

Margery Allingham

The Definite Article

"My dear man,*" said Old Lady Laradine, her remarkable voice penetrating the roar of the Bond Street traffic with easy mastery, *'don't think you're going to get away from me once I've settled down to a gossip. Come back here at once. Dorothea has got her girl safely engaged to Lord Fettering, I see. You know him, don't you? Tell me, do you approve?"

Mr. Albert Champion bent his lean back once more and peered again into the tonneau of the elderly Daimler, where the redoubtable old lady sat enthroned.

His pale, somewhat vacant face, at which so many criminals had laughed too soon, wore a patient but harassed expression as his fifth attempt to escape was again frustrated.

"Forgive me, but you're holding up the traffic rather seriously, you know,*" he ventured mildly. "There's a bus having apoplexy just behind you, and I see a traffic policeman gazing over here with unhealthy interest. Does it matter?"

The old lady swung round to peer out of the window above her head with an agility which was typical of her.

"Yes, I dislike the police,*" she said briskly. "They have a mania for motorcars. Get in.**"

Mr. Champion drew back involuntarily.

"Oh no, really," he murmured. "I—I'm late for an appointment now. Delightful seeing you. Good-bye."

The car door swinging suddenly open on top of him silenced his excuses. "Where is this appointment?" The old voice was commanding.

"Scotland Yard," said Champion with what he took to be a flash of inspiration. "Terribly important."

"Get in then, idiot," shouted the old lady. "Bullard!" she screamed to the chauffeur. "Scotland Yard!—and drive as fast as you like. It's official business."

A moment later Mr. Champion, who had no desire to go to the headquarters of the Criminal Investigation Department anyway, found himself sitting meekly beside his kidnapper as the big car slid quietly out into Piccadilly.

Lady Laradine regarded him with the affectionate pride of an angler for a landed fish.

"There," she said. "Now tell me! your friend Lord Fettering is hysterically in love with Dorothea's girl Roberta, isn't he? How did he get that abominable uncle of his to agree to the match?"

Mr. Champion blinked.

"Tommy Fettering?" he repeated with irritating stupidity. "Has he an uncle?"

Lady Laradine made a menacing noise in her throat.

"Don't you dare to take that line with me, young man," she said, prodding his knee with a finger which felt as though it had a thimble upon it. "You know as well as I do that Pettering's mother is determined he shall have a career in the Foreign Office and that old Braithwaite, her brother, who is in the Cabinet, is only willing to arrange everything if he's allowed to keep the whole family under his thumb. Young Master Thomas has to get his uncle's permission before he sells a plater, much less gets himself engaged. How did the boy talk his uncle round? You must know."

Mr. Champion was aware of her small faded brown eyes watching him with a shrewdness which was unnerving, and he stuck resolutely to his usual policy, saying nothing that could possibly be taken down and used against him.

"I imagine the request was purely formal," he murmured cautiously. "I don't know Miss Roberta Pendleton-Blake. There's nothing against her, is there?"

"Against Roberta? Of course not!" the old woman snapped at him. "Dorothea is one of my best friends. But the money in that family did come from frozen meat in the last generation and everybody thought that the old uncle, Braithwaite,

would put his stupid feet down on that account. So he would have done, of course, if there'd been any breath of scandal. The P.O. is so pristine, isn't it? But I suppose the meat is something they can bring themselves to forget and forgive. Still, I believe it was touch and go. Tell me, do you like Roberta? She's my godchild, but you can say what you like."

Mr. Campion patiently repeated his previous announcement that he had not met the Pendleton-Blakes. Lady Laradine was shocked.

"Oh, my dear, you must," she said. "I'll see you're invited to the dance Dorothea is giving for the girl next week. Mind you come. They're charming, all absolutely charming, even the husband—but he's dead, of course. Dorothea is a sweet creature. So original. She uses all the ideas I give her for her parties. I've told her she must have the Psychometrist at the next dance. That's something new to amuse people. It's so interesting, I think, to have something to do, besides watching the younger people dance. It gives one something to talk about afterwards. You really must meet Dorothea. Oh, how disappointing, here we are."

Her flow of chatter died abruptly as the Daimler turned on to the Embankment, and her passenger sprang out with uncharacteristic haste. He did not get clean away, however.

"I'll wait for you," said Lady Laradine, her hand on his coat. "I want to hear all the news."

Mr. Campion, who had considered crossing the road, picking up a cab and driving peacefully back to Bond Street, was aghast.

"That would be too kind," he said with earnest conviction. "I'm afraid I may be hours, literally. Thank you so very much. Good-bye."

"Good-bye then," said her ladyship regretfully. "I shall look out for you at Dorothea's next week."

Mr. Campion smiled a trifle wanly and walked towards the entrance. Since there was nothing for it but a visit to his old friend Superintendent Gates, or undignified concealment behind a gate pillar until the Daimler should elect to depart, he sighed and, waving to the inquisitive figure in the back of the car, he gave his name to the man on the door and sent up his card.

The superintendent embarrassed him considerably by receiving Mm at once, having taken his unheralded arrival as a sign of great urgency.

"What's up?" he demanded. "I've never known you blow in here without making an appointment. Something serious?"

Inwardly Mr. Campion cursed all strong-minded old ladies, and after a while he mentioned the fact aloud.

Gates began to laugh. He was a thin grey man with light intelligent eyes and a certain natural mournfulness of expression.

"That's fine," he said with relish. "This is just the place for a nice rest in the middle of the morning. Put your feet up. Don't mind me."

Mr. Campion took a silver case from his pocket and drew out a cigarette, which he laid upon the desk with quiet dignity. "Get this analysed for me, old boy, will you?" he said earnestly.

The policeman's smile faded and he prodded the cylinder gently with a broad forefinger. "Which is it?" he demanded. "Drugs or explosives?"

"Heaven knows," said his visitor seriously.

"Really? Where did you get it?" Gates was as alert as a terrier.

Mr. Campion surveyed him affectionately. "I bought it in an open shop right in your own district. Think that over."

Gates sniffed at the cigarette suspiciously. "Righto," he said, "I'll send it down. What are your grounds for doubting it?"

"Three extra in a packet and they taste like hell," explained his visitor affably. "They're a new brand, advertised all over the place."

The superintendent regarded him coldly for a moment or two and finally lit the exhibit, which he puffed contentedly.

"All right," he said ominously, "all right, my lad. If you're looking for something to employ your time I'll see what I can do for you. Sit down. I've got something in your line. This'll just about suit you. Somebody wants a miracle. I thought of you when I got the enquiry."

His guest looked suitably chastened and would have drifted towards the door, but Oates's ferocious good humour increased.

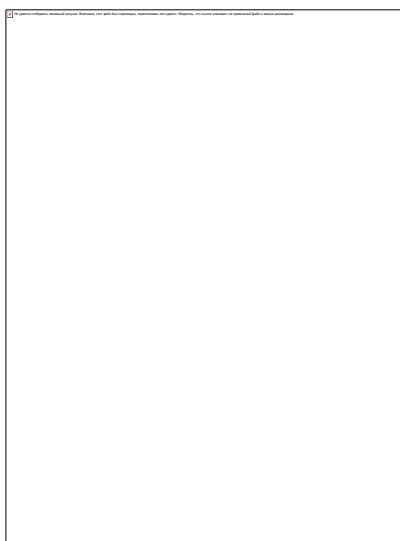
"Sit down," he repeated, taking up a sheaf of official papers. "Here's the dope. This is what comes of persuading foreigners to say 'Your police are wonderful.' They're beginning to take it literally, the lunatics. This is an enquiry from the U.S. The Federal Police are looking for a Society blackmailer who, so they say, always spends October in England. They can't give us any more than that on him. They simply say they'd be obliged if we apprehended him. Obligated isn't the word. They mean staggered."

Seated on the hard visitor's chair, Mr. Campion did his best to look intelligent, and his pale eyes were amused and friendly behind his horn-rimmed spectacles.

"He's male, is he?" he said. "That's a step. I mean it reduces it from all the population of America to half the population of America, doesn't it?"

Gates turned over the blue sheets in his hand.

"Yes, they seem fairly certain of that," he said without smiling. "But you see what I mean when I say the description is slight. This is the story, as far as I can make it out. Late last year there was a fatal accident to the young wife of one of those fabulously wealthy financial men they breed over there. She fell off the roof of a skyscraper, and no one seemed to know why. There was no suggestion of foul play, but the question of suicide was raised. The husband, poor chap, was for too broken up at first to go into the thing thoroughly, but afterwards he seems to have pulled himself together and made several interesting discoveries.



"The first thing he noticed was that the girl died without a halfpenny in her private account, and that there were records of large, ever-increasing sums withdrawn from it to explain this.

"This money had been paid out from the bank in cash and naturally he began to think of blackmail."

He paused and Campion nodded.

"The girl," Oates continued, "was very young, not at all the type to have a dangerous secret, and the whole notion seemed incredible to the husband until he cross-questioned the coloured maid who had come up from his wife's home

with her on her marriage. From her he got an interesting story.

"It appeared that the young wife had kept some letters, a sentimental memento of a boy-and-girl love affair which had fizzled out before the older man put in an appearance. The maid thought that someone had got hold of these and convinced the wife that her husband would read a great deal more into them than ever they had originally contained. To prevent this eventuality the poor wretched

child ruined herself financially, worked herself into a state of nervous collapse, and finally threw herself off the roof. You know how these things sometimes happen, Campion."

The elegant personage in the horn-rimmed spectacles did not speak at once. It was an ugly little story, and one which he had heard too often in his career to doubt. Like the superintendent, he knew only too well that the clever blackmailer who picks the right type of victim seldom has to find anything that is really reprehensible on which to base his threats.

"Too bad," he said seriously. "Didn't they get any line on the chap?"

Stanislaus Oates made a few vulgar and not altogether relevant remarks which seemed to relieve his feelings.

'I told you," he said finally. 'Why don't you listen? They haven't got a sausage, not a whiff, not a faint delicate aroma floating out from the window of a passing car. They don't know anything. And they have the calm impudence to write and say 'We hear your Force is wonderful. How about sending this lad along in a plain van?' "

"Yes, I know." Mr. Campion spoke soothingly. "But they must have something to go on. Otherwise why apply to you? Why not go to the Chinese or to the Nevada Sheriff?"

Oates grunted.

"They think they've got two clues," he admitted. "They concede that they're slight. I like that word of theirs, 'concede.' They're both based on something the dead girl said to the maid. The first one is a remark she made late in the summer of last year, when she first showed signs of worry. 'It'll be all right in October,' she said. 'He goes to England in October.' She wouldn't explain herself and seemed to re-

gret the admission of trouble as soon as she had made it. That's the first.

"The second is just demented. Apparently, on the morning of the 'accident,' she was sitting up in bed and she said to the maid, who seems to have been a reliable witness, 'It's no good, Dorothy, it's no good. It's written in ink. He saw it in ink.' And then she went out on the roof."

He paused and shrugged his shoulders.

"There you are," he said. "There's the lot, and I hope it means more to you than it does to me. Written in ink, indeed! What was written in ink? And why was it more important than if it had been written in pencil? Or cross-stitch, for that matter?"

Mr. Campion sat looking thoughtfully at the toes of his shoes for some moments.

"This girl who died," he enquired at last, "what sort of life did she lead? Was she likely to come into contact with shady characters?"

"No, that's the odd part about it." Gates studied the blue sheaf again. "She was one of New York's pampered babies. Looked after as if she was royalty or something. She never went out unescorted and never visited anywhere but in the most exclusive circles. Whoever got hold of her must have had peculiar facilities for getting into the best houses. I think the whole story is scatty. I shall write and tell 'em so, in a nice way, of course, when you've broken a tooth or two on the problem."

"Me?" Mr. Campion seemed startled, and the superintendent was amused.

"I'll tell 'em I've put a Society expert on the job," he said, grinning. "That'll please 'em and keep 'em quiet for a bit. There you are. You came in here looking for something to do and now you've got it. There's a little miracle for you. Pull that off. Written in ink my foot!"

"In ink?" repeated Mr. Campion with sudden interest as a chance remark he had heard earlier that morning returned to him with sudden significance. "I wonder ..."

Gates regarded him sympathetically.

"You're getting swell-headed," he said kindly. "It often happens to amateurs. You're beginning to think you're gifted

with supernatural powers. This'll do you good. It's impossible. If you had all the luck in the world it'd still be impossible."

Mr. Campion collected his hat and gloves and wandered to the door.

"I'll let you know if I spot him," he said.

"Do," said Gates cheerfully. "And send me a wreath at the same time. I'll need it."

His visitor looked pained. "Do I get a reward if I bring him in?" he enquired.

"You get an illuminated address of five thousand words, written in my own hand and coloured," said the superintendent heartily.

Mr. Campion seemed both pleased and surprised,

"I shall like that," he said.

He went quietly out of the building, and that evening did what was in the circumstances a very extraordinary thing. After certain elementary researches he wrote a careful and slightly effusive note to old Lady Laradine and begged her not to forget her promise to get him an invitation to the dance in honour of Miss Roberta Pendleton-Blake.

He paid for this fit of apparent lunacy a few days later when he sat beside that paralysing old lady in the corner of a ballroom which was not so much decorated as obliterated with heavily scented flowers and watched a vast throng of young people moving his mass formation on a glistening floor.

Lady Laradine was at the top of her form. She had spent the earlier part of the evening in a black velvet tent in an ante-room of the big Clarges Street house consulting the latest Society entertainer, and was bursting with her experiences.

"My dear," she was saying happily, "my dear, the creature is too astonishing. Dorothea was inspired to engage him. I told her she would be. Look at Roberta and young Fettering dancing together over there . . . aren't they charming? I'm so glad the uncle was reasonable. Dorothea tells me she cried with relief when she heard that the wretched man had consented. Dear me, let me see, where was I?"

Mr. Campion had not the faintest idea and was on the verge of forgetting himself sufficiently to say so when she recollected unassisted.

"Of course," she said, "the fortune-teller. Quite an astounding person. A psychometrist. Fortunately I'm never indiscreet, but really some of the things he told me about people I know. . ."

Her resonant voice rose and fell, and it occurred to her patient audience that she must have told the seer quite as much as ever he told her. Her flow of chatter was quite remarkable.

"He took my ring and put it in an envelope," she hurried on. "I put the envelope under the crystal and when he looked in and told me the most astonishing things about my mother. Wasn't that amazing?"

"A ring?" enquired Mr. Campion, pricking up his ears.

The old lady looked at him as if she thought he were deficient.

"I don't believe you've been listening," she said unjustly. "I've been explaining to you for the last half hour that Cagliostro is amazing. You give him something that belonged to someone dead, or elsewhere anyway, and he tells you all about them."

"Cagliostro?" repeated Mr. Campion, temporarily out of his depth.

Lady Laradine threw up her small yellow hands in exasperation.

"Bless the man, he's delirious!" she said. "Cagliostro the Second is the fortune-teller, animal. The psychometrist. The man I've been telling you about. He's in a black velvet tent somewhere in the house. Go and see him yourself. I can't be bothered with you if you don't use your mind at all. All you young men ought to take up Yoga. It clears the brain. Come and see me and I'll put you on to a very good man."

Mr. Campion rose. His ears were singing, but his eyes were alert and interested. "I'll go and find him at once," he said. "I like fortune-tellers."

The suddenness of his dash for freedom routed the old lady, and he was half-way down the room and out of earshot before she collected sufficient breath to call him back.

Mr. Campion went off on his quest with that hidden, al-

most absent-minded, purposefulness which was his most misleading characteristic. He paused in the doorway to exchange a word with Tommy Fettering and be presented to the entirely delightful Roberta, chatted carelessly with two or three acquaintances, put himself in the good graces of his hostess with a few intelligent compliments, and wandered out into the main body of the house practically by accident.

It took him some time to find the psychometrist and his velvet tent, indeed he became definitely lost in the house at one period before that and came to a full stop in a dark corridor on the floor below the ballroom.

He was standing on the threshold of a small room furnished as a woman's study. The place was dimly lighted and the slender walnut furniture made graceful shadows on the silk-panelled walls. But it was not at these that the tall man with the diffident manner remained to stare with speculative interest.

Kneeling before a bureau on the other side of the room was a girl in a green chiffon dress. The first thing Campion noticed about her was her extreme youth, and the second the astonishing fact that she was forcing the catch of a drawer with a brass paper-knife.

He then saw that her hair was curled on the top of a small and shapely head and that her green dress floated about a slender, childish figure,

As he watched her she slid the drawer open an inch or so and inserted a little inquiring hand.

Mr. Campion, deeming that the moment had come, coughed apologetically.

The girl in the green dress stiffened and there was a moment of painful silence. Campion had some experience of the hardened criminal and he thought he had never witnessed such an exhibition of calm nerve. Before she even looked round she opened the drawer a little further and, with a nonchalance that had guilt stamped all over it, drew out a small flat packet which she wrapped in her georgette handkerchief. Then she turned and rose quietly to her feet.

Mr. Campion found himself looking into a small, intelligent face which would blossom into radiant beauty in a year or so. At the moment he judged her to be seventeen at most.

She was very red and her grey-green eyes were angry and alarmed, but her dignity was tremendous.

Her remark was as bald as it was unexpected, and it had a strong element of truth in it which silenced him altogether.

"It's nothing to do with you," she said and darted past him before he could stop her, leaving him staring in blank astonishment at her tiny whirlwind figure disappearing into the darkness of the passage.

Mr. Campion pulled himself together and went quietly up to the ballroom. He was mildly startled. Young ladies who open bureau drawers with paper-knives and run off with mysterious packages wrapped in green georgette handkerchiefs constitute a responsibility which cannot be altogether ignored.

He had plenty of fish to fry of his own, however, for he had not braved an evening in the same house with Lady Laradine for nothing. He looked in at the ballroom again and reflected that every woman he had ever met at a dinner table seemed to be present with her daughter, but of the little girl in the green dress there was no trace at all.

Lady Laradine saw him from the other side of the room and bore down upon him like a very small ship in very full sail and he ducked into the first doorway to avoid her, thereby discovering the thing he had sought so unobtrusively for the past hour.

A black velvet tent hung with gilt fringe and topped by a directoire eagle rose up, dark and impressive, in the centre of the high-ceilinged Georgian room. He wandered over to it and raised the flap.

The scene within was much as he had expected, and the sight of it gave him a thrill of satisfaction. One point in particular interested him immensely. A strong overhead light shone down upon a small ebony table which supported a red satin hand-cushion and a black crystal ball.

The man who smiled at him over an unimpeachable shirt-front was unusual. This Cagliostro was not the sleek huckster with the twinkle and the swagger which the credulous public has come to expect in its seers, but a surprisingly large man with thin fluffy hair and prominent cold light eyes. His smile was secretive and not at all pleasant. He did not speak, but

indicated the consultant's chair very slowly with a sweeping movement of a great fin-like hand.

Mr. Campion would have accepted the invitation but he was frustrated. Lady Laradine pounced upon him from behind.

"Oh, there you are," she said irritably. "Well, I hope you've been hearing something entertaining for it's more than I have. Has anybody any conversation at all these days? What did Cagliostro tell you?"

Mr. Campion was explaining meekly that he had had as yet no time to consult the psychometrist when he caught sight over his captor's shoulders of a slender little figure in a green dress. There was quite a little crowd in the ante-room and she did not notice him, but made straight for the tent and passed inside.

"Really!" Lady Laradine, who had known by instinct the precise moment when his attention had wandered and had spun round herself, was now looking at him with impolite amusement.

"My dear boy, a child?" she burst out in her tremendous voice. "Well, it's an extraordinary thing to me, but I've noticed it over and over again. You clever men are absolutely devastated by immaturity, 'aren't you? Still, seventeen . . . Dear boy, is it wise?"

"Do you know who she is?" Campion got the enquiry in edgeways.

"Who she is?" echoed the old lady, her eyes crinkling. "My good man, you don't mean to say you haven't even met? But how touchingly romantic! I thought you young people managed things very differently these days. Still, this is charming. Tell me more. You just looked at each other, I suppose? Dear me, this takes me back to the nineties."

Campion regarded her helplessly. She was like some elderly yellow kitten, he thought suddenly, all fluff and wide smile.

"Who is she?" he repeated doggedly.

"Why, the child, of course," said Lady Laradine infuriatingly. "Little What's-her-name. Jennifer, isn't it? To be presented next year when there won't be such a crush. You know perfectly well who I mean. Don't stand there looking

like a fish. Roberta's sister, Dorothea's youngest daughter. So pretty. Like some sort of flower, don't you think?"

"A daughter?" said Campion flatly. "She lives here, then?"

"Of course she does. Where should she live but with her mother?" Her ladyship's eyebrows seemed in danger of disappearing altogether. "A child of seventeen living alone? Whatever next! She's a charming little thing, although I've never had any patience with schoolchildren myself. Still, she's far too young for you. Put it out of your mind. Let me see, what was I going to tell you?"

This was a secret Mr. Campion never learnt. Lady Laradine, who had hitherto accredited him with excellent manners, was deeply disappointed in him. He stared blankly at her for a moment and then, turning away abruptly, strode across the room, passing behind the tent, to the door half-hidden behind it which led out into the house.

Lady Laradine saw the top of the door open and close and assumed that her victim had passed through it, which was just the kind of silly mistake which long experience had taught Mr. Campion that most people were wont to make.

The long evening went on according to the programme the hostess had arranged, but there were certain additions to it which were not on her schedule at all. At half-past one in the morning a weary and somewhat stiff Mr. Campion made his way gingerly out of the concealing folds at the back of the psychometrist's tent and, slipping into the house, walked quietly down to the little study where he had first met the girl in green.

He went inside and sat down in a wing-chair in the darkest corner. Presently he heard her coming as he knew she would. Her dress brushed the step and he heard her quick intake of breath as she closed the door behind her and, crossing into his line of vision, flung herself down on her knees before the bureau drawer.

"I say," said Mr. Campion, "I suppose you know what you're doing with that chap downstairs? I don't trust him myself."

This time his interruption was greeted with interest if not respect. Jennifer Pendleton-Blake screamed and swung round,

her eyes terrified. Even so, however, her words were unexpected.

"What do you know?" she demanded.

*'Quite a lot." Mr. Champion rose stiffly to his feet. "I've been standing on one foot, half smothered by dusty black velvet, for an hour and a half."

The girl gaped at him and he had the grace to look ashamed.

"I've been listening," he said. "What did you give that fellow to—er—'psychomet?' I couldn't see. Letters?"

She nodded miserably.

Mr. Champion coughed.

"I don't want to seem unduly inquisitive," he said, "but I'm out to help in any way I can. Who were they from?"

Jennifer Pendleton-Blake turned back to the drawer and turned over its contents. The nape of her neck was pink and her shoulders were quivering.

"I don't know," she said helplessly. "That's just it, I don't know!"

Mr. Champion knelt down on the floor beside her and looked into the drawer, which contained as fine a collection of sentimental relics as ever he had set eyes upon. There were several little bundles of letters tied up with different coloured ribbons, a choice selection of dead flowers, a university scarf or two, and quite a quantity of chocolate box lids.

He glanced at the seventeen-year-old at his side and surprised her looking half her age. Inspiration came to him.

"Jennifer," he said sternly, "these are not yours."

"No," she whispered, her lips trembling.

* 'Whose are they? Roberta's?"

"Yes."

Mr. Champion lent her the handkerchief out of his breast pocket.

"Let's discuss this," he said cheerfully. "I think I'm getting the hang of it. I'll tell you the story as I see it and you correct me when I go off the rails."

Miss Pendleton-Blake rewarded him with a pathetic acquiescing sniff.

"I don't know who you are," she said, "but you seem all right. Anyway, things can't be worse."

Mr. Champion ignored the somewhat dubious compliment.

"When a young woman feels she's grown up, but has only just arrived at that eminence, she often finds herself at a temporary disadvantage," he began with a certain amount of oracular tact. "I mean, for instance, when she is faced with the exacting problem of finding something really interesting to take to a psychometrist I can sympathize with her difficulty."

The young lady looked at him gratefully.

"That was just it," she said. "I hadn't anything belonging to anyone whom I really wanted to know something about and I did feel a bit out of it, young and fiat, you know. I'm not even presented yet. So I suddenly thought of Roberta's drawer up here, where I knew she kept all Tommy's letters. I thought I'd just get them, hear the low-down on Tommy and put them back. I didn't dream that the fortune-teller would be such a beast."

"He wouldn't give them back to you?"

"Why, no. It was most peculiar." Jennifer's face was the complete picture of youthful reproach. "I put the packet in an envelope and sealed it, as he told me to. He stuck the envelope under the crystal. He told me a lot of silly stuff that obviously wasn't true and then he gave me what I naturally thought was the envelope back. I didn't examine it there, but when I got up here again I found it was only this."

She opened her green handkerchief and produced a wad of neatly folded newsprint.

Mr. Champion regard the package gravely and with distaste.

"You went back to him, naturally?" he said. "I heard the whole of that interview. You had to wait your turn to see him, of course. It must have been a trying experience."

"It was filthy," said Jennifer violently. "Did you hear him laugh at me and say I'd made a mistake? Then he congratulated me on my sister's engagement and said he'd be seeing me again. He meant me to realise that he knew all about everything, you see. It wasn't until just now, though, that I realised the frightful thing. Those letters weren't Tommy's. They must have been Bobby Dacre's, or

one of her other silly undergrads. They're always writing stupid letters to her because she's so frightfully pretty. Cagliostro must have looked

at the letters I gave him and saw that they were written to her and not signed by Tommy, who, as everybody knows, is her fiance". Now he'll keep them and make a row. What shall I do?"

Mr. Champion grinned.

"Hold on a minute," he said. "He can't do much, you know, not in this case, although I can conceive a situation in which his little conjuring trick might prove decidedly awkward. Who cares who has been writing to Roberta? Not Tommy."

"Oh, no, not Tommy." Jennifer was contemptuous. "But it might be frightfully awkward if he went to Tommy's perfectly revolting uncle. He's a horror. He's just straining at the least to make an objection to the engagement. Everybody knows that. If this filthy fortune-teller so much as approached him he'd make it an excuse. Besides, you know how frightfully prurient everybody over forty is."

"Are they?" said Mr. Champion, feeling the dangerous age was uncomfortably close.

"Oh, yes!" said Miss Pendleton-Blake. "What shall I do?" she added after a pause. "Try and buy them back before he goes?"

Mr. Champion regard her with affection.

"You're what my more vulgar friends would call a proper little mug, aren't you?" he said. "Our pal Cagliostro isn't so dumb. He certainly knows how to pick his clients. Now look here, we will do mat. We'll do just what you say. We'll try to buy them back. But we'll need witnesses and, as we don't want publicity, we'll want the right witnesses. Oates will have to leave his bed, and it serves him right. Look here, can we be certain of keeping Cagliostro here another hour?"

Jennifer glanced up at the sunburst clock over the mantelshelf.

"Oh, no," she said. "He's due to leave in ten minutes or so now. Perhaps he'll just take the money quietly and give them back."

"In view of a rather horrid little tale I heard the other day I think he'll take the money and not give them back," he said. "And if we don't have the right kind of witnesses there may be a row, which is not what we want at all."

The girl in the green frock shivered.

"Who's going to keep him here, then?" she said. "You don't know these entertainers. They'll never stay a second after their time is up. Is it so terribly important?"

"Terribly," said Mr. Champion.

"Then we're sunk." There was a wail in the young voice. "Nothing on heaven or earth can detain people like that."

A beautiful idea came to Mr. Champion.

"I know someone who could detain anything," he murmured, and went off in search of Lady Laradine.

At four o'clock in the morning Superintendent Oates sat in a small room on the first floor of Mrs. Pendleton-Blake's house and regarded Mr. Champion with a certain thoughtful-ness. He was contented to know that in a cab speeding through the quiet streets Cagliostro the Second sat sullen and resigned between two unsympathetic and sleepy police officers.

Opposite the superintendent stood Mr. Champion, looking very wide-awake and wearing an almost intelligent expression. Jennifer Pendleton-Blake was clinging to his arm, her eyes dancing.

"It might be him," said the superintendent grudgingly and ungrammatically. "His papers do show that he only came over from the States at the beginning of the month. Anyway, it was the fairest cop I ever saw. He played straight into our hands. Never having met this little lady before, he felt he was quite safe from any trap, I suppose. He was more astounded than afraid when we walked in on him. Well, we'll keep the publicity right down; it's easy in this sort of case. You played your part very cleverly, Miss."

Jennifer smiled.

"He was exhausted when I got to him," she said frankly. "Edith Laradine had been with him for a whole hour, you know. She did the really clever thing by keeping him here. She's wonderful."

The superintendent cocked an eye towards the door.

Through the heavy panels and down two flights of stairs the steady murmur of Lady Laradine's remarkable voice reached them faintly as she recounted her experience to her friend and hostess. Gates listened for a moment and shook his head like an airedale.

"Yes," he said heavily. "Yes, indeed. She is. Wonderful is the word."

Jennifer laughed.

"You were pretty clever, weren't you, bless you," she said, glancing up at Mr. Champion.

"Him?" said the superintendent. "Him?"

Mr. Champion remained affable and blandly uninformative until, good nights having been said, they taxied back to Champion's flat together for a nightcap. Then the superintendent's dignity gave out sufficiently to permit him to ask a direct question.

"Simple, my dear chap," he said. "Your police experts are wonderful."

Oates made an unofficial remark.

"You come off it," he said after a bit. "You know and I know that the chances are a hundred to one on this Cagliostro fellow being the same man I was telling you about last week. We shan't be able to prove it, I don't suppose, but it's clear enough. How did you do it? Luck again?"

"Luck?" protested Mr. Champion in pained astonishment. "My good policeman, when you actually meet brilliant detective work don't let its unfamiliarity blind you to its merit. Luck indeed! It was pure deduction and intelligent investigation, backed up by old-fashioned listening at doors."

"Yes, I know all that." Oates was irritated in spite of his satisfaction. "Once you decided to watch your man, the thing was child's play. You spotted his game at once. It was a clever one, mind you. He must have made a point of keeping all letters handed in to him and taking a look at them, giving back the uninteresting ones as soon as his client spotted his 'mistake,' as he called it. He had a dozen of those little fake packets ready, all shapes and sizes. You spotted that trick all right because you actually saw, or rather heard, him doing it, but what on earth made you suddenly decide to watch a man who was simply entertaining at some wretched party at which you happened to be?"

"I didn't happen to be at the party," objected Mr. Champion with feeling. "I went there deliberately and at tremen-

dous personal sacrifice in order to find him. I was looking for him."

"Why?*"

"Because you told me to, my dear chap." Mr. Champion leaned back in the taxicab and spoke with-weary patience. "Cagliostro is the only Society fortune-teller to visit these shores regularly every October. As soon as you told me that story the other day it was obvious that he was the man you wanted, providing your tale had any foundation in fact. I wanted to find out if it had, so I went and had a look at Cagliostro at work. Is that clear?"

"Yes," said Gates hastily. "Yes, old man. Don't get excited. Yes, I see that. But why a fortune-teller? I didn't mention a fortune-teller. The idea never entered my head."

Mr. Champion seemed to be at a loss, but suddenly he smiled.

"Oh, that," he said. "Of course. I forgot. You didn't see the significance of the maid's story, did you? She insisted that her mistress had definitely said 'It's no use. It's written in ink. He saw it in ink.' Now is it clear?"

The superintendent swore.

"You make me tired," he said. "I've never heard such nonsense in my life. That statement was plain idiotic."

Champion nodded. "I know," he said. "It was. But the maid wasn't idiotic. The maid was a sensible girl, a good witness; you said so yourself. That's why it occurred to me that she must have made a simple, ordinary little mistake, the kind of mistake a sensible person might make. Don't you see, Gates, what her mistress really said was 'He saw it in the ink. It is written in the ink.' "

Gates was silent. "Even so. I don't see—" he began.

Mr. Champion chuckled in the darkness.

"You don't patronize fortune-tellers. If you did you'd know that, while some of them look at cards or peer into crystals, others read secrets mirrored in a pool of black ink. When you told me that

story I thought of fortune-tellers, and when I looked into Cagliostro's tent this evening the first thing I saw was a black crystal. Then I knew I was on the right track. The unpleasant little trick he tried to play on that adorable

guffin, Jennifer, put him slap into my hands. There you are, sir, it's in the bag. When do I get my illuminated address?"

"Eh?" said Gates, and after a second or so of consideration began to laugh. "I'll hand it to you," he said. "You get all the luck, but you have a sort of flair, I'll admit. You'll have to excuse the five thousand words."

Mr. Campion handed him his cigarette case.

"Not at all," he said firmly. "I want my reward. Either the address or you take Lady Laradine round the Black Museum for me."

Gates accepted the cigarette.

"I'll do the homework," he said resignedly. "After all, life's short."