, with
his mind’s eye, the sight whose reality he felt would leave him
without sanity. With straining, staring eyes he peered, through
the thick, soft blackness which would not let him see, towards
the doorway whose door, he knew from that scream, stood
open. He waited for light; waited with dread corroding him;
for the light which was to come would not, he felt, be a light
such as a man should see . . . a faint grey light was what he
waited for; light which is not light as men know it but rather
a magicking whereby the veil of darkness is vilely lifted. He
waited for this lifting and what it would disclose . . . the figure
of Auntie ghastly in her trappings of tawdry finery. . . .

And then, while his mind, recovering, urged flight and
could not gain even the shadow of obedience from the great
body whose strength seemed drained away from it utterly;
then there came another scream.

It was this time a formless gibbering. It lasted for perhaps
a second. And it was followed by a short rapping sound, as
if a stick had met metal with a light, shrewd tap.

The Sailor, himself at his strongest again, came upright as
if some spring within him had been set. He said, and because
of the greatness of his relief, said aloud in his deep voice which
boomed in rolling hollow echoes down the low-roofed passage:

"That son-of-a-bitch-of-a-bird!"

His hand going to his pocket for the torch, he took a step
forward and, turning, another across the threshold of Auntie’s
chamber.

But before he had pressed the torch’s button there happened
a thing which was surprise so absolute that the torch itself
slipped from his fingers to floor, clattered as it bounced,
and lay.

With that step, indeed, midway in it, he had cannoned into
a man. A solid, breathing lump of a man. . . .

Astonished utterly, he became for an instant frozen into an
immobility as complete as that which just now, in the passage,
had gripped him. But the cause was different; this time there
was not that cold slimy fear sapping his strength. There was
a man to deal with and of men he knew. . . .

In that instant when the shock of surprise had paralysed
him, the arms of the unseen man came out and flung themselves
about him. And a voice, hoarse with rustic exultation, bawled beside his ear:

"Bob! Bob! Here!" Then, lower: "Gottcha, you... ."

The Sailor said, whispering with a laugh in the whisper:

"Is that so?"

He had, because of the hug about him which he had not yet cared to break, only some four inches play with his right forearm. But four inches is quite a distance. Suddenly, every muscle taut now where a second before they had been slack, he clenched his right hand into a fist and struck with a short jabbing, twisting movement into the body which was so near his own. As the fist landed he gave that extra twitch of the shoulders, a movement pivoting the body from the right heel, which ensures that every ounce of weight is used. ...

The arms about him dropped; through the dark he heard a curt, coughing gurgle. A rustling then; and a sudden great weight, soft yet firm, struck his shins and feet and rolled away from them. He smiled a little. But there was in him, if not fear, an apprehension; an unease; a dread. For he had felt, during that embrace in the dark, buttons of metal pressed against the hand of his doubled-up left arm. Metal buttons, uniform buttons. ... Tom had been wrong. The police had not left. ... He had walked into the spider's parlour, so ingeniously baited with darkness.

Now all this, the collision, the arms about him, the shout of the man now insensible at his feet, the blow which had sent him there, the racing of thoughts, all this had taken no more than maybe the half of a minute, so that, even while he thought, he heard through the thoughts a clattering of official boots down the stone passage, coming from the front of the house.

He turned, and his hand brushed the wooden back of a chair. His fingers seized it, and he swung the thing up and over his head so that upon his scalp rested the top of the seat, the legs in air like a bunch of unsightly antlers. ...

Just within the door, crouched now and holding the chair with a hand upon its either side so that its legs stuck, parallel with the floor, straight out before him, he waited. ...

The running feet ran no longer. ... The sudden closing up of that rent in the silence must have given them pause. They came on slowly, with less noise, and preceded by a small white bull's-eye of light, which danced and roved about wall and floor and ceiling.
It was as he first saw this light that the Sailor began the noise. He stamped, he made strange shoutings, some in a hoarse deep voice like that which had called "Bob!" some on a high, strange note.

He was rewarded. The feet broke into a run again. In three paces they were at the door. And as they reached the door, the Sailor charged. The chair legs found their mark, with sixteen stone of bone and muscle behind them. . . . There was, at the moment of impact, a sharp crack as something hit the chair's seat's under side, then a rushing and a thud. . . .

The Sailor, the chair lowered, took two small paces backward and was within the room again. He lowered the chair and sat down. Then, on his knees, he groped about the floor and found, by luck, his own fallen torch, the bulb unbroken. Under his coat he pressed the button and found that the thing still worked. Without light, for he did not know whether the enemy had more reserves, he went silently out into the passage again and, kneeling, inspected his second victim as well as he might, with hands and ears.

The man lay sprawled against the passage's farther wall, which his head must have struck in his fall. There was no blood, nor were there, it seemed to the Sailor's hands, any broken bones. The breathing was heavy and short. Relieved, he rose and crept back once more into Auntie's room.

Here, he knelt again, this time by the body of his first vanquished. There were stirrings in this body; consciousness was coming back. Still without light, but with the speed and silence of experience, he trussed his fowl. With a short piece of cord he tied the thumbs together, the arms being pulled behind the back and the hands put palm to palm. With a longer cord he bound the ankles, and then, with a third piece, joined wrist bond to ankle bond. With his prisoner's own handkerchief, found in a buttoned pocket of the tunic, he made a gag. Only just was this in place and secured when gurglings told him that consciousness was fully back. Smiling, he stood up and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. Groping, he found a table and the position of its legs and then, with his foot, rolled and pushed his prisoner beneath it.

Still smiling to himself in the darkness he went again into the passage. He wished this clear, from general tactical principles. He tip-toed, his muffled boots making no sound upon the stone flags, down the passage to his right, pausing at each
step to strain his ears for sound. He heard none; once more
that thick, soft silence was pressing close round him in the
darkness.

He came to the door of the room in which, as he knew, Val
had been used to sleep. It was ajar. He pushed it open and,
arms folded above his head, rushed in with small silent steps.
... Nothing stirred ... he came out again into the passage
and retraced his steps until he stood over the limp figure which
sprawled against the wall opposite the door of Auntie's room.
He bent and with his fingers hooked into lapel and trouser-
band, lifted. He straightened himself, and the twelve-stone
dead weight came up from the ground as if it had been only
as many pounds. Bearing it now against his shirt, one arm
beneath its shoulders and the other in the crook of the flaccid
legs, he went, as quickly as before, back down the passage and
into that room of Val's. ...

Upon the bed ... that same bed where first she had with
naked fear in the blue eyes told him that she would not, could
not, be "shut in" ... he laid his battered prey and eased
its collar and pushed a pillow beneath its head.

He stood upright, and with a stretching and a great sigh,
prepared for the last labour which must come before he might
assume the house empty of the enemy and be free to begin
upon the work of search which had brought him there. His
head ached still with the straining of his ears, and across his
forehead, above his brows, there seemed to be clamped a hard
cold bar, for his eyes still would not believe that, no matter
how they tried, they could not, in this house of blackness, see
even so much as a finger's breadth before them. He tried to
cease from striving after hearing, but could not. For just as
soon as he had, by great effort, relaxed the tension of that
striving, so did sounds seem to come ... dim, faint sounds
suggestive of danger ... sounds which at once waked that
strain again. And so with his eyes. When he shut them in
endeavour to escape the irksome pressure of that cold bar
across his brow, then was it that, being shut, they became
certain that were they to open they would find that this foul
crust of utter blackness had thinned; that power was growing
upon them and that this, together with the lightening which,
shut, they were sure had come, would mean that sight was once
more possible. ...

He gave up the struggle. Neither ears nor eyes would give
themselves the rest which he strove to force upon them. He
could not wait. He passed out, growing now more certain of his steps, into the passage again, shutting the door behind him and locking it with the key he had taken from the inside. He dropped this key into his pocket and leaned back against the passage wall. He had, now, to make sure. . . .

He made his noises again. He jumped and stamped. He growled in his throat and interspersed the growling with the high, strange head-noises he had used before. He was careful with this noise, striving to make it sufficient to fill the house yet not of a volume likely to spread dangerously without.

He came to an end. He listened. No sound. He made fainter noises; little shuffling noises; a desperate hoarse half-choked cry of "Help-help!" He listened again. No sound. No sound and the darkness thicker, it seemed, than ever.

He drew a deep breath and stood upright and, feeling for his torch, made his way towards Auntie’s room again. On the threshold he paused and brought the torch from his pocket. Light now he must have, and there seemed no danger, now that he had demolished the enemy, in having it.

But, as he stepped into the room, his thumb ready against the button of the torch but as yet not pressing it down, light came. Not the light of a torch, isolated and almost tangible, but light everywhere. A broad, enveloping, yellow light. Real light. Light as opposed to darkness. The whole room was full of light.

The Sailor, blind now as he had not been blinded by the dark, clapped a hand to his eyes and cursed. A voice said, rasping across the tumbled room:

"Put up y'r hands! Go on! Up with 'em!"

Blinking, shaking his head, peering upward from beneath down-drawn, contracted brows, the Sailor obeyed. His eyes, slowly at first but then with a rapidity which seemed to him a miracle, recovered. He saw, standing behind a table at the far side of the room, a thin, red-haired, sharp-faced man in policeman’s blue. In his right hand this man held a long-barrelled automatic pistol, its muzzle pointed, unwavering, at the Sailor’s head. Upon the table before him was the large oil-lamp which, at the touch of a match, had demolished the darkness.

The Sailor, his hands level with his ears, watched silent while his captor, who wore upon his sleeve the three stripes of a Sergeant, edged out from behind his barrier and came forward with slow official tread. As he watched this approach
his face was a blank, but the brain behind it busy and purposeful as an engine.

From beneath the table to the left of the door came a muffled, choking series of gurgles. The Sergeant’s thin-lipped mouth twisted into a smile. He said:

“All right, Cowley. In a minute!”

He was close to the Sailor now, looking up at him with red-rimmed eyes of a hard grey, his mouth faintly sneering.

“Clever, eh?” he said. He thrust the automatic forward, until its muzzle was a bare inch from the Sailor’s stomach.

“Aren’t you?” said the Sailor.

The red-rimmed eyes glared. “No gab now! Here! You untie him. Quick!” He jerked his fiery poll down towards the trussed and grunting form beneath the table. “And look slippery, you hulking great —!”

The Sailor turned, and the turning hid the gleam which had come to his eyes. He knelt, ponderously slow, beside the table. He peered beneath it, then turned, pivoting upon his knee, and looked up, inquiring, at the Sergeant. He said:

“Would I pull him out first?”

The Sergeant nodded; a masterful nod. He stood, feet planted apart, upon the loose strip of flower-patterned carpet which covered the boards from door to wall, thus making up the deficiency of the large fixed carpet of dusty red which floored the larger part of the room.

The Sailor, instead of turning back to carry out his orders, flung himself, so quickly that many a man not half of his weight might have envied, forwards and sideways. . . . His arms shot out. . . . His hands gripped at the strip of carpet . . . with a terrific thrust of his heels upon the floor he straightened from the crouch he now was in. . . . And the carpet came up with his hands; that is, there came up that end of the carpet far from where the red-haired Sergeant stood.

He fell, that Sergeant. His feet flew from beneath him and he fell, upwards, outwards and backwards. By his good fortune, and the Sailor’s, his shoulders took the ground first, thus breaking much of the force with which, an instant later, his head came down. He was not even stunned. . . . He began, in fact, so soon as he had fallen, to twist round as he lay so that he might use the pistol which still was gripped in his right hand.

He was quick. But not quick enough. For even as he fell the Sailor jumped; his right boot swung and its tip crashed
against the knuckles of the pistol hand. With a clatter the gun
lay spinning on the green and sickly yellow tiles of the small
hearth, and, almost before it fell, the Sailor knelt astride its
owner.

He said, looking down at the red hair and crimson face and
blazing small eyes:

"Clever, eh?" He shifted so that his knees kept down the
blue-clad arm, which then gave up, as indeed they well might,
all attempt at struggle. "Just a minute now..." He felt
in pockets and brought out more lengths of thin, strong cord
and became busied with it.

There was no darkness to fight now, so that his speed was
doubled. In a moment he was done and standing again. He
looked down at the Sergeant, straight and helpless and very,
very angry. He said solemnly:

"Hurts me more than it does you, Sonnie!" Then, with
a smile: "Quit looking that way! You'll burst, man!" He
bent down and picked up the fellow like a sack; took three
steps and laid him, face to the wall, upon Auntie's settee of
faded, spotty yellow plush. "Don't want you looking at me!"
he said, and was answered by stifled raging gurglings behind
the gag. In chorus there came other similar sounds from
beneath the table by the door. And then a cry from the
parrot, whose baleful eye shone upon the scene with, it seemed,
a gross malignant humour:

"Choclit, dearie! Averchoclit!"

"Oh, you!" said the Sailor. He crossed to where, beside
the fireplace, the cage stood on the floor. He picked up the
baize cloth which lay fallen and threw it over the cage and was
rewarded by silence. He stooped again and picked up the
pistol and looked at it and at last thrust it into a pocket.

He stood then, his hands thrust into the side pockets of his
coat, and with his back to the hearth surveyed the room at his
leisure. He pondered where he should start his search; where
Auntie would have been likely to hide the stock of her secret
trade. In this room, probably. But where? Beneath the
floor? Behind a loose chimney brick? Ordinarily, in a locked
drawer or cabinet? Subtly, following the principle of the
safety of the obvious?

He sighed and brought a hand from his pocket to scratch
reflective at his head. A long job, unless great luck were with
him. A very long job, perhaps not to be successfully completed.
... He looked once more, with a wry twist of the mouth,
about the room. In the soft yellow light of the big lamp it showed a dreary tawdriness more disheartening even than its daytime aspect. There was a cold gloom about it; a death of the spirit; a musty, dusty beastliness.

Should he start, he thought, with the cupboards? No, for that would mean moving the Sergeant again. . . . Smartish chap, that. Must have been there, behind that table, the whole time, just waiting. And it wasn’t lack of guts that had kept him from coming out sooner, to the help of his men. No, just craft. Making his bird think there was nothing left to deal with; then getting him off his stroke. . . . Not bad.

His eyes wandered again to the table in the window behind which this foxy Sergeant had bided his time; wandered, then stayed fixed. Fixed upon two boxes. Official-looking boxes. Certainly, from their very plainness and cleanliness and air of utility, certainly no boxes of Auntie’s. . . . Moved by a hope which, despite its wildness, became even as he crossed the room almost a conviction, he went to the table and lifted the lid of the first. He said, whispering:

"Well, I’m ——ed!"

For under his hand were certain neat bundles, bound with tape and having recently written neat tickets upon them. His search had been most thoughtfully carried out for him; for the second bunch was of letters in that spidery hand which covered the half-sheet which had been clutched even in death by Auntie, and which now rested somewhere among those multitudinous packets in the coat of Tom.

He pored over this and the other bundles, reading the letters through. He peered into the other box and found its contents to be not letters but fragments of ash and fluff; hairpins and matches and such like, each bundle neat and neatly ticketed with the place of its finding in round, laborious handwriting. Whoever had charge of the County Police was thorough to pedantry in the methods which he made them follow.

The Sailor put into his breast pocket only the bundle of letters. He said, with a smile and a gesture which must have annoyed his prisoners yet more than the words:

"Thank you very, very kindly."

He turned out the lamp and then, groping in the sudden darkness, made his way to the door. He passed through it and closed it softly behind him.
CHAPTER X

Down the passage he went towards the scullery through which he had entered. But he checked half-way, by the door of the room that had been Val's. From his pocket he took the key and turned it in the lock and went softly in. At the bedside he halted and used his torch, and by its light made close examination of the second of his victims.

He came out of that room not ill-pleased. A nasty crack on the head, but with no consequences more serious than a slight concussion. He locked the door again but this time left the key in the lock.

He went, lighting his way, along the passage to the scullery and through it to its door. His torch showed him bolt and key. He turned one and slipped the other and softly drew the door wide.

His torch was off now and back within his pocket. But as stepping into the warm, lighted darkness of the outer air, he said softly: "Betty! Here!" he heard a sound and saw a dim strange shape which, despite caution, brought the torch out again and again into use.

Its rays showed to his eyes a sight which brought to them first the blank wide stare of astonishment, then, swiftly, a flash of laughter which spread until the whole face was alight with it and the shoulders below the face heaving in their effort for silence.

Still laughing, he crouched and once more brought the torch's ray to bear. The picture was unchanged. Betty, motionless as bronze, stood over the supine figure of a man, the metal buttons of whose tunic glinted and winked in the white beam. He, too, was as still as if carved; but he was conscious and unhurt. He gazed up, with trembling lips and staring terrorised eyes, at the great muzzle, its lips lifted at the corners to show a hint of fangs like the teeth of a trap, which was steady within an inch of his nose.

"Lay off, Bet!" the Sailor said. She moved, with a cock of the head towards him as who should say: "There it is; any time you want more of this done, only too happy," and stood watchful at a pace's distance. The man stirred, the merest flicker of movement, and there came from the depths of Betty's throat a faint, distant rumbling, menacing and minatory. He lay still again, still as death, every muscle rigid.
This set the Sailor, who perhaps was already elated, off again upon his silent laughing. He saw with his mind’s eye the whole history. Saw the policeman, on outside guard, creeping round to the scullery door, there to enter and go to the valiant help of his shouting, stamping comrades; saw him met suddenly by a thunderbolt, a silent mass which leaping up from the ground, takes him in the chest and brings him down. When the stars have danced their dance before his eyes and he can see again, he is flat and helpless and that grinning muzzle looks into his, and every sound or movement which he may begin to make is strangled at birth by that low rumbling and a white gleam of teeth beneath slaverling red gums. . . .

The Sailor laughed and laughed his full, silently. But as he laughed he worked. This fourth capture made not even a show of resistance. So that, in time even quicker than with those inside the house, the Sailor had him tied and gagged.

He left him within the scullery, sitting, crumpled and most undignified, in the dark and bucket-laden space beneath the sink. Then, the scullery door locked behind him, what he had sought safe in his breast pocket, and Betty a silent shape at his side, the Sailor took his leave.

Over his own tracks he went, creeping down the garden, under the stile and so into the shadow of the wood, where a man might walk upright.

He went with caution but freely, and as he went gave himself congratulation on his luck. Even he blessed the policemen, for though his manner of dealing with these would make the chase hotter for him yet had they not been there it seemed to him likely that he never would have got those letters. For either these had been found earlier, in which event had the guard not been set they would have been, with the other exhibits, moved to another more official place; or they had been found that evening, his four victims having while it was yet light made a thorough and systematic search such as he himself, alone and with only a torch, could not have hoped to carry out.

Though he had said to Betty as they had crawled from stile to trees: “Didn’t want that other one, girl. Four’s greedy!” He felt that everything in this night had fallen out indeed well for him, and in this reflection was carried near to that point where he must leave the shelter of these trees he was among and cross the open heath for the woods in which lay home.
He was carried near to it, but no farther. For, at his side, Betty suddenly halted, with a ghost-whine for the attracting of his attention. He stopped, looking down. She was rigid, tail straight out, ears pricked. She pointed. He listened, straining his ears.

To them at last, through the darkness heavy with the thousand night scents of the earth and its fruits, there came a sound. Very faint it was, but he could not tell whether this faintness was by reason of distance or in its nature. Nor could he tell, until he thought to follow the line of Betty's point, from which direction it came.

He strained his ears, standing motionless, endeavouring to analyse the sound. It was a voice; but it seemed to have no words. It was a high note, in the main, yet there were threaded through it deeper sounds. It was a sound not pleasant to his mood, for as he stood listening it drifted into his mind a melancholy which by degrees infinitesimal at first but then with a pervading flood swept him clean of the elation which had thrust all trouble from his mind.

The sound, it seemed to him, grew clearer. Motionless in the darkness he struggled with its mystery. Then its risings and fallings; its checks and runs; its sad, hard painfulness; these told him, suddenly, that this was a woman weeping.

He did then a thing which in view of his position was forever to be a mystery even to himself. He went, with not a thought to police, nor murders, nor the figurative price upon his own head, straight in the direction of the sobbing. It lay deeper within the trees and with every step went some of that faint light which had, in his walking, guided his steps. Going became difficult and more difficult. But Betty now went ahead. He lost sight and touch with her, but stumbled on.

And then, when he had travelled a hundred yards which seemed a mile, he came upon the dog again. She was nosing something which lay huddled at the foot of a large tree upon the edge of a little natural clearing. Into this clearing came enough of the starlight for a man to see at least his hand before his nose or a path beneath his feet.

The sobbing had ceased. The Sailor, peering down uncertainly, saw dimly that a paleness which must be a hand was caressing the head of Betty. He went forward a step, so that no longer was he hidden in the patch of utter darkness made by the shadow of the big tree. He said uncertainly, and feeling,
now that intrude he had, the intrusion was a vile ravishing of another's privacy:

"Er... Can I... Is anything wrong?" The words came haltingly from a tongue suddenly awkward and stiff. Their stupidity; their abysmal inadequacy sent the blood to his face with a hot rush that made him bless the darkness.

There was, following this speech, a silence deeper than any of this night of silences. Not as those other silences had been, of soft, stifling darkness and doubt and sometimes dread. But a silence sharp with a sharpness of spears. A silence that was not of nothing but of everything. A silence so full with meaning that his mind could catch at nothing save a knowledge that this was a lull, like that dead calm before the monsoon, preceding great and bewildering happenings.

He stood there, head thrust a little forward, the great shoulders hunched. His arms dangled loose and nerveless at his sides. At his knees Betty sniffed, seeking words of praise or blame or at the least recognition.

There was a movement in the dimness, a rustling. The shape which had lain abandoned by the big tree's foot came suddenly alive and rose and stood before him. Such was the darkness that he knew rather than saw it as tall and strong and rounded; he remembered how last he had seen her, gazing after him from the inn's doorway. There waked in him the soft, rather terrible shock of such recognitions even before he heard the voice.

She said, this voice low and deeper than he knew it by reason of the strength she put out to restrain her sobs:

"You! It is you! It is!"

He heard the voice and its tone and was aware of emotion. He said:

"Yes. But..." He stopped, biting off words which immediately he forgot, so that he could not have told, an instant afterwards, what it had been that he was about to say.

"You!" she said again. She came close so that he felt her breath cool and soft upon his cheek. "You!" Arms came up in the dimness and twined themselves about his neck. They forced down his head and against his face he felt a warm softness, and when he raised it there was a salt wetness upon his lips. She said:

"You didn't come."

"I... I..." he said. "How... how could I?"
Through the darkness, in which he could only see by memories the features of the dim, pale oval that was her upturned face, he strove with an eagerness he knew futile to read her eyes.

She said:

"No. No; you couldn’t. I see that."

He remembered things. He shot out a hand whose fingers gripped her wrist with a force that from most women would have drawn a scream. He said, in a tone which by itself was insult:

"I’ve heard! Lot, I’ve heard..."

She said, answering tone more than words:

"Meaning?" She stepped back a pace, and her chin went up.

"Don’t fool with me!" He spoke harshly and with a brutality most rare in him.

She laughed. A hard sound without mirth. In the dimness her face was a pale blur, strained back from the paler neck between it and the invisibility of her dark gown.

"Fool!" she said.

In a passion of sudden cold rage which, even at the moment of its shaking him, he could not understand since his mind, or part of it, had told him already and many times that he was done with this woman, he shook savagely at the wrist which he still held. He said, between his teeth:

"Yes. F-double-o-ell. Fool!... Oh, you’re so innocent butter wouldn’t melt in that mouth that’s red-hot with lies!... But I know. I’ve got friends that are friends. Get me? And one of ’em was hearing you!" He shook again at the wrist. "You know a whole lot about me, eh? And tell it!"

She said, her voice choked and throaty with effort to keep back a cry at the pain of her wrist:

"Please let me go!"

He flung the hand away. "Didn’t think I’d hear that, did you?" he said. "But I did.... You and the rozzzer!"

He spat.

There was a silence. At the end of it he said childishly:

"Did you? Or didn’t you?"

She said: "You seem to know... know all about it." A little sob caught at her throat and checked her. "It’s... it’s... what’d be the good of my saying... anything? What... what’d be the good?" Her voice went up with these last words; up into a desperate sob, half-controlled, which affected the Sailor strangely. He felt within his own
throat a tearing, which was yet a constriction, most discomfortable. He said:

"Mean to say . . . ."

She cut across his words like a flash. She said:

"Mean to say nothing! What would I say to you. . . . I'm not much. . . . Me, I'm just a woman who let you have me. . . . Why? Don't know why. Because I—well, I was fool enough to think . . . to think I'd . . . I was . . . you were different. . . . Oh! I know well enough what you're thinking; that I sleep with every Tom, Dick or George that happens along. . . . That's what's in your head. . . . I'm not going to trouble to try and get it out. . . . Only . . . only you're a fool; a damn wicked fool! After that night you ought to know; not go taking hearsay and be ready to think all the bad things about me you can lay your head to. . . . You ought to know . . . I was a fool, too, to think what I did of you. . . ." Through the darkness there came to his ears, at this break in the passionate, jerky rushing of her words, a little hard laugh, mirthless and more painful than any sobbing. He moved; his lips opened to speak, but before words came, she spoke again:

"Yes. I was the biggest fool! God! I was. . . . Now go. Go! For Christ's sake go, and leave me alone!" Her speech was cut short; suddenly it seemed that all the fire and passion was out of her. She sank down to sit where before she had lain.

This action had, to the Sailor's eyes, which fought every movement for clearer sight than the darkness would cede him, a curious unearthly magic. His gaze, straining, had been fast upon the dim paleness of her face, and now it seemed that this, bodiless, was going from him, wavering away and down into depths of black mistiness. . . . He stepped forward, his arms half outstretched, a little wordless cry upon his lips. From the ground her voice came up to him. It said, flat and weary:

"Go. Go . . . and let me be."

He dropped to his knees beside the place whence the voice had seemed to come. He said:

"But . . . but you told that policeman. . . ."

"Will you go?" she said, and once more, as she turned with the words, propping herself upon an elbow, he could see the white dim shape of her face.

He said: "I'll not . . . not till there's some explaining."
"They came," she said, "and asked me what I knew about you." Her voice was flat; toneless like that of a tired, bored child made to speak against its will. "What was I to tell them? That I knew nothing; hadn't seen you? When they knew... there was every one to let 'em know it... when they knew for certain sure that you'd been there the night. What use'd it have been to know nothing? And what use to be just answering questions. So I thought... told you I was a fool. ... I thought I'd help... So I let on I was dead against you; had thought you were a bad one all the time. I reckoned if I did that properly... and I did... then maybe they'd pay more attention to the lies I was going to tell. They did; and I told 'em all manner of stuff which I said you'd told part to me and part in the bar and part to the helps. ... Lot of lies and nonsense. But it was swallowed. Yes, swallowed whole. An' seeing it was all, when you come to it, pointing to your having gone in another direction and, by times and what not, couldn't have had aught to do with that killing... seeing that, p'r'aps it did help you. ... Now, will you go!" She turned her face away again and he was left only with the knowledge that near him, within reach of his hand, she lay.

Then, uncontrollable, a sob came from her. A hard, rasping, shaking sob.

He moved his hands through the darkness and touched her shoulder, soft and strong and warm beneath thin covering. He said helplessly:

"I... I... I didn't... what could I think?"

His hand was jerked violently away. As he knelt her face rose, as she sat up, until again it was a pale blur beneath his eyes.

"Think?" she said. "Think? What's thinking got to do with this? If I'd thought, what d'you s'pose d've happened. Why, I'd've come to believing that it was you who killed that woman. ... If I'd thought. But I didn't think... didn't need to, when I knew you couldn't. You might kill some things, but not hammer in a raddled hag's head. ... Thinking!"

On his knees the Sailor felt a humility strange to him. He felt a child in the presence of a god. He felt all the remorse of a child who has hurt in its tantrum a beloved and adult friend. His hands moved in a helpless little gesture. He said slowly:

"I see... I see now..." He took a firmer grip upon himself and said, after that pause: "Stop crying! Stop. Please stop!" He moved out a hand as if to touch her again.