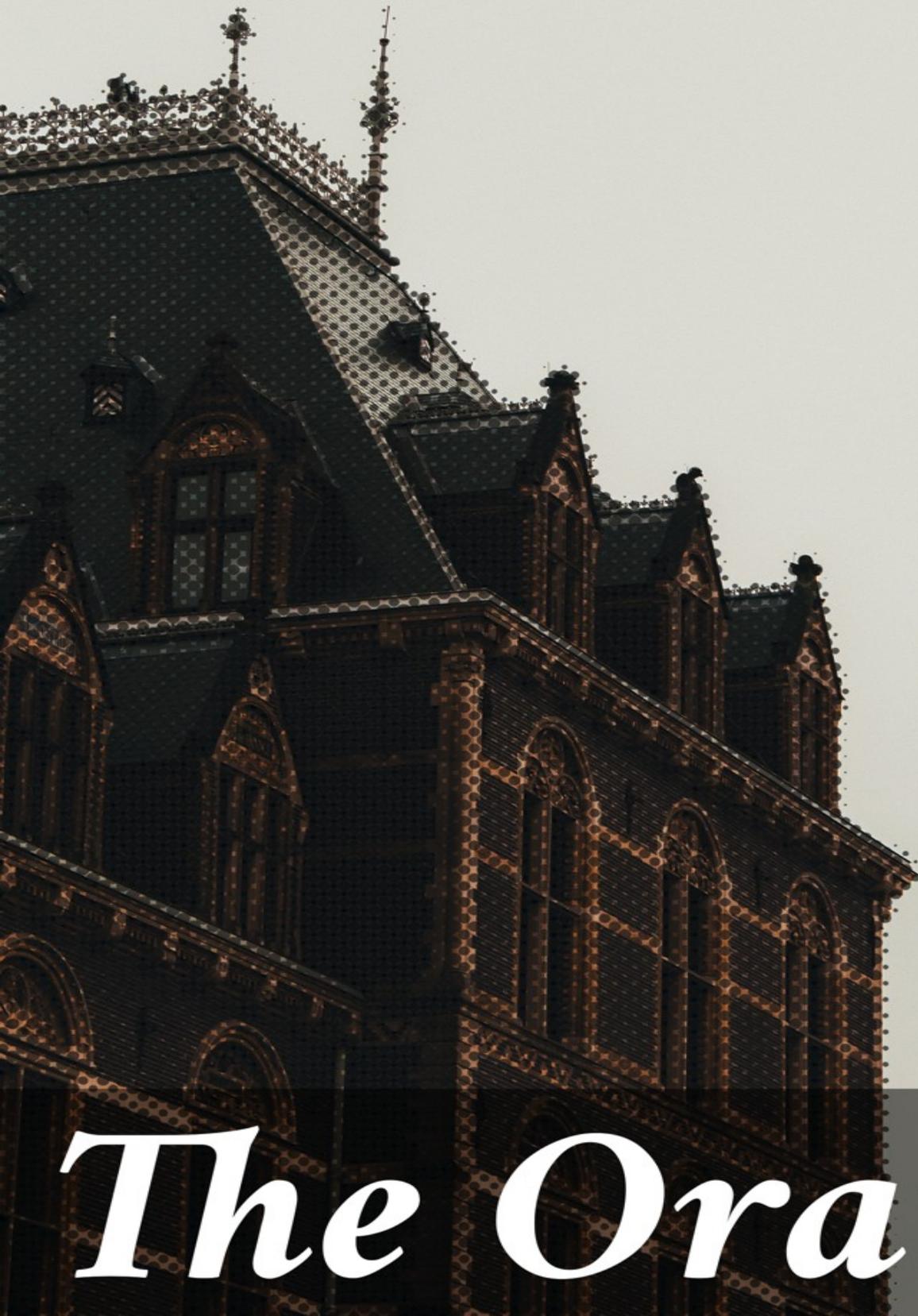


**Edgar Wallace**



*The Orator*

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# **The Orator**



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

\* \* \* \* \*

## II. — THE MIND-READERS

First published in The Pall Mall Magazine , Oct 1927

\* \* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \* \*

## III. — THE OLD LADY WHO CHANGED HER MIND

First published in The Pall Mall Magazine , Sep 1927

## IV. — THE SUNNINGDALE MURDER

First published in The Pall Mall Magazine , Dec 1927

## V. — A BANK AND A SECRETARY

First published in The Pall Mall Magazine , Nov 1927

\* \* \* \* \*

## VI. — THE MAN NEXT DOOR

First published in The Pall Mall Magazine , Feb 1928

## VII. — THE SIRIUS MAN

First published in The Pall Mall Magazine , Jan 1928

## VIII. — THE COUPER BUCKLE

First published in The Pall Mall Magazine , Apr 1928

\* \* \* \* \*

## IX. — THE CASE OF FREDDIE VANE

First published as "The First Night" in The Pall Mall Magazine , Mar 1928

## X. — THE GUY FROM MEMPHIS

First published in The Pall Mall Magazine , May 1928

\* \* \* \* \*

## XI. — THE DETECTIVE WHO TALKED

First published in The Pall Mall Magazine, Jul 1928

XII. — THE FALL OF MR. RATER

First published as "The Orator's Downfall" in The Pall Mall Magazine, Jun 1928

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THE END

THEY called Chief Inspector Oliver Rater “The Orator” for obvious reasons. Less obvious to those who have no sense of English humour is the fact that such a name stuck to him, less because of the fortuitous circumstance of his initials and surname than because of his extraordinary silence. Mr. Rater said very little, but was believed, with excellent reason, to think a great deal.

He was a tall, broad-shouldered man, with a large, expressionless face. And when you spoke to him you had the impression all the time that you were being disbelieved. You left him with the idea that here was a man who had a vocabulary of about ten words. Many a criminal had been marched into the Orator’s presence with an alibi so complete that it seemed ridiculous to detain him, but under the deadening influence of his taciturnity had grown desperate and truthful.

“He has one vice,” the Assistant Commissioner used to say: “he is a very heavy thinker.”

The Orator was indulging in this pet weakness of his one afternoon in February, as he stood in the corner of a large room, which seemed to be entirely filled with wedding presents, and watched a very fashionable gathering, most of whom were looking for the silver clock they gave to the bride and comparing it unfavourably with the silver clocks that other people had given.

You do not as a rule invite a chief inspector to watch wedding presents, but the Orator had volunteered for the job, and was himself a guest, for the bride’s dead father had been a great personal friend of his, as Angela Marken remembered when she was making out a list of invitees.

“My dear,” said her mother sharply, “you can’t ask a policeman. Don’t be ridiculous.”

Angela sighed and leaned back in her chair, biting at the end of her pen thoughtfully.

“I don’t know why we shouldn’t,” she said, a little wearily. “He will be one of the few respectable people present.” She hesitated a little, and then: “Can’t I invite Donald Grey?” she asked.

Mrs. Marken’s aristocratic nose wrinkled.

“Certainly not! Be decent, Angela! Donald’s a very nice boy and I like him tremendously—but—you can’t afford to grow sentimental over a young man with three hundred pounds a year.”

“I suppose not,” said the girl quietly, and addressed an envelope to Chief Inspector Rater. “Perhaps he will look after the jewellery for us; that would be rather nice—and save us a couple of guineas,” said Angela, a little bitterly.

Why she should be bitter at all, very few of her guests would understand. Lord Eustace Lightley was rich, the prospective heir to a dukedom, good looking, something of a poet— in every way a most satisfactory match for the daughter of an impecunious field-marshal with a passion for the theory of strategy.

Angela was slim and pretty in a pale way, immensely self-possessed. The Orator saw her come in her bridal costume and slightly approved of her. He approved of so very few people that this attitude of his might be accounted as enthusiasm. Later he saw the bridegroom, and did not approve of him at all. A lanky, thin-faced, rather narrow-headed man, with the complexion of a girl in spite of his

thirty-five years, Lord Eustace Lightley was not the type that appealed to the Orator. He mused, in his fantastic way, that if he had been commissioned by the Almighty to fashion man, Lord Eustace Lightley would not have occurred to him.

His lordship was irritable to a point of rudeness, and their first and last encounter did not leave the Orator any too happy.

“Are you the detective fellow?” he asked.

The Orator nodded, which was quite a long speech for him.

“Then what the devil are you standing over there in the corner for? You can see nothing, my dear good chap. Why not go up into the gallery?” He pointed to a little minstrel gallery overlooking the room.

The Orator scratched his nose.

“You’re absolutely useless here,” his lordship went on, with growing wrath. “You might as well be in Grosvenor Square.”

“That’s where I’m going,” said the Orator, and left his enraged host without another word.

That was the first and last time he saw Lord Eustace Lightley, but he learnt quite a lot about him in the ten minutes he stood on the sidewalk before the house, for there came to him a young and respectable man, carrying in his hand a small, neatly wrapped brown paper parcel, who consulted with the Orator the best method of reaching his lordship. Evidently he knew Mr. Rater by sight, which was not remarkable, for the Orator’s picture had a frequent appearance in the popular press.

“Isn’t it queer, Mr. Rater, what romances there are in real life?—things you wouldn’t believe were possible. We’ve been chemists to his lordship’s family for the past hundred years —he gets everything from us, toothpaste, soap, everything. Even when he was in Syria, years and years ago —he had a lung or something, but he’s cured now—we used to send him every week....”

Mr. Rater listened and was really interested in all that the chemist’s young man had to tell him.

A year and a few months later Mr. Rater was spending his annual holiday at Ostend. He was a bachelor, and therefore could afford expensive holidays, and he chose Ostend because it was pretty certain that he would meet there quite a number of staggered men who imagined him to be a hundred or so miles away. He did not read the newspapers, and it was a little conversation heard by chance at the Hippodrome between races that brought him back to search the files of the newspaper.

“We regret to announce the death of Lord Eustace Lightley. His lordship has been ill for some months, and died suddenly at his residence in Hart Street, Mayfair, last night.”

“Dear me!” said Mr. Rater.

Had he followed his own inclination, he would have sent a wire of congratulation to the widow. Instead he was reminded of the conversation he had had with the chemist’s young man, and wrote it down in his diary for future reference; and there the matter went out of his mind, for he was occupied during the next three days with interminable conferences with the Ostend police. There had been a number of robberies at the big hotels; jewels to a great

value had been abstracted whilst their owners were at dinner or in the Casino; and the Orator woke up to take an active interest in such of his fellow-countrymen as were sojourning in Ostend.

There were five, so far as he could trace; but the man for whom he was looking was not there. The robberies were typical Osawold jobs, and he was a little disappointed to learn, as he did by telephone, that William was in London, and had been in London, practically under police observation, for the past month.

“In fact,” said the voice at the telephone, “he was nearly pinched on the day you say the robberies were committed... a uniformed man saw him coming out of a house in the West End and recognised him. But it seems he was called in from the street by a lady whose husband was taken ill. The telephone had gone wrong and she was sending him for a doctor.”

“Bad luck!” was the Orator’s comment.

The very next day the real thief was caught, an American citizen named Lavinsky, and there was the end of that mystery.

The Orator came back to town, a giant refreshed, so full of good spirits that he agreed with a fellow passenger who remarked that it was a fine day.

London offered him very full occupation for his talents. For three months he followed remorselessly on the trail of Honoré de Youre, the Bath murderer, and he had returned one early morning from a grisly little ceremony at Wandsworth Prison (the Orator always saw the hangings for

which he was responsible) and was walking through Hyde Park when a harsh voice hailed him a little derisively.

“Hullo, inspector, come and have a spiel!”

He turned his head slowly and gazed upon an astonishing sight. In a large and beautiful limousine, supplied, he guessed, by a hiring company, was a resplendently dressed man. The white derby hat was an offence; the diamond ring that glittered on his finger an outrage.

“Step inside, inspector,” said Bill Osawold brightly.

Evidently he did not expect the invitation to be accepted, for there was a momentary look of alarm in his small eyes when the Orator opened the door of the carriage gravely and, stepping in, sat opposite to one whom he had on three separate occasions sent to penal servitude.

“Business looking up, Bill?” he asked.

The man coughed and moved uneasily in his cushioned seat, under the scrutiny of the detective.

“Never seen anybody looking so lovely, Bill,” murmured the Orator.

And indeed Mr. Osawold’s raiment was particularly fine. The shepherd’s plaid suit, the glossy silk shirt with violet stripes (collar to match), the diamond stick-pin, the patent shoes and livid silk socks, were very impressive.

“I’m going straight now, inspector,” said Bill huskily. “An aunt died and left me a lot of money. You must come round and see me in my apartment.”

The Orator’s eyes were passing over him with the thoroughness of a vacuum cleaner.

“Aunt, eh? I’ll bet she’s looking down from heaven, pleased with herself! Australian aunt, Bill?”

“American,” said Bill, and his shapeless features twisted into what was intended to be an ingratiating smile. “Any time you want a drink, inspector, just pop in to 107 Bloomsbury Mansions.”

“I do all my popping at soda fountains, Bill,” said the Orator gently.

The admiration in his face was unaffected.

“And to think that the last time we met was when I pinched you red-handed on the roof of Albemarle Mansions and got you five for carrying a gun!”

The other wriggled in his embarrassment.

“That’s all done with now, inspector,” he said. “Since my uncle died——”

“You told me about her,” murmured the Orator.

“Aunt, I mean—I’ve been going straight. I’ve kept away from low company.”

Mr. Rater scrutinised his companion as an accountant might scrutinise a faked balance sheet. He found him wanting in several particulars. Not all Mr William Osawold’s offences had been associated with burglary. There was a raw streak in him that was so near to primitive savagery that in certain moments it was not distinguishable. The Orator remembered one particularly atrocious crime that had been responsible for Bill’s absence from his usual haunts for four years and three months. This episode he called to the mind of the plutocratic Mr. Osawold.

“I must have been mad to do a thing like that,” said the other, shaking his head. “Anyway, the girl told a lot of lies about me, and you didn’t do me any good, inspector.”

“I seldom do,” agreed Mr. Rater.

By this time the car had reached the Marble Arch entrance to the park, and Osawold tapped on the window.

“I’ll be dropping you here, inspector. I’ve got an engagement with a friend of mine,” he said, and was relieved when his enemy was out of his sight.

He certainly had an engagement; a very pretty shopgirl who had misguidedly accepted his invitation to a *tête-à-tête* lunch at his flat was waiting for him when he arrived home.

Mr. Rater was neither perturbed nor puzzled by the sudden accession to wealth of a well-known and highly disrespected criminal. The phenomenon was by no means uncommon. Did not Harry Gay, the confidence man, take a whole floor of the Splendide Hotel on the proceeds of a wonder-coup, and didn’t Clew Remmi celebrate a scientific burglary by driving down Oxford Street drinking beer on the roof of the most expensive limousine in London?

At five o’clock that afternoon a divisional call came through to headquarters and was plugged into Mr. Rater’s room. It was all about Bill Osawold—or as much about him as a hysterical, half-crazy shopgirl could tell between spasms of hysteria.

“Oh, yes,” said the Orator softly.

It was, and yet it was not, a coincidence that, coming out of Scotland Yard into Whitehall, almost the first person Mr. Rater should see was Bill Osawold. It was not a coincidence because the direct route between Bloomsbury and Waterloo Station passes along Whitehall and across Westminster Bridge, and Bill was on his way to the railway terminus and was making a permanent flit, if the trunk and the two bags on the top of his taxi meant anything. He flashed past the

inspector—into a traffic block opposite the Houses of Parliament.

Before the phlegmatic constable signalled the traffic to move, the Orator was standing by the open door of the cab.

“Step out,” he said, “and step lively.”

Bill obeyed; his face was white and puckered with rage. With a gesture the Orator had summoned a uniformed policeman.

“Fan him,” he said briefly. “He’s got a gat.”

The burly policeman “fanned” the prisoner scientifically. Five minutes later Bill was standing before the sergeant’s desk at Cannon Row station, describing himself flatteringly.

“It’s a trumped up charge,” he vociferated. “What this girl says about me is lies. She came of her own free will; she’s been chasing me for weeks——”

“No girl has been mentioned—yet,” said the Orator.

Bill’s ugly face contorted in a sneer.

“You think you’ve got me, don’t you? But I’ll tell you something, Rater—there’s money behind me. I could have your coat off your back if I wanted to.”

“Put him in a nice hard cell,” said the Orator gently. “If he gives you any trouble, give him a punch on the nose.”

Bill’s belongings lay on the sergeant’s desk : they included some £1,750 in banknotes, a small automatic pistol fully loaded, several diamond rings, and the brilliant stick-pin before mentioned. Mr. Rater regarded these thoughtfully, had the numbers of the banknotes taken and sent three men making enquiries.

In the intervening days between the appearance of Bill Osawold before a magistrate and his arrival at the Central

Criminal Court, the Orator learnt many things, but he could not connect William with any act of robbery or larceny which could justify a further charge. What he did learn—and this was before the man's appearance at the Old Bailey—was that the prisoner was to be well and truly defended. Not only was he represented at the police court by one of the greatest solicitors in London, but when the case was called, there rose from the counsel's table an eminent leader at the Bar, and with him were two of the best known common law juniors. And in consequence this trial, which should have lasted a few hours, dragged itself out to three days. There were all manner of witnesses called to tear to pieces the character of the chief witness, and it was not a particularly difficult job.

But, fortunately for justice, the prosecuting counsel was a man of great genius, and slowly but surely the net was woven about the man in the dock. It was on the second day that the Orator saw in the front seat of the public gallery a lady whose face seemed familiar. And then with a start he recognised Lady Angela Lightley. She was following the case with extraordinary intensity, and yet it was not morbid curiosity that had brought her. He saw her wince, not once but many times, at the recital of some unpleasant detail. The end of the trial came : the jury, without leaving the box, returned a verdict of guilty. The thin-faced old judge fixed his pince-nez, glanced for a moment at the prisoner and then at the jury.

“Is anything known against this man?” he asked, in his hard, dry voice.

The Orator stepped up into the box, raised his hand as the oath was administered, and spoke briefly.

“... a thief and an associate of thieves. He was convicted of a similar offence in 1921. He has a very bad reputation and is one of the most dangerous criminals known to Scotland Yard.”

Bill Osawold leapt to his feet, livid with fury.

“I’ll get you, Rater... you...!”

The judge dipped his pen in the ink and wrote leisurely upon the paper before him.

“You will be kept in penal servitude for twelve years,” he said.

It took four warders to remove the demented man from the dock.

Rater waited outside in the marble waiting hall near the entrance of the public galleries, and presently he saw the girl and stepped directly in her path. This time she could not avoid him. He saw her face go white and pink, and white again.

“Oh, Mr. Rater, whatever will you think of me?... I’m writing a book on crime. It was a horrible case, wasn’t it?”

Her embarrassment was almost pitiable. She was trembling in every limb from the shock of this meeting.

“You saw me before? I didn’t think you would recognise me.”

“Writing a book, are you, my lady?” said the Orator quietly, and then remembered to offer his condolences.

“Oh, yes,” she said hurriedly; “it wasn’t a very happy marriage, you know. He was rather—difficult. I am being

married again in three months' time to Mr. Donald Grey. He's at the Foreign Office."

She looked round as though she were seeking some way of escape. He fell in by her side and walked down the stairs with her.

"I suppose you've never seen that fellow before?" he asked, and she stopped, her face bloodless.

"That man Osawold? No, of course not."

"Pretty bad man," mused the Orator, speaking half to himself. "Got quite a lot of money, too, when we arrested him. I have been wondering how he came by it."

"I'm afraid I can't help you."

She was breathless, spoke with difficulty. He might have been hopelessly wrong, but he could have sworn that she was on the verge of collapse.

"Somebody's been paying for his defence. There's been no demand for his money, so I suppose he's got influential friends," he said. "May I come along and see you, Lady Angela?"

She hesitated.

"Yes," she said at last, and gave him her address. It was an exclusive West End hotel.

She was calmer when they reached the street, and succeeded in getting back to something near normal.

"I suppose you are so used to such cases as these that they do not distress you?" she said. "It has reduced me to a rag! One didn't realise there was such nastiness in the world. Will he appeal?"

It seemed to Mr. Rater that it required an extraordinary effort for her to ask this question.

“Appeal? This fellow Osawold? I suppose so. He seems to have all the money in the world.”

“Do you think he will succeed... that there was any question of misdirection? Somebody was saying that the judge had made comments which were prejudicial to the prisoner.”

Rater, watching her closely, shook his head.

“He hasn’t got a ghost of a chance.”

“Oh!”

That was all she said, but there was something so desperate, so despairing in that word that even he was shocked, and it took quite a great deal to shock the Orator.

“I wish you would tell me something, Lady Angela.”

“What?” she asked quickly.

“What’s on your mind? I might be able to help you. Your father was a great friend of mine, you remember, and I’d go a long way to be of service to his daughter.”

She forced a smile.

“I’m afraid you can’t help me, unless you can write my book!”

He saw her beckon her waiting car, and stood on the edge of the sidewalk long after she had disappeared.

Duty took him to Pentonville Prison to interview the man on a matter connected with one of the diamond rings which had proved to be stolen property. That Osawold was the thief he never for one moment imagined, and Osawold’s story of how he came to acquire this trinket was convincing.

“I got it from Louis Rapover. I bought it for forty-three pounds. If it was pinched, I know nothing about it. You can’t get that on me, Rater.”

“Appealing, aren’t you, Bill?”

The man nodded.

“And I’m going to get out, don’t worry,” he said. “I’ve got friends who have got to get me out, or they’ll know all about it. Twelve years... that old swine! Say a good word for me when I come up, Rater, and I’ll drop you a monkey.”

“I never keep monkeys, Bill,” said Mr. Rater, who was in no sense offended by this offered bribe. “Only cocker spaniels, and you can’t drop me one of those because I breed ’em.”

The appeal was heard at the Royal Courts of Justice in the Strand. Bill Osawold was brought to the Court two hours before it sat. He came in a taxicab, accompanied by the usual guard of warders, and was put into a small, cell-like room beneath the Courts. At ten o’clock his breakfast was brought up on a tray from the refreshment-room below.

A policeman accompanied the girl, but his idea of accompanying was to go down the narrow stairs ahead, and he had passed out of sight before the waitress had reached the landing.

“Excuse me.”

The waitress turned her head. A lady was standing behind her. She was dressed in black, the rather elaborate mourning of a Frenchwoman, and a heavy black veil drooped over the brim of the hat.

“Are you taking Mr. Osawolds breakfast?” she asked in broken English.

“Yes, ma’am,” said the girl.

“Is that man with you?” The stranger pointed down the stairs, and the girl turned her head. There was nobody in

sight.

“Which man, ma’am?”

“I thought I saw a policeman,” said the woman in black.

That was all the conversation. The Frenchwoman turned and almost collided with Rater, an interested spectator. She brushed past him with a muttered apology, keeping her head down, and moved so quickly that it almost seemed as though she expected to be followed.

Mr. Rater looked after her and then went quickly in pursuit of the waitress. He stopped her outside the guarded door of the detention room. He took the cup of steaming coffee from her hand, gazed at it meditatively, and then, to her amazement and wrath, let the cup drop. It smashed to fragments on the stone floor.

“Sorry—I’m a bit awkward this morning,” said the Orator. “I’ll see about clearing this up, young lady. You dash back and get another cup. Tell them Chief Inspector Rater will pay for the breakage.”

He waited with the custodian of the door till the girl returned. She was not allowed to enter the room; one of the warders took the remainder of the prisoner’s breakfast in to him, and Mr. Rater walked slowly up the stairs into the central hall. He was present in court when three judges dismissed the appeal, and sent William Osawold to Dartmoor for what was tantamount to a life sentence.

It was four o’clock in the afternoon when the telephone bell in Lady Angela’s sitting room tinkled. Grave-faced, she had been sitting waiting for that message; at her feet were a dozen editions of the evening newspapers.

“Tell him to come up,” she said, in a voice so low that her message had to be repeated.

For once in his life the Orator was really talkative. He talked about the weather, the noise of traffic in the street, the high cost of hotel living, and then:

“Your friend’s appeal failed, Lady Angela.”

“Why do you call him my friend?” she asked, not meeting his eyes.

“We could hardly call him that, could we?” said the Orator, smiling comfortably. “He’s not *my* friend, at any rate. In fact, I suspected him of a number of jewel thefts in Ostend.... Funny thing, I called up London, and they told me he had been seen coming out of your house the very morning your husband died.”

She made no reply.

“The trouble with me,” the Orator went on, “is that I’m a theorist. I’m always making up stories of what happens behind closed doors. And I’ve been trying to get a story that would fit your interest in Bill Osawold, and I think I’ve found it. Some things “—Mr. Rater shook his head sadly—” one can never get definitely. For instance, what was the stuff that mad Frenchwoman put in Osawold’s coffee this morning? I saw her empty her little bottle when the waitress’s head was turned. She might not have been French at all; she was certainly crazy-mad. That’s not the way to stop a man talking. If you knew as much about criminals as I do, Lady Angela, you’d know that their bark doesn’t amount to a row of pins. Bill Osawold’s not going to get anything out of betraying the lady who helped him, and he’s not going to live any too long, if what the prison doctor told me is true. If