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THE QUEEN OF SHEBA'S BELT BY EDGAR WALLACE WWW.NEWAAVAKAAYA.COM

THE QUEEN OF SHEBA'S BELT

"I suppose there is nothing more to be said."

The woman rose slowly from the deep chair and drew the lace wrap about her shoulders with a little shiver.

The terrace before Emmiersley Hall was deserted. There floated out to the couple of soft strains of the latest Hungarian waltz, and there was a harmony between the soft mist of sound, and the solemn splendor of the moonlit path, which sloped down from their feet.

The man had risen with her. He was a tall, handsome man on the right side of thirty; his straight back and squared shoulders spoke eloquently of the army. Now his fine face was hardened by the pain which he had occasioned, and which he would willingly have spared this beautiful woman.

She looked unusually pale in the moon-light; a beautifully shaped creature with masses of dark hair, dressed low about her temples; imperious and haughty; you saw that in the almost insolent droop of the eyelash, in the strength of the chin.

She was humble enough now.

"No, I do not think there is much to be gained by talking it over," said the man with a nervous little laugh. "I wonder at myself, that I can discuss it so dispassionately, but it is only because I want to be fair to you, Anna – I beg your pardon!" He corrected himself hastily. "It is a trick one does not readily lose – Lady Wensley."

As if actuated by a common desire to get as far from the house as possible, they walked to the edge of the terrace.

"You think I have treated you badly?" she said, leaning over the balustrade by his side.

She spoke quickly, for she knew that their time together would be all too brief for her purpose.

"I don't think you acted quite straight with me," he said. "I want to be fair with you. I know now that you were keen on marrying money, but you might have given me some indication of your thoughts and wishes in that direction."

Yet, she noticed wonderingly, there was no reproach in his voice.

"The first news I had of your marriage came by the very post by which I expected to receive your final wishes about the marriage settlement. You had given me no indication, no hint of your changed views. Why, you were married by the time the letter reached India. It was a pretty hard and bitter blow for me," he said gravely.

"You have survived it very well, Ronald," she said with a little smile.

He turned his head; his face was stern; there was no reflection of the amusement she had shown.

"God gives men strength in the hour of their necessity," he said soberly. "Do you remember your 'Vanity Fair'? You remember that awfully good chap who would have been the hero of the story, if Thackeray could have tolerated a hero; and you remember what he said to the girl whose whims and fancies he had endured for so long? You probably don't. He said 'You are unworthy of me.' It was as I was finishing your letter for the second time, that that blessed phrase came to me. Trite, wasn't it?" he said with a short laugh. "Yet, like most trite things, it was very comforting."

She hung her head.

"You are very hard; you do not understand."

"I confess I do not; at least, I did not then," said the man.

"You do not know what it is to be poor," she said in a low voice.

He laughed again.

"I've hardly ever known what it is to be anything else," he said with a little chuckled of genuine amusement.

"And now it is all over, and you've forgotten?"

"Yes, it is all over," he agreed.

"And you have forgotten?"

"No!"

"You think women are horrid?"

There was a little inquiring tilt to her eyebrows, as she raised her face to his with the question.

"I do not think that women are horrid," he said, "though I am perfectly sure, by whatever standard one judges, that you were not a nice as you might have been. Let it go at that."

He turned as if to re-enter the house, but she laid her hand on his arm.

"One moment, Ronald," she said. "Suppose – Suppose…"

She stopped. Her breath came quickly, there was a strange fire in her eyes.

"Suppose I have regretted all that I did, and that I see now, with a clear vision, my folly and its fruits? Suppose," she dropped her voice to an eager whisper, "that I count love above all things? Ah! Listen to me!"

She caught his arm, for he would have moved a little away from her in his embarrassment.

"Money isn't everything, Ronald. It was wicked of me, and cruel of me, I know, to do what I did; but I wanted something more than love, and now I want love more than everything."

The diamond star upon her white bosom rose and fell quickly; her shining eyes were uplifted to his.

He shook his head slowly, There was pity in the face turned to hers.

"It is too late," he said gently, "even were I blackguard enough, it is too late! For if you did not love me, I believe I could not love you as a man should lave – "

She stepped back with a little cry.

She had never doubted his love for her. His words were like a blow; harder to endure.

"There is someone else?"

He dropped his eyes before hers; he found himself talking a little hoarsely and cleared his throat.

"There is someone else," he said. "I think that, at last, I have found the real thing."

Though the French window which opened from the ball room to the terrace, there came a tall, big moulded man. The light from the room touched his white hair, and gave the pair a momentary glimpse of a red, jovial face.

"Hullo! Is that you, Anna?" he called.

He saw her figure standing aloof from the other, and hastened towards her.

"Come along, my dear, the Rajah was asking for you. Hullo, Grey!" he said genially to the other; "come inside, my lad. You will find, when you reach my age, that a sentimental passion for moon light effects will be tempered by a natural fear of rheumatism. Brrrrrr!" he shivered.

"I will come in one minute, John," said the woman. "Captain Grey was just telling me about his adventures in India and you've interrupted at the most exciting part."

"I'm sorry," said her husband with a quick laugh.

He turned his kindly blue eyes upon the younger man.

"You fellows who have adventures to tell," he said ruefully, "have a tremendous advantage over us poor stay-at-home fogeys. Yet the Rajah was promised a glimpse of that treasure of his. There's adventure enough there – even for you, Grey," he said.

"I will come in."

"One moment, Captain Grey," said lady Wensley, desperately. "I wanted to ask you just one thing."

Her husband stood for a moment irresolutely, and then, as he realized that he was a little de trop, he made a graceful retreat.

"Don't stay too long, the air is chilly," he called over his shoulder.

She waited until his big form had disappeared into the brilliantly illuminated room, then turned to her companion.

"What is her name?" she asked quietly.

Ronald Grey hesitated.

"It would be hardly fair…" he said.

"Are you engaged to her of aren't you?" she asked, almost roughly.

"I am engaged," he said simply.

She laughed; it was not a laugh that was good to hear. It told of the disappointment, chagrin, humiliation and thwarted designs of the woman. It told too of the reawakened love, perhaps of its very birth, since she had never felt so deeply as now.

"Who is she?" she asked again.

Before he could reply, the slim figure of a girl stepped out on to the terrace, and came towards them.

"Ronald," she cried, "we are waiting for you."

She stepped up to him and laid her hand on his arm.

There was no need for lady Wensley to ask any further. The man's silence was eloquent. He had wished to spare her the humiliation of knowing that Marjorie Douglas had supplanted her in his heart.

Marjorie was Anna Wensley's cousin – a beautiful child who had blossomed, as it seemed, in a day to womanhood. She was fairer than Lady Wensley; as tall, as graceful, and, of her colouring, more beautiful. Her eyes sparkled with laughter as she spoke; she was all excitement.

"Oh Anna," she cried, "aren't you longing to see this wonderful belt of the Rajah's?"

The woman pulled herself together with a great effort.

"I'm not particularly keen," she said.

She knew that the tete-a-tete was finished. What further need was there for any talk between them? She knew the worst; she had offered something and that something had been rejected.

She fell in naturally by Ronald's side, and walked back with him into the room.

The dancing had ceased; the guests were gathered in one corner of the room about the swarthy figure of the Rajah of Jhiopore. It was the Coronation year, and to Sir John Wensley had fallen the duty of entertaining one of the richest of India's potentates. They had met when Sir John had been on a shooting expedition, and he had welcomed the suggestion of the India Office that he should take under his wing for protection and guidance this stout and kindly Eastener.

The Rajah had had the benefit of an Oxford education, and was, at once a pleasing and an accommodating guest.

As the little party entered the room, his Highness was talking to a tall, clean shaved man, of distinguished appearance. The hair about his temples was grey; there was a certain strength in the set of his jaw, but humour shone in the grey eyes that looked out upon the world from under shaggy black eyebrows.

The Rajah's deep laugh sounded high above the babel of talk.

"This will amuse you, Sir John," he called, as he caught sight of the figure of his host.

"What is that?" asked Sir John with a smile. "Anything Claude Trennion says is calculated to amuse me."

"I don't know that it is particularly amusing," drawled Trennion, "though I suppose even a policeman is entitled to his jape. I was telling the Rajah that he ought to be jolly careful of that belt in the house of an antiquarian, as you are, Sir John, of such enthusiastic tastes."

"Well, the Rajah hasn't corrupted me yet," smiled Sir John, "though possibly after I have seen this wonderful belt of his I shall be filled with greed and envy."

"You shall see it now."

The Rajah got up from his chair and beckoned a servant.

"Will you tell my secretary that I wish to see him," he said.

The, turning to the little throng about him, he said seriously:

"It is rather a business seeing the Queen of Sheba's belt. You see, it is one of my family heirlooms. I brought it to London with me because the British Museum people were most keen on preparing a replica, and though my faithful subjects tell me, from time to time, that I am the most admirable of men – that I am the very light of the heavens, and the rich soil beneath their feet – I have not the same childlike faith in their integrity as I have in the staid gentlemen at your great national museum."

With a swift glance he looked around. His eye lighted on Marjorie, and he nodded.

"You, Miss Douglas, shall wear this belt. It looks its best upon somebody. You can have no idea of the fascination of the jewel until you see it worn by a beautiful woman."

The words of the Indian sent a quick flush to the girl's face, though the compliment had been kindly meant. Whatever embarrassment she may have felt was relieved at that moment by the arrival of the dark skinned secretary of the Rajah.

They exchanged a few words in Hindustani, and then with a deep salam the secretary left.

Trennion watched the scene curiously. He had come down from London that day at the invitation of Sir John. He had welcomed the change. Too much of Scotland Yard is not good for the health of an Assistant Commissioner, and work had been very heavy during the past few months, as a result of the Coronation festivities.

He took an idle interest in people; they were his chief and solitary "subject." Human nature he found more engrossing than any other kind of actor.

He fell in at the rear of the little party which trailed behind the Rajah and his henchmen. They made their way through the long corridor of Wensley Hall, and up the broad stairway to the Rajah's suite. There was nothing in the furnishing or decoration of the apartment to suggest the abiding place of one of India's richest men; for Sir John knew the Rajah's tastes sufficiently well to avoid ostentation, and indeed, the stout little man who ruled the Province of Jhiopore neither desired Eastern luxury or missed it.

There were two rooms communicating. The inner was his Highness's sleeping apartment; the outer his sitting room, and, for the time being, his state office.

He bade them wait a little while and disappeared into the bedroom. A few minutes later he came out carrying a long, flat case of red morocco. He laid it upon the table in the centre of the room, under the branching lights of an electrolier, and opened it.

The little party which thronged about the table uttered cries of surprise and delight.

There, upon its blue velvet cushion lay the Queen of Sheba's belt. It was a great breast-plate of dull gold set about with uncut diamonds and emeralds; on either side, flush with the breast of the wearer, were two bosses thickly encrusted with pearls and emeralds.

He lifted it gingerly from its case and weighed it reflectively in his hands.

"This weighs seven pounds," he said, "which rather disproves the theory that the new woman is better developed physically than was her sister of olden days."

He nodded to Marjorie and she stepped forward, a little uncomfortably, but smiling.

"May I be your lady's maid?" he said, and with his deft hands he fastened the great belt about her waist.

It fitted her perfectly. The ancient fasteners behind, working as truly as they did in the days of Solomon's queen, snapped into their places: the jeweled shoulder-straps fitted true into their little slots, which the dead and gone workmen of Babylon had fastened.

She made a gorgeous figure standing there in the full glare of the lights.

Ronald, watching her, felt a glow of pride in her loveliness, and their eyes met in one understanding and happy glance.

Lady Wensely had intercepted that glance, and something gripped at her heart and stirred the very foundations of her being. With a superhuman effort she retained control of herself.

"Very pretty, Marjorie," she drawled. "you look as if you had just stepped off the stage of the Gaiety, or," with an almost imperceptible shrug, "from the floor of a Covent Garden ball. What is the value of this wonderful thing, Rajah?"

The little man looked up, showing his white teeth in a smile.

"It would be difficult to value it from the point of view of an antiquarian." He glanced at Sir John and the baronet nodded. "But taking a purely material view, if one weighed of the gold and valued the gems according to the standard of Hatton Garden, that belt is worth 200,000 pounds.'

There was a little gasp of astonishment.

"Oh, take it off please," said Marjorie nervously, "I don't like to wear anything so valuable, even for a few moments. One of the emeralds may drop out."

The Rajah shook his head.

"Enjoy the sensation for a moment," he said. "Remember as you stand there, that Sheba's queen wore that belt probably before the great Solomon himself."

"Please take it off," she said.

She had gone suddenly white. Some premonition of evil had come to her, and Trennion on whom no sign was lost, caught a glimpse of the face of his hostess, and wondered what this girl had done to earn that brief and fleeting malevolence which gleamed from the older woman's eyes.

With deft fingers the Rajah released the belt, and the girl, looking a little white, smoothed out the creases in her crumpled dress with a hand that trembled.

"It gave me quite an uncanny feeling," she said, smiling nervously. "Wasn't it absurd of me!"

"Other people have had that feeling," said the Rajah drily. "People with stronger nerves than you, Miss Douglas."

He replaced the belt in its case and disappeared into the bedroom with it; by and by he returned.

"What did you think of it?" he asked Sir John.

"It is a magnificent piece of work," said the antiquarian, shaking his head in admiration. "I didn't have the opportunity I should have liked to have had of examining it."

"You shall have that tomorrow," said the Rajah. "To tell the truth, I am as chary of showing it as most people are of wearing it. It wasn't fair, really, that I should ask Miss Douglas to put it on. It was only because I, myself, have no faith in these ridiculous superstitious" – he shrugged his shoulders contemptuously – "but I should not have asked other people to share my skepticism."

"Is there a legend?" asked Trennion.

"There is an obscure and rambling legend to the effect that anyone wearing it is liable to bad luck, or something of the sort. It is not a particularly powerful talisman, either for good or evil."

They made their way back to the ball room.

It was a small house party that had gathered at Wensley Hall. This restriction as to the number of guests had been necessary, since Sir John had been in some doubt as to the retinue the Rajah would bring, and in what state he would live. It had come as a pleasant surprise to find this genial ruler so simple a man. The Rajah of Jiopore, with his big round body and his big round face, was a pleasant surprise to most people with whom he was brought into contact. He was one of the best read men of his class; a keen sportsman, and a good fellow by all standards.

Trennion was thinking this as he strolled to the library. The "policeman" was no dancing man, and his idea of rest took the very common place and intelligent shape of a book, a pipe, and an easy chair. It was all he asked of the world – just then.

He found a comfortable chair in one of the window spaces. Sir John was something of a modernist so far as his domestic comfort was concerned, and those nooks which in ordinary country houses are breeding places of pneumonia and influenza, were at Wensley Hall the coziest of corners.

The room was empty when he came in. One light was burning and he did not trouble to switch on the remainder. He had no wish to read: he lit his pipe, and stretched himself on the big settee, looking through the window at the soft vista of park land mysteriously illuminated by the yellow moon.

He was a tired man. He had come to Wensley Hall because he was tired. His head nodded; the pipe in his mouth fell with a little thud on to the carpeted floor and he dozed.

He could hardly have fallen asleep before he was awakened by the sound of voices.

He opened his eyes. Marjorie stood in the center of the room, an agitated Marjorie, with her hands clasped. She faced a small bald-headed man with melancholy side whiskers.

"I can't pay you yet, Mr. Callit," she was saying; "I had no idea you would want paying so soon."

"Well, Miss," said the man, "I'm sorry the bother you, but I really must get money in. I've had some big demands, otherwise I shouldn't have bothered you. I've come down specially from London, tonight, to see you."

"But I can't pay you," said the girl in despair. "I can't! I should never have had those things if I had thought you were going to bother so soon. My dividends aren't due for another two months, and it is impossible for me to do what you ask."

The little man shook his head, helplessly.

As for Trennion lying there, an unwilling eavesdropper, he was in an unenviable position, and would have given no little sum to have been well out of the room beyond earshot.

He knew exactly what the girl would feel if she found him there, or if he were to make his presence known.

"Can't you get the money anywhere, Miss?" asked the man desperately; "you don't know what a hole I am in. Eighty pounds won't be anything to a lady like you."

"Oh, you ought never to have come," said the girl. "I wish to Heaven I had never bought clothes at your wretched place. It is abominable of you."

"Can't you borrow the money?"

"How dare you!" she flamed. "How dare you suggest that I should borrow money! Whom do you imagine I could borrow money from? You have to wait."

"I can't wait, Miss," whined the man, wringing his hands. "I tell you I am in a pretty bad position. What about Captain Grey?"

She drew herself up and looked down at the other coldly.

"I am going to ring for the servant," she said; "you had better go. You are behaving disgracefully. You have no right to mention anybody's name to me."

"I must have the money," said the man in a panic. "That's what I came for, and I am not going away till I get some."

Trennion thought he heard a slight noise near the door; his ears were unusually sensitive, and they caught that which the girl had evidently missed.

He looked up quickly and bit in his lip to suppress an exclamation. In the shadow of the portiere he saw a woman, and that woman was Lady Wensley. She had been there all the time – he saw that. From where she stood she could have seen him and she turned her head, but her attention was too closely occupied by the scene she was witnessing.

Trennion guessed that she had been there all the time. He had no illusions as to the motive of human beings. His police work had destroyed much of his faith in the common honesty of humanity. She had followed the girl, he guessed, with intent to discover the meaning of, what must have been to her, a suspicious visit. And now she stood there, listening intently.

"I will send you something tomorrow," said Marjorie at last. "I can do no more than that."

The man hesitated.

"Are you sure, Miss---" he began.

"I tell you I will send you money tomorrow," said the girl with a little stamp of her foot; "and you must be content with that."

"Well---" he rubbed his hat irresolutely on his sleeve, "that will have to satisfy me, Miss, I suppose," he said dubiously. "I'll trust you. If you can let me have it before twelve o'clock tomorrow, it will make all the difference in the world to me."

She said no more. The interview was finished.

Trennion saw the figure by the portiere slip through the door. He saw, too, the puzzled look which came into the girl's face at the sight of the open door – a bewilderment which was succeeded by a look of apprehension. Without a word she threw the door wide open and passed through; and the man followed, closing the door behind him.

Trennion sat up, picked up his pipe from the carpet, and walked into the middle of the room.

An Assistant Commissioner of Police is not usually perturbed by the frailties or the unexpected impecuniosities of his fellows. That Marjorie Douglas should be damned neither shocked nor amused him. At first he thought he had come upon a surprising streak of extravagance in the girl, but the words of the agitated trades-man had dismissed that idea from his mind. He saw exactly her position – a position in which any woman might find herself.

He wondered whether he should offer her the money. Eighty pounds was not a great sum, but to make the offer would be to make the admission of knowledge. It was a delicate situation. He was pondering the matter over, his chin on his palm, when the door opened hurriedly, and Anna Wensley came in.

She stopped dead when she saw him.

"Mr. Trennion!" she said, and then, with a little nervous jerk of her shoulders, came farther into the room. "I wanted a book; these dancing people are boring me. How long have you been here?"

She spoke quickly and jerkily.

"I've just come in," replied Trennion untruthfully.

"Did you meet – anybody?" she asked.

"No! I saw your cousin, Marjorie. Who was the queer old gentleman with her?"

"Oh! He is a man who has come down from town." She shrugged her shoulders. "I'm afraid poor Marjorie is rather extravagant. You won't tell anybody, will you?" she asked pleadingly.

"You may be sure I shall tell nobody," he said.

He wondered exactly what her object was in telling him this and how much of the secret she was prepared to divulge.

"You see, Marjorie has been spending a tremendous amount of money on jewellery and things." Her gestures spoke her disapproval more admirably than words could have conveyed it. "I think the young girls of today are tremendously foolish. It is so easy to get credit, and the," another shrug, "to find a method of raising money on the jewels. I don't say," she said quickly, "that that is what Marjorie has done – but so many girls do it. It's rather shocking, isn't it?" she cooed.

He nodded.

"It's very shocking indeed," he said gravely. "In fact, it is an offence under the law in certain cases."

"I know. But you are not going to arrest dear Marjorie and take her away?" she smiled, "are you? No! The man you saw was from Stangs, the jeweler. However, one oughtn't to talk about it, but I know I can trust you, dear Mr. Trennion."

"Oh yes," he said with a smile, "you can trust me."

What object could she have, he wondered, in lying to him? He did not doubt that the man was from a firm of dressmakers. Why should she wish to represent her cousin so blackly? Why had she come in so hurriedly and shown such evidence of dismay at finding him there?

These were the problems which helped to keep him awake longer than he desired that night. They occupied him at spare moments on his journey to London the next day.

Once back in Scotland Yard his engrossing work was sufficient to take his mind from the little comedy which he had seen enacted at Wensley Hall. He was an enthusiast in the pursuit of criminal research. He found his work already defined for him that day, and spent a fascinating twelve hours taking the measurements and the weights of a number of known criminals, who had been transported in closed vans to Scotland Yard, to his office, for that purpose.

The work took him two days. It was two days of minute measurements, two days of patient recording.

On the second day he had finished his work and had gone back to his club for dinner. In the middle of the meal a club waiter brought him a telegram, and he opened it.

His eyebrows rose as he read the message it contained;

"Queen of Sheba's Belt has been stolen from Wensley Hall. Can you come along and help us investigate?

JOHN WENSLEY."

He laid the telegram down by his plate and whistled softly to himself.

* * * * * *

Marjorie Douglas stood facing her cousin in the dusk of the drawing room. The girl's face was tense and white, but about the thin lips of Lady Wensley flickered a faint satirical smile.

"I really cannot understand what you are driving at, Anna," said the girl.

"I didn't suppose you would," said the older woman drily; "yet I thought you might have saved me the embarrassment of putting what I have to say into plain words."

"They cannot be too plain for me," said the girl coldly. "I am tired of innuendoes, and of hints and suggestions."

Lady Wensley had dropped her eyes, and was viewing with apparent interest the gathers she was making in her tulle scarf.

"I suppose you are," she said, without looking up. "As for me, I am more than tired of other things."

The girl looked at her with a puzzled expression.

"I can quite understand, Anna," she said gently, "that you are a little distraught by this dreadful robbery; but your hints hurt me; they worry me terribly. Can't you say exactly what you mean? Do you suspect anybody? And do you think - ?"

She stopped dead.

"You don't think that I know who took it?" she asked with a catch of her breath.

Lady Wensley raised her insolent eyes to her, and stared unwinkingly.

"I wonder why you say that," she said softly. "Now, can't you offer me any hint that would help me when it comes to giving dear Mr. Trennion information?"

"Hint?" gasped the girl. "Why surely –"

"I simply hate to say it, Marjorie," said Anna.

She walked to the window and looked out upon the gathering gloom, her hand behind her; the figure of a woman with an unpleasant task before her. Yet the straight line of the shoulders and the poise of the head told the girl that her cousin would not shrink from the performance of her duty, however painful it might be.

"Of course, dear," she said, in her cooing voice, "everybody knows you are hard up."

The girl flushed.

"I don't know what you mean," she said steadily.

Lady Wensley shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, after all, if you don't know you are the only person here that doesn't. Isn't it a fact that you are being dunned by a man who came all the way from London?"

"That is true," said the girl hotly, "and you are wicked and cruel to suggest that the fact that I have been in want of money can in any way be associated in with the loss of the Rajah's jewel. It is infamous of you!" She stamped her foot. "How dare you?"

Lady Winsley turned swiftly.

"Did you pay the man the money?" she asked pointedly.

"I did," said the girl.

"Where did you get the money from?"

With an effort the girl mastered her growing anger.

"The money came to me….I found the money…."

She stopped; it seemed such an impossible explanation.

"I received money on Thursday."

"The day after the robbery," said Lady Wensley meaningly. "How did it come?"

"It came by post, in bank notes."

"But from whom did it come?"

The growing terror in the girl's eyes was pitiable.

"I don't know," she said.

She forgot to be indignant or angry. All she realized was that there was piling up against her a monstrous mountains of suspicion, and that she could give no explanation which would satisfy her inexorable cousin.

"It came by post," she said again, "on Thursday morning. There was just a hundred pounds in bank notes. I don't know who it came from," she shook her head helplessly, "but I had written to one or two people, and I thought that one of these had sent it."

"To whom did you write?"

"I thought it was from one of these," she went on quickly; "but there was no name on the envelope. I should have written to them to find out, but by the next post came a letter from both of them. One of them sent me the money, which I returned; the other was not able to help me. That is the truth," she said defiantly. "You have pried into my private affairs; you have put the worst constructions upon my actions. You don't, for one moment, imagine that I had anything whatever to do with the taking of this jewel?"

Again the shrug.

"I want to settle this matter without any bother," said lady Wensley. "After all, my dear girl, it isn't so much a question of what I think, as what the world will think…"

She hesitated a moment, eyeing the girl closely.

"What will Captain Grey think?" she said slowly.

The girl's face was white now. She stood a moment staring at the other, as though she could not fully grasp her meaning. Then she turned, and without another word, left the room.

She went straight to the library, expecting to find Ronald there. She knew he had some work to do, for he had been asked to prepare a report upon some north-western tribes with which he was acquainted.

He looked up as she came in. He was sitting at the writing table, surrounded by papers. His smile left his lips when he saw the distress of the girl.

"Why, what is the matter?" he said rising.

In a voice which was rendered almost incoherent by her mingled grief and anger, she told him the story, and he listened. And as he listened his eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"But," he said, "my dear girl, surely you are joking?"

"I'm not," she said.

"But Anna would never dare to say that to you," he cried, his brows clouding, "Not in all seriousness?"

For reply, the girl burst into a passion of weeping.

He caught her to his breast, and soothed her as best he could, but it was a long time before he could pacify her.

It was unthinkable; it was monstrous that such a suggestion as this should be made. He had shared in the general perturbation which had fallen upon the household when the discovery of the Rajah's loss was made. It had hurt him to see Sir John Wensley so grieved. The old antiquarian had taken the matter much to heart; and although the Rajah, with oriental philosophy, had made light of the matter, and had sought to ease the shock of the discovery, yet nothing that the Indian could say or do could relieve Sir John of the sense of his own responsibility.

The Rajah had gone. He had taken leave of his host and hostess with the urbanity and geniality which characterized all his movements. One might have thought, from his florid little speech, and from the gay good humour in which he left, that, so far from having lost a jewel which was worth of king's ransom, he had acquired one.

Two of the best men from Scotland Yard had come down to investigate the matter, without arriving at any result that was satisfactory either to Sir John or to themselves.

Sir John Wensley had been a little disappointed that Trennion could not come himself.

Trnnion had a reputation through two continents for the detection of such crimes as these.

Scotland Yard's opinion, as represented by the two detective officers who came, was that the burglary was the work of a gang of international criminals whose activities had, for the past year or so, tried the patience and called into play all the vigilance that Scotland Yard possessed.

As against this theory, their enquiries in the neighbourhood failed to elicit any news of strangers, not did systematic investigation in the villages about Wensley produce any other evidence which might connect outsiders with the crime.

The accusation against Marjorie Douglas was, of course, absurd. Ronald himself did not take it seriously. He was disturbed by a belief, which amounted almost to a certainty, that the robber or robbers had operated from within the house, and that whoever had taken this wonderful jewel had not, so far, succeeded in removing it from the precincts of Wensley Hall.

This view he had communicated to Sir John, but a very stringent search of the servant's quarters had not revealed any clue.

Lady Wensley was not in her boudoir, nor was she in her little study.

Ronald hesitated.

Should he send to her room? Sir John was away; he had gone to town to see Trennion.

His hand was on the bell when Lady Wensley came in.

She had utilized the period which had clasped between the departure of the girl and the coming of Ronald, to change. She looked her best in the blacky blue close fitting velvet dress which she wore. She had just the touch of colour which she sometimes lacked, and the glitter of diamonds at her fingers offered the only relief to the svelte and somber figure. Her eyes were bright as with some unwonted excitement.

To his surprise she came forward with a smile.

"I suppose that girl of yours has been telling you that I suspect her?" she asked.

"I think – " he began.

"Don't think," she said lightly, "Just come along and sit over here." She indicated a big settee. "Now, Ronald," she said with almost matronly assurance laying her hand on his arm, "I want you to take a sensible view of things. I know it sounds horrid, but remember this, that Marjorie has been in great difficulties. She is being dunned, and when a young girl is being dunned, you never know exactly what she is going to do."

"But surely," he looking at her in pain and astonishment, "you don't really mean that you think Marjorie is a thief?"

"What am I to think?" asked lady Wensley in resigned despair. "Somebody has taken the belt – somebody inside the house."

"But it's preposterous, Anna," he said sternly. "You really don't mean it?"

"Mean it? Indeed I mean it," she said earnestly.

He rose quietly to his feet.

"If you mean that," he said, "then you and I are no longer friends."

"But-"

He raised his hand.

"Hear me until I've finished. You know as well as I that your cousin would never stoop to so base a crime. Her whole life, her upbringing, her training – everything, is against such a monstrous supposition."

"When a girl buys jewellery – "murmured Lady Wensley.

"It was not jewellery," cried Ronald indignantly. "She has told me everything. It was a paltry eighty pounds with a wretched little tailor who was on the verge of bankruptcy. He came up here in a panic. As a matter of fact, his petition is filed in this morning's papers."

Lady Wensley smiled.

"How clever of Marjorie!" she said admiringly. "Of course, she saw that in the paper and jumped at the idea."

He turned from her abruptly.

"I don't stay in this house another day," he said, standing at the door, "nor does Marjorie. I see something behind all this – some wicked malice."

"Oh, la la!" laughed lady Wensley; but her laugh was a little artificial, and more than a little shrill. "What melodrama we talk in these days! If you must go, of course you must. I'll have your bag packed, and as to Marjorie" – she shrugged her shoulders – "I suppose you have the right to say that she shall go too. I will place no obstacle in your way. Go to London, and let me know where you are staying. More important," she said carefully, and looked at him with a speculative eye which well nigh maddened him, "you had better let me know where Marjorie is staying. There may, of course, be developments."

She lingered on the last word with significance.

"Developments," she repeated. "I think I can do no less than go to Scotland Yard and lay my view before dear Mr. Trennion. It is a shocking thing to do, of course, but what am I to do? I must protect our guests."

His calm grey eyes were fixed upon her face.

"I do not know what you can do," he said quietly, "I only know this, that I am either to believe that Marjorie is a thief who has committed a most terrible crime, or I am to believe that you are a jealous, disappointed and malignant woman."

Every word was a clean cut; every word flicked the woman like the cruel end of a lash.

Yet she showed no sign, save the tightening of her lips, and an almost imperceptible stiffening, that she felt his anger. She did not attempt to reply; there she was wise. She controlled all outward evidence of distress; to speak would have been to betray her weakness.

"I choose to believe," he went on, "in the purity and in the honesty of Marjorie. If I do you an injustice I am not doing you so cruel a one as you have done my future wife."

He made a little pause before the last word, and, seeing her wince, was momentarily sorry.

"You may offer Sir John any explanation you wish. You may tell him that I and Marjorie's accomplice if you wish," he said. "I am leaving by the six o'clock train, and Marjorie goes with me to London."

His voice was low, but perfectly under control.

With a little bow he left her. She stood motionless for a long, long time, though it was probably not more than a few minutes, and then she walked slowly from the room, and mounted the stairs to her own bedroom.

She stood before her glass, as though communing with herself; then she turned swiftly and rang the bell.

A French maid came in a few minutes.

"Celeste," she said, "tell me, where is Miss Douglas?"

"She is going, milady," said the girl.

They were speaking in French, for Celeste knew very little English.

"Where is her baggage?"

"In the hall, milady."

"All of it?"

"*Oui* , milady. Thomas brought down the last bag before your ladyship rang."

Anna considered a moment.

"Go quickly, and if there is nobody there, bring up Miss Douglas's bag – the green one."

The girl went out of the room, and Anna paced the floor feverishly. It was a desperate thing to do. She was in a panic before the girl had half descended the stairs; she would have run down and called her back, in fact, she went to the door with that object, but heard footsteps and stopped. It might be Ronald, he was on the same floor. What a fool she was; what a careless, blundering fool, first to precipitate this crisis and then to take advantage of it with such unpardonable gaucheric! But the green bag would be an easy matter for her – if Celeste could get it.

Then a thought struck her; she walked swiftly to her dressing table and pulled open a drawer.

She heard a tap at the door and her heart froze within her.

"Come in," she said faintly.

It was Celeste, and she was carrying a small green dressing case.

"Did anybody see you? Answer me quickly – did anybody see you?"

"No, milady," said the girl.

Anna could trust Celeste. The girl was devoted to her – owed, in fact, her life to this strange woman who could be so cold and so fiery, so heartless and so tender even to her dependents. Anna had nursed this French maid of hers through a bad attack of diphtheria, when a trained nurse from a nursing home could have been found for her – when, too, she could still have claimed something of credit for the girl's recovery. But with that perverseness which was at once her charm and her undoing, she had chosen rather to attend the girl herself. Now she was to put her adoring servant's loyalty to the test.

"You will not say a word of this to anybody," she said, fumbling with the clasps of the bag. "Go out of the room and see if there is anybody in the corridor."

The girl went out, and came back to find her mistress, white of face, tugging unavailingly. The bag was locked. She was mad to expect anything else.

"Take it back to the hall," she said "quickly."

She had a key which would open it, for the green bag had been her own till she had given it to the girl. But her keys were not there. They were in her study downstairs. She had realized this the moment she had opened the drawer of her dressing table.

She followed the girl out as she carried the bag along the corridor, and stood at the head of the stairs until she had disappeared from view. There she waited until the French girl returned.

"Did anyone see you?"

"No, milady," said the girl, wonderingly.

"*Bien!*" said my lady with a heartfelt sigh of relief.

There must be some other way. She must find it. The fortune of chance might serve her in good stead.

She walked steadily down to the hall, just as Marjorie came up. A servant stood at the door, there was nothing to be said but conventionalities.

"I am sorry you have to go," she said politely.

Ronald took her extended hand and bowed over it.

"I hope I shall have the pleasure of meeting you again," he said stiffly.

Marjorie said nothing. She was too shocked by the amazing charge which had been brought against her to find either the will or the inclination to play a part.

To cover the awkwardness of the situation she turned to the waiting groom.

"I want you to register that bag." She pointed to the little travelling bag. "Book it to the cloak room at King's Cross, until called for."

"Yes, madam," said the man.

To the cloak room at King's Cross, repeated Anna mentally. She saw a way.

She watched the brougham which carried the two to the station until it was lost to sight in a turn of the long avenue, then she slowly retraced her steps to the house and to her room.

To the cloak room at King's Cross.

Then Marjorie was not going home. She would go to Plymouth, to her aunt's, and would pick the bag up on her return.

Marjorie lived with her widowed mother in Chelsea, but Anna knew that she was, at that moment, wintering in Italy, and was not due back for a week.

Yes. It would be Marjorie's Plymouth relative who would entertain the girl for the next week.

A week. Sufficiently long! Here was her opportunity.

She went into her study to work out the plan. Her luck was in; how much so she realized when the evening brought a wire from Sir John to say that he was accompanying the Rajah to Paris, and would not be back for eight days.

* * * * *

Claude Trennion came swinging through the archway of Scotland Yard, his hat, a large white *Terai*, set a little askew on his head.

His face was thin, clean shaven and burnt brown by the Indian summer – for he had come to Scotland Yard by way of the Punjab. There was a patch of grey hair at his temple, and a monocle in his eye. He was tall enough to indulge himself in the luxury of a stoop; one hand was everlastingly thrust into his pocket, the other whirled a Malacca cane.

He returned the salute of the policeman on duty at the door, went up the broad stairway two steps at a time, and came to his big handsome office as his uniformed clerk was laying his papers on his desk.

Trennion looked round as he entered the office.

A weighing machine, such as may be seen in the offices of a medical man, stood under the window. This he had used in preparing his famous report on the Bertillon System.

"Get that away today, Cole," he said, nodding toward the machine. "Anybody waiting to see me?"

"A lady, sir."

"Oh yes, Lady Wensley." He nodded, this time to himself, and, unlocking the drawer of his desk, took out a large envelope. "Ask her to come in," he said.

Trennion was silently reviewing the events of the previous week, when the door opened and Anna Wensley came in.

"I am so sorry to bother you, dear Mr. Trennion," she said as they shook hands. "I've come about the belt, of course. I do so want to clear this matter up without any delay, and it was dear of you to give me this appointment."

He smiled.

"Very delightful of you. Won't you sit down and tell me exactly what your own views are?"

Trennion placed a chair for his visitor.

Lady Wensley deposited her muff and gold purse, with its bunch of jingling keys attached, upon the Assistant Commissioner's table, and settled herself comfortably in the chair Trennion offered. She was a little irritated by his "office manner," and how absurd of him to pretend that he did not know her views after her letters and telegrams.

"I am afraid I can tell you very little," she said easily. "The belt has disappeared by the Rajah literally as priceless. He is beside himself with anxiety, and till it is found neither Sir John nor I can know any peace."

"The belt is particularly heavy, I remember, is it not?" Trennion put the question almost indifferently.

"It weights six pounds four ounces," Anna replied promptly; "that is one of the facts which I thought you know. By the way, you have a list of my guests, have you not, Mr. Trinnion?" she added carelessly.

"Yes; I have the list you sent me – here it is."

Trennion took the slip of paper from his desk.

"It was hardly necessary to be so explicit," he smile, "remembering that I shared your hospitality for two whole days. I see you have included Marjorie Douglas," – he looked up sharply, - "and you say," he read from the letter, "she is very poor, very pretty, very clever and ambitious, and she was seen coming out of the Rajah's room on the day the belt was stolen. I always understood that Marjorie is a cousin and a great friend of yours?"

Anna's short upper lip curved never so slightly, but she avoided the inquiring gaze of the other.

"Not exactly," she said carelessly. "She's certainly a cousin; but as for the other – she's a friend of a friend – Ronald Grey, whom you know." Trenniion nodded. "She's pretty certainly, I should not call her beautiful…a very fascinating girl, and he's a susceptible man."

"They're engaged?" Trennion put the question as one who was merely making conversation.

Lady Wensley stiffened a little and answered as it seemed, reluctantly.

"Yes; there is some entanglement. She's – well, of course, dear Mr. Trennion, I don't care to say anything unkind, but – "she lifted one velvet-clad shoulder

deprecatingly, "I think you remember a certain episode in the library at Wensely – the dunning jeweler?"

Trennion nodded. He maintained his attitude of polite attention.

"You've known Ronald for some time, have you not?"

"Oh, for quite a long time," said Anna easily, though under the inconsequent examination of the man she was experiencing a tinge of exasperation. "I shouldn't have asked Marjorie if he hadn't insisted."

"Insisted?" echoed the attentive Commissioner. "He must be rather a close friend – a very close friend – to insist upon our receiving a girl you do not care to meet."

"Perhaps 'insisted' was not quite the right word – I express myself badly, I am afraid."

Lady Wensley's tone was languidly impatient.

"He has some right perhaps – " Trennion paused.

Anna rose from her chair. Her movement was full of dignity and face. Only the steely glitter in the narrowed beautiful eyes betrayer her anger.

"Pray what do you mean?" she demanded coldly.

"Don't be offended. Lady Wensley, I beg. Friendship is a big matter. Surely if it has obligations, it has rights."

Anna resumed her chair, and with something of her indolent serenity; the interview was going the wrong way. She felt herself losing grasp of the situation.

A knock on the door interrupted her and, in response to Trennion's summons, a policeman appeared with a card. The Assistant Commissioner glanced at it thoughtfully and put it on his desk.

"In a moment, Cole," he said, "I will ring; ask them to wait."

"We policemen, Lady Wensley," he continued when the man had left, "are inclined to be brusque, you understand? Well, this affair of the belt is a very serious matter. The Government doesn't want the matter to go intou court, but we must get the belt."

"Of course, we must get the belt," said Anna, in her most confidential manner, "but-" there was a slight change of tone, a drop in its temperature, "do you mean that there will be no prosecution?"

"Not if we can get the belt without," said the other decidedly.

The woman bit her lips and moved a trifle restlessly.

"You'll hush it up – I didn't think they did that sort of things at Scotland Yard!"

Trennion made a little grimace.

"Oh, we do many things at Scotland Yard besides finding lost umbrellas," he said a trifle flippantly.

She was obviously distributed.

"I must insist – Dear Mr. Trennion, how can I allow this matter to be hushed up? Think of my position. It is extremely awkward. I am afraid – indeed, I am convinced – it is impossible in this case to let the guilty go free. I am very sorry for her, of course" – she gave a little shrug –"besides, she was my guest. It is all very embarrassing. I wish Ronald would be more careful in his choice of friends – you see, I know the branch of the family rather well, and they are – well – just a little – oh, how I hate –" she checked herself again, and resumed in calmer tones, "how I hate being concerned in a affair of this kind!"

Trennion had been regarding his fair *vis-à-vis* attentively. He remembered that night in the library; it was a vivid memory. And her present distress was not lost upon him; he adopted a properly sympathetic tone as he replied:

"I'm awfully sorry for you, but I must tell you that unless we discover the belt actually in Miss Douglas's possession we shall not prosecute."

The lady's lips tightened.

"How do you mean 'in her possession?"

"Well, unless, for example, she has it on her person, or we find it in here," tapping a green leather bag which lay on his desk.

"But why should it be in there?"

The question was put in all artlessness and Trennion stifled a smile.

"Because this is her bag," he said patiently, "and because I acted on your information and secured it from the cloak-room at King's Cross. Curiously enough, somebody else had been trying to get it."

"Marjorie herself, no doubt?"

"I should say not. If she had tried she would have got it. Besides, she left immediately after the robbery for Devonshire. She wrote to you from London, you remember, telling you that she had gone on in a hurry, leaving her bag at the cloak room." "At least," he said carefully, "that is what you told me. Oh no, the lady who was trying to secure this bag was a veiled, mysterious person – so mysterious that the attendants refused to hand it to her without the ticket. I got the bag today in order that it might be opened in the presence of interested persons."

Trennion fixed his eyeglass a trifle more firmly in his eye, and pressed the electrical bell upon his table.

"I think we had better try to unravel this matter. You are pretty confident that the belt is in this bag?"

A shadow crossed Anna Wenley's face, but it passed in a moment. She could hear the thump-thump of her own heart, could feel the process of age that drew the skin of her face tighter, and deepened the shadows beneath her eyes. Yet she was apparently her easy, nonchalant self again as she drawled:

"Dear Mr. Trennion, how can I be confident? I only tell you of my suspicions-all that I wish to do is to assist justice."

"I think you may be able to do much in that direction," Trennion assured her, as he turned to the man who answered his ring. "Ask that lady and gentleman who are waiting to see me to come in, please."

"Very good, sir."

Anna started up from her seat suddenly and crossed the room to where Trennion sat. She laid her hand on his arm. She had not expected this.

"Mr. Trennion," she said, "I don't want-"

But whatever she had in her mind to say was not spoken, for at that moment two people were shown into the room.

The first was Marjorie. She was very pale, and her deep blue eyes were wide with distress. Her pretty mouth had a downward droop, like that of a tired child, and her lips were not quite steady, though she pressed them bravely together. Trennion, with his quick smile, welcomed her and pushed forward a chair. She certainly did not look a thief, nor did she bear the stamp of infamy, which as Anna had hinted, was part of her family heritage.

Ronald Grey – tall, soldierly, and more angry than distressed, followed her. He paused abruptly as he caught sight of Lady Wensley.

"Anna!" he said. "You here!" His voice was charged with contempt.

The fleeting expression of sullen rage which had marred her beautiful face a moment earlier as the two had entered the room vanished like birds before a storm. She smiled sweetly at him and utterly ignored the girl.

"Yes, of course I'm here – where did you expect me to be?"

He looked at her impatiently.

"Why have you come?" he said sternly.

"Surely not to repeat the lies you pretended to believe at Wensley?"

Marjorie laid a pleading hand upon her lover's arm.

"Ronny, please! Please say no more."

The girl's words and actions seemed to fan to flame some smouldering passion in the beautiful woman as she turned her eyes angrily on the girl.

"Please, please!" she mocked. "Oh, don't beg his forbearance, I pray you. Let him say what he wishes. There was a time, Ronald, when – but do I need to remind you of what time? I see you remember!"

The man's eyes Involuntarily sought those of the young girl, and as he answered the elder woman he pleaded to his fiancée.

"I remember much that I wish I could forget," he said very gravely.

But Lady Wensley had no intention of accepting the rebuff.

"How like a man!" she said almost gaily, "isn't it, Mr. Trennion? Men wish to forget their own follies, and women find their chief joy in remembering them?"

Marjorie's eyes were fixed on her cousin's face.

"Anna," she said, "I have come here to answer the charge you have brought against me-"

Anna stared at her.

"I – my dear, good girl, I bring no charge."

The girl's face went a trifle paler under the insult of the older woman's manner.

"Why! That is my bag," she exclaimed suddenly.

Trennion nodded, and his voice was gentle and reassuring as he replied:

"Yes, it is your bag. I have taken the liberty of exercising certain embarrassing powers which I possess to claim it."

Ronald, who had listened impatiently to the exchange between the two women, could no longer control himself.

"But this is monstrous – it is an outrage," he broke out. Then he looked across at Lady Wensley, who stood all the time with a little scornful smile upon her face. "This is a plot," he accused her.

"If it is a plot," said Trennion soothingly, "I shall find out all about it, you know. I've got quite a reputation for finding things out. The Commissioner says I'm more like a magazine detective than a policeman. Now let us get to facts. The belt was stolen – the Queen of Sheba's belt. I'm sure, Lady Wensley," Trennion favoured her with his most friendly smile, "that dear lady would turn in her grave if she knew that her golden corsets were the subject of an inquiry at Scotland Yard. It was stolen, no doubt about that, and on the morning it was stolen," he turned again to Marjorie, "a maid saw you, Miss Douglas, leaving the Rajah's rooms."

"I can explain," said Marjorie quietly.

"One moment." Trennion's voice was as gentle as ever. "The expalantion given is that you had the room immediately above the Rajah's, and corresponding in every way, mistook the floor, entered the Rajah's sitting room by mistake, and came out immediately."

"That is the truth – a simple explanation," Marjorie answered him.

"Oh, very!" The words were from Lady Wensley, and her tone implied all that her words left unspoken.

"Lady Wensley, your tone is insulting," said Marjorie, rising indignantly, with tears of anger in her eyes.

Again Trennion interposed, but Ronald interrupted roughly.

"The whole thing is absurd. Suppose Marjorie had stolen it – where on earth could she dispose of it? How could she smuggle -?"

Trennions smiling protest interrupted his anger.

"I think it best, don't you, if we have no interruptions?" he said smoothly. "Now, Miss Douglas, did you ever see this belt except on the occasion when I was present?"

"Never," said the girl decidedly.

"Or handle it – except on that occasion?"

"Never – even then I did not touch it."

"You did not by any chance carry it away inadvertently, caught it in your wrap or something?"

"Oh, no, that would be quite impossible."

"Why?"

Trennion spoke almost sharply.

"Because I was not wearing a wrap," the girl returned.

"How absurd, Mr. Trennion," Lady Wensley interrupted impatiently. "How would she carry it away in her wrap – why it weights over six pounds!"

"Miss Douglas apparently does not retain a sufficiently vivid impression of the fact to realize this," said Trennion very quietly; then to the girl, "who packed your bag?"

"I packed this bag."

"What is in it?"

"Nothing of importance, that is why I left it at the cloack-room."

"It is pretty heavy." Trennion lifted the bag gingerly.

"There are some books in it."

The girl showed signs of weariness at the apparently useless questions, and Ronald came to her aid.

"Marjorie has been perfectly open and straightforward, Trennion" he said hotly. "It is a disgraceful thing that such a charge should be leveled at an innocent girl."

Lady Wensley looked at him scornfully.

"If you are going to be heroic, I shall be bored," she said. "May I look at your pictures, Mr. Trennion, do you mind?"

"Pray do, Lady Wensley," said Trennion politely; "but you'll find very little to amuse you, I' m afraid."

"I assure you it takes very little to amuse me – is not that so, Ronald?" She was fast losing all sense of caution. Only she knew that she had thrown something away with both hands; had been prodigal of love – of happiness, of life.

Ronald Grey looked at her smiling face almost sorrowfully, and made no reply. The smile died from her lips and she turned her back on him abruptly.

"You have no objection to my examining this bag?"

Trennion put the question almost deferentially.

"None whatever," said Marjorie; "but I am afraid I have no keys with me. I left them behind at Plymouth."

"Oh!" Trennion's tone was non-committal.

"Of course she wouldn't have the keys, Mr.Trennion," Lady Wensley turned from her inspection of the pictures to make the remark; "and of course they would be at Plymouth – two hundred miles away."

Ronald faced round towards her.

"Your malignity is pitiable," he said in a low tone.

"You grow more and more like the hero of melodrama every minute," she retorted calmly, and then as though dismissing him from her thoughts she pointed to the weighing machine. "What is this thing, Mr. Trennion?"

He started.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Lady Wensley. That is a balance. I've been conducting some experiments."

"Really, how positively chuky – I wish you would weight me."

Her enthusiasm was almost childish, and as Trennion hesitated, she stepped on to the weighing plate and repeated her request. It was the desperate expedient of one who desired time. The very of one who desired time. The very freakishness of it took the Commissioner off his guard, and he crossed the room obediently.

"This is not business, you know," he said reproachfully, as he carefully adjusted the weights.

Captain Ronald took advantage of the interruption to gently lay his arm upon his fiancee's shoulders. He spoke reassuringly, caressingly but there was infinite pain in the man's clear grey eyes.

"Marjorie, you have nothing – nothing to fear."

She slipped her hand into one of his and moved a little nearer to him.

"You do not doubt me?"

"I'd as soon doubt my mother. If I doubted you, life would be a bitter, empty thing. You are the beginning and end of life to me."

There was no doubting his earnestness and the girl smiled up at him gratefully. The smile faded as the thought of Lady Wensley intruded itself.

"Yet I am so afraid of her, Ronald; there is something sinister in her assurance. She behaves as though she had me in a trap. There is a triumph in her voice, in her look. Oh, Ronny, I am afraid – afraid!"

"Nine stone twelve and a half pounds," the Assistant Commissioner's voice broke in on them.

"Is that good or bad?"

"It can be nothing but good in your case, Lady Wensley," said the courteous Trennion.

"I don't know what that means, but I am sure it is meant to be nice."

She played with the weights of the machine as Ronald claimed the other's attention.

"Trennion, Miss Douglas is quite willing that you should cut open the bag."

"That is good of you, but it is not at all necessary," replied Trennion with a smile, taking off the telephone receiver. "We are always prepared for – hullo – hullo – give me 16-X. Yes is that 16-X? A.C. speaking. Sergeant, send me up some keys, a lady's dressing-bag. Very ordinary type. Thank you. I shan't keep you a minute."

He hung up the receiver and turned to find lady Wensley at his elbow.

"Mr. Trennion" – she spoke very softly, "there is something I feel I ought to tell you."

"Yes," said Claude in a matter-of-fact tone.

She looked significantly at the others.

"Alone," she said briefly.

Marjorie rose immediately and turned to the door, and with the stiffest of bows Ronald Grey prepared to follow her.

Lady Wensley advanced a little towards him.

"You don't mind, Ronald, do you?" she said plaintively, "I shan't tell him a word about – us."

Ronald apparently did not hear her. He held the door open for the girl and they passed out of the room.

Trennion was consumed by a strangely sudden interest in the papers on his desk. It was well that he did so, for Lady Wensley's face at the moment was not good to see. The next moment a stifled little cry caused him to look up.

She had both hands to the lace at her throat. She swayed a little. He was beside her in an instant.

"Are you ill?" He reached for the bell.

"No – no, don't ring; I'll be better in a moment – a little water, just a little water!"

"Let me ring, Lady Wensley."

"Please don't, it will pass. I am ashamed of such weakness."

"Can I leave you – I'll go myself for the water – are you sure you will be all right?"

"Yes, yes."

"I won't be a moment." Trennion went hurriedly from the room. He was really concerned. A woman, unless she was absolutely normal, invariably troubled him.

The closing of the door had an extraordinary effect upon Anna Wensley. She stood suddenly erect.

"Queen of Sheba's belt," she murmured. "Did she feel like me?"

She walked swiftly to the door to be certain it was shut, and then came as swiftly to the table. She spoke breathlessly now, as though the low spoken words urged her on to complete the work she had to do.

"Did she hate a woman and pray for her death? I wonder, a woman who had stolen her love from her. Answer that, my Queen of Sheba's belt?"

Her fingers fluttered rapidly down the buttons of her loose tailor made coat, and as it fell back something glittering showed against the dark of her gown beneath,

something that shone and sparkled as it clasped her waist with its setting of gold. She found a key hanging on a long chain round her neck and hastily unlocked the bag on the table.

In an instant the glittering thing from her waist was in the bag, and she snapped the fastening down. Trennion, entering the next moment, found her still in the drooping attitude in which he had left her, and he hurried to her side with the water.

"Are you better? Do drink this."

She took the glass from his hand and murmured some words of thanks.

"I am so sorry, but you know I am not very strong. Thank you so much, I have been an awful nuisance to you."

"Not at all – do you feel well enough to tell me –"

She put up her hand to stop him.

"I think I won't if you don't mind; after all, it is hardly fair; I have only my suspicious, you know. The girl can't help being poor, can she –"

He looked at her sharply.

"Well, as you please," he said. Then a light knock sounded on the door.

"Come in! Ah, Cole, with the keys. Please ask Captain Grey and Miss Douglas if they would kindly come in again."

Trennion stood jangling the keys together till the man had gone, then looking at the bag, he asked Lady Wensley:

"You think she stole it?"

"Well, what am I to think? I hate to be uncharitable, but all sorts of things happen in society, as you must know, dear Mr. Trennion."

She paused as Marjorie, followed by Ronald, entered the room again, then went on in her drawling tone:

"I hope you won't keep me very much longer, I've three calls to make and I must leave town by the 12.45."

Trennion answered her. "I do not think you need wait at all, lady Wensley," he said.

She frowned. She was being taken too literally. Nor did she like Trennion's "office manner."

"I can spare another ten minutes or so. I will wait till then anyhow," she said.

He selected one from the bunch of keys the man had brought him.

"I think this is a likely one, Miss Douglas. Will you open it or shall I?"

"You open it, please."

Trennion tried the key he held in his hand.

"This fits. Hullo!" he looked up with a little frown.

"Doesn't it open?" asked Marjorie.

"I can't tell yet." Trennion put his hand to the bell. "Yes, it is open. One moment before we look into it. I want to ask my man a question." Then to the man, who had just come in, "you brought this bag from King's Cross yourself?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you had charge of it ever since?"

"Yes, sir," repeated the man.

"Did you notice if it was locked when you received it from the cloak room?"

"It was, sir."

"Are you sure?"

"Perfectly certain, sir. I brought it straight to the Divisional Superintendent and he tried it."

"Thank you, Cole; that's all."

"I only wanted to find out," said Trennion to the astonished three, "to – well, just to make sure."

He looked at the bag again but made no move to open it.

"Well!" the impatient exclamation came from Anna Wensley.

Trennion looked at her as if he was thinking of something else.

"Well! I hope it is well," he said at last, and he opened the bag. Just inside was a filmy lace wrap, and in silence he lifted it. The Queen Sheba's belt lay shimmering between the folds of lace.

"My God!" Ronald Grey turned an agonized face to the woman he loved.

"Ronny – I am innocent! I know nothing – nothing about it!"

Grey took the half fainting girl in his arms and comforted her with little choking words. He was dazed and bewildered but he did not doubt her.

As for Trennion, this scene might have been enacted a thousand miles away for all the notice he took.

"I don't think I want this bag anymore," he said calmly.

Anna looked towards him eagerly "What are you going to do – your duty, I hope?"

"You never can tell," said Trennion vaguely.

"You will arrest her – you must, you will?"

There was no mistaking the passion in the woman's voice, and Ronald turned on her almost savagely.

"Anna! Have you no heart? Can you not show a little mercy? She is innocent. My God! You know she is innocent!"

She laughed; a little rippling sound which expressed real mirth.

"My dear good Ronald – *voila*!" she pointed to the belt.

Trennion interrupted her.

"I think if you would talk to Miss Douglas, Ronald, possibly there is an explanation – try and get her to remember the circumstances."

He turned to lady Wensley and appeared to be making conversation to gain time for the now weeping girl.

"Ten-stone twelve-and-a-half-pounds," he said lightly. "That's a respectable weight for so dainty a person, Lady Wensley."

"It wasn't ten-stone twelve, Mr. Trennion," said Anna, adopting his tone, "it was nine twelve, you know."

His friendship at this moment, when every remaining spark of goodness in her flamed to light to uncover her sin was especially comforting.

"Ten twelve, I think," said Jimmy.

"Don't be stupid, Mr. Trennion, I can prove it – come here."

She stepped on the weighing-machine and Trennion slid the weight upon the steel arm. Then he turned to the lovers.

"Have you found a possible explanation?" he asked.

"I can offer none –none."

"I didn't think you would somehow."

He put his hand on the bell.

Ronald Grey was as white as the girl by his side.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I am going to send for an officer."

"Ronald!" Marjorie clutched his arm. Lady Wensley's drawling voice jarred in upon them.

"Dear Mr. Trennion, I think it is awfully splendid of you. I know just how you feel, but one owes a duty to society, and all that sort of thing, and duties are most painful things."

"They are," said Trennion unsympathetically, "very painful." Then to the attendant who had just entered, "take this bag to a cab for Miss Douglas."

He crossed the room to where the lovers stood an taking the girl's hand in his, said kindly:

"I am so sorry to have given you so much bother. Go and finish your holiday in Devonshire; it's a delightful place."

"Why – aren't you – aren't you arresting me?" said the startled girl.

Trennion smiled.

"No; why – do you want to be arrested?"

"But the belt – I must be cleared of that dreadful charge."

"Oh, you're cleared all right."

"Cleared!"

"Yes, you don't suppose I should send you off if I thought you were guilty; I – catch her!"

And the overwrought girl reeled and would have fallen but for Trennion's timely warning.

She pulled herself together and forced herself to speak.

"I'm all right – only it was a little, a little sudden." She smiled pitiably. "How can I thank you, Mr. Trennion?"

"Please don't – go off and thoroughly enjoy Devonshire."

But Lady Wensley had found her voice.

"Mr. Trennion – what does this mean? I will not be a party to this perversion of justice."

The Assistant Commissioner smiled crookedly.

"Don't bother, Lady Wensley, you're not. Marjorie, I am sure your cab is waiting; do not let us keep you."

He almost hustled them from the room and turned to meet the fierce stare of the woman.

"You shall hear this, Mr. Trennion."

She was speaking quickly, painfully. She saw the undoing of a plan, which, hateful as it was, was dear to her.

She walked swiftly to the door and would have passed through, but he stood before her.

"Do not go for a minute, I beg, Lady Wensley." The cool young man's voice was smooth and persuasive.

"You will not persuade me," she raged. "I shall go straight to the nearest newspaper office and tell the story."

"Ah, then you would lose your train," said the imperturbable Commissioner. "Be advised by me, go straight to Wensley and forget this miserable affair."

"How dare you offer me advice!" She was almost incoherent in her anger. "Of course, I see your object. You have good reason for wishing the matter forgotten. But if there is a law in England, she shall suffer. You shall not hush up this affair."

"As a matter of fact, I am not really keen on hushing up ordinary crime, but this is no ordinary crime."

He picked up the belt from the table and weighed it thoughtfully in one hand.

"Here is the belt," he pursued, "a nice heavy belt – you must have found it very heavy."

"I – I? why?, what do you mean?"

"You wore it thing morning, you know, when you came here with it round your waist. You knew that Marjorie's bag was here, because you wired me to secure it, and because all other means having failed you, you hoped for an opportunity to put the belt in."

"How dare you!"

But the Assistant Commissioner went on as though she had not spoken.

"The opportunity came when I went to get you a glass of water – you made one mistake. You did not lock the bag after you."

"Oh, this is infamous," gasped the enraged woman. "Prove it; prove it! You cannot!"

"I can prove everything; but there are some things we don't want to prove."

"You shall pay for this insult."

"Lady Wensley, listen to me." His voice was firm; he had dropped the tone of *badinage*. "For your innocent amusement, and at your request, I weighed you when you came in – you weighed nine-stone-twelve-and-a-half. For my own information I induced you to be weighed again – after – the belt – was found."

"Ah!" a look of terror came into the beautiful, insolent eyes and he continued:

"You weighed nine-stone-six – you had lost six-and-a-half-pounds in less than a quarter of an hour. Lady Wensley, this belt weights six-and-a-half-pounds."

"What a fool – Oh, what a fool!" The words were whispered rather than spoken, and the terror in her eyes deepened.

"It is very simple, isn't it," said Claude suavely; "but I repeat, there are some things one does not want to prove. You wish to catch the 12.45, I think, Lady Wensley. Well, you'll find your way out – you needn't wait for Cole. The stairs are at the end of the corridor. Good bye, so glad we have been able to arrange things. Hope you will have a pleasant journey – charming day, isn't it?"

He watched the unsteady figure till it had turned into the side corridor which led to the stairs, then he came back to his desk, and stood looking down at the belt.

"Rum things, women," he said. "Queen of Sheba – Anna Wensley – all rum."

THE END