Brayton's Secret

BY

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Lawrence Brayton lay back in his chair luxuriously. This was the kind of thing that appealed to him—he liked the silken luxury of it all, the flowers, the shaded lights, the statues, the suggestion of aloofness all around him. There was no vulgar chatter or merry laughter in the dining-room of the Wellesley, no startling display of the "human form divine" as interpreted by the last audacities from Paris—they did not encourage powdered shoulders at the Wellesley. It was all in the very best of taste, quite subdued, with lights shaded and just an occasional flash from a tiara or a coronet, in the purple, flower-laden lamplight. The coffee was excellent, the cigarette a dream, the liqueur a poem. Brayton was quite glad to be alone in the quiet enjoyment of the picture.

"I ought to have been born a rich man," he muttered as he glanced across the tangle of purple orchids on the table. "Every poet should have money. I wonder if I am a poet really. Anyway, I am blest, or cursed, with the artistic temperament. All the same, I've got to work in the city for my living. A commission agent! If I could only have foreseen it in the old Eton days! Lord! to have money, and cut the City. To be able to say to Gertrude Mallison—Lawrence, my boy, you are a greater fool than I took you for. Still, I suppose I have something to be thankful for. I can put my hands on a thousand pounds, and I've had a good dinner at Harrison Syme's expense without having to put up with the company of that brilliant bounder himself."

As a matter of fact, Harrison Syme had been called away before the soup was finished. Somebody wanted to speak to him on the telephone. He had gone off in his insolent, swaggering way; he had come back looking white and uneasy, quite unlike the financier who was supposed to have made over a million of money in the past four years.

"Beastly nuisance, but I've got to go, Brayton," he muttered. "Most important matter. I'll do my best to get back in an hour. You get on with your dinner; I've ordered it, and I shall have to pay for the same in any case. If I don't get back I'll ask you to call on me to-morrow. You may have made something of the cipher by that time."

Brayton expressed himself quite correctly and conventionally. As a matter of fact, he was not disposed to quarrel with the turn of events.

"Let it go at that," he said. "It looks to me like a variation of the Four-Ace Code. It's the code I've been using for years."

Brayton smiled to himself. He was fond of mysteries and puzzles, and on more than one occasion had been of considerable assistance to Scotland Yard. But then, at the Yard, they knew what Syme was not aware of—that the Four-Ace Code was Brayton's own invention. He had sold it some years ago for a trifle, not realising its value, and now the code was one of the most popular amongst business men. The key-card could be changed at pleasure. If the diamond ace was the key letter, then anybody familiar with the clue could decipher. But say a man distrusted his confidential clerk and elected to take hearts instead, the clerk in question was reduced to impotence. All the most precious secrets entrusted to the cable came by the Four-Ace Code.

Syme gulped down a large glass of brandy, and departed. Quite content to be alone, Brayton sat there puffing another cigarette. On one side of him was an ambassador, at the table on his left a personage was dining. It was all very pleasant and very soothing to a well-bred, ambitious young City man possessed of the artistic temperament. He longed to have the money to do this kind of thing regularly. And perhaps Gertrude——

Well, why should he not think of her? He knew that she liked him, and she generally chose him as her partner at tennis and in the mixed foursomes at Ranelagh; she had told him once that his step suited her to perfection. But then she was so beastly rich and he was so beastly poor! She wasn't an ordinary type of girl either—she had something besides money and beauty. One night, up the river—yes, he had seen the glint in her eyes, the faint, unsteady smile. He had been very near speaking that night. To have her for his wife, to order out the motor and drop in here to a little dinner, they two together. And to sit opposite that exquisite face and watch the smile in those glorious eyes

"I am the biggest fool in England," Brayton told himself. "Well, what is it?"

A telegraph-boy stood by his side, a pert little messenger absolutely at home there.

"Mr. Syme, sir?" he suggested. "Thank you, sir; good night, sir."

The orange envelope was dropped carelessly on the table, and the boy had vanished. Evidently a telegram of importance, and one that Syme had expected, for the sender of the message had known exactly where to find Syme and where he could get him without delay. Very strange. It did not seem quite so strange when Brayton recalled the fact that Syme dined at the Wellesley most nights. Possibly Syme did not want the cable to go to his office.

"Wonder if I'd better open it," Brayton said. "It may be very important. His own man has orders to open any telegram, I know. If it is important he'll pitch into me afterwards for not taking steps to get in touch with him. I think I will."

The envelope was barely fastened down. There were only two words in it, and they were in cipher. In an idle way Brayton spelt them over. What did jigshawspi lemonnutznoseben mean? Brayton stuck the envelope down again and called one of the waiters.

"Here's a shilling for you," he said. "Try and get Mr. Syme on the 'phone. Try his clubs. When you get him, tell him to hold the wire as I want to speak to him."

The waiter departed on his errand. Brayton could see the queer jumble of words no longer, but he could have repeated them by heart all the same. He had the sort of memory necessary to the solution of cipher. And, in fact, two or three letters in the jumble were oddly familiar. He wondered where he had seen them before. Suddenly the answer flashed upon him.

"By Jove, he muttered, "it's the Four-Ace Code. And the cipher ace is clubs. I don't want to pry into any man's secrets, but I'd like to see if I could work it out."

He took a pencil from his pocket and jotted the sequence of letters down with absolute correctness on the back of the menu card. Then he proceeded to place the consonants in two parallel lines. Now that he had got the start, the rest was child's play. He wrote the answer to the sum in his neat handwriting, so that the words stood out like little letters of flame.

"Agricola main reef forty ounces. Blind. Eighty years. Over a thousand."

To the lay mind even now it looked cryptic to a degree. But not to a man who had spent five of the best years of his life in the City.

"So Agricola is a really big thing," Brayton muttered.

"The Agricola mine that everybody says is a swindle turns out to be a big thing in a main reef, showing forty ounces of gold to the ton.

"Nobody knew but the man who sent this cable, and he has seen that the rest are absolutely 'Blind.' The life of the mine is eighty years, and the dividend should pan out at over a thousand per cent. Well, Syme is a greater rascal than I took him for. It was only to-day that I read that Agricola was going in for liquidation. Shares a drug in the market at two for three-halfpence. By Jove, if I can get into the market before Syme I shall be— I've got a thousand pounds to play with. And shares to be had for nothing. Oh, Gertrude, Gertrude——"

Brayton stretched out a shaky hand in the direction of the cablegram.

"No, I won't," he said between his teeth. "I'll not suppress it. I'll play the game. Syme shall have his cable if I can possibly find him, but there is no occasion to tell him what I have discovered. He couldn't know that any form of the Four-Ace Code is like an open book to me. He'll probably go quietly to work some time to-morrow, but he'll be too late. By lunch time Agricola will be all mine."

Brayton helped himself to another liqueur and lighted a cigarette with a perfectly steady hand. The whole thing was deliciously simple. He had only to divide his thousand pounds between two brokers, and give them instructions to buy Agricolas so long as the money lasted. They could be had for practically nothing. By this time to-morrow Brayton would be rich. People would no doubt say a good many hard things about him, but it was all in the way of business. Let them do it. And Gertrude——

The waiter was some time away. He came back presently with the information that he had got Mr. Syme on the 'phone at his club. Mr. Syme regretted that he was unable to return to the Wellesley that night, as he was detained on business of the utmost importance, and that he had just gone home.

"You told him about the cable message?" Brayton asked.

"He never gave me a chance, sir," the waiter exclaimed. "He was in a desperate hurry. He cut me off and hung up the receiver. I did all I could, sir."

"I daresay it will be all right," Brayton responded. "I'll take the message myself on my way home. If a man is so foolish as to—— That will do, waiter, thank you."

The waiter vanished, and Brayton leisurely donned his hat and coat. Things were going to be very different with him from this night on. By this time to-morrow ——. He walked as far as his club, the one extravagance he indulged in, feeling on the best of terms with the world. It is not every night that a man strolls down Pall Mall with a secret in the back of his mind worth two hundred thousand pounds. And this was quite a moderate estimate, Brayton thought.

It was not very late as yet and the club was full. Brayton dropped into his accustomed seat in the smoking-room and blandly inquired if there was any news. Three or four men were discussing something eagerly by the fireplace. It seemed to Brayton that he caught Syme's name.

"What's that you are saying, Doctor?" he asked. "What about Syme?"

"Dead," Doctor Gladstone said crisply. "I've just come from Syme's room. I'm his man, you know. They fetched me from here by motor half-an-hour ago. Dead before I got there."

A little odd feeling played up and down Brayton's spinal column.

"A sudden trouble with the heart?" he gasped.

"Suicide," Gladstone went on with pseudo-cynical indifference. "Shot himself through the head with a revolver. Walked in quite coolly and took off his hat. Called for a drink and took every drop of it. Then he handed the glass back to his man, took a revolver from his hip-pocket, and shot himself. Mad! Not a bit of it—man was as sane as you or I. Another financial bubble pricked. They say the Agricola smash finished him off."

Brayton called for a drink himself; he felt that he needed it. The cablegram had come too late; perhaps things had gone too far for even the news from South America to save him. And Brayton was the one man in the world, with the exception of the sender of the message, who knew that Agricola was the best thing on the market at the present time.

"It's a bad smash," another man said. "I met poor old Stannard this afternoon nearly out of his mind. He's been advising his clients to put money into Agricola. He began to tell me what one client of his, a girl——"

"Is that Stannard, of Lincoln's Inn, the lawyer?" Brayton asked. "Mr. Mallison used to be his partner. If it's the same man."

"Oh, it's the same man," the other said. "What, are you going already, Brayton?"

Brayton muttered something to the effect that he had work to do. He wanted to be alone to think this matter over. The floating kaleidoscope of events bewildered him. An hour or two ago and he had sat humbly in the Wellesley envying Syme his money and position, and now Syme was dead, and Lazarus had a fortune in his pocket. Not a soul in the world knew except the sender of the cablegram. There would be a great deal of poverty and distress, for the Agricola had been a strong tip with the public, who, a little while back, had rushed for everything that Syme fathered. Scores of these people would be ruined, but Brayton did not allow his mind to dwell on that point. People of that class always lost their money—if one fraudulent scheme didn't have it another would. Why couldn't they be content with a safe interest?

"Oh, yes, a lot of people would suffer. But people like old Stannard! It seemed incredible that he should have been caught. And that he should invest clients' money. Gertrude Mallison was a client of his; in fact, he was her trustee. Suppose he had lost all Gertrude's money. Suppose she had to turn out and get her own living. And suppose Brayton was rich, as he would be soon. Gertrude, Gertrude, those eyes of yours have made a fool of me," he murmured. "Your father was not the man to give his trustee much latitude in the way of investments. Still —"

The papers were full of it next day. It was a tremendous smash. Scotland Yard had been after Syme; they had been looking for him the evening before with a warrant. He had played a desperate game at the finish, but fortune was against him. It was one of the inspectors of the Yard who told Brayton all this. Syme could not afford to wait for that cablegram from South America. Doubtless, he had lingered on till the last possible minute. The authorities had taken possession of Syme's papers, and already a hopeless state of affairs had been divulged. Everything had been disposed of—Syme did not appear to have a share worth keeping left. There was no occasion to hold on to the Agricola, seeing that in the ordinary course of events, they could have been bought back for two for three-halfpence. Special meetings of the various shareholders would be called at once, but the chance of saving anything out of the wreck was very remote.

Brayton stood impassively. The game was absolutely in his own hands. There was no occasion for any hurry. He took his way leisurely into the City and commenced operations. He was a buyer for cash. His broker was frank to the verge of rudeness.

"My dear fellow, you will lose every penny," he said. "What on earth——"

"Never mind that," Brayton said. "What can you buy the shares for?"

Well, certainly for sixpence each. Perhaps less."

"Then buy all you can for cash and the account. I'll give you a cheque for £1,000 now. That should secure 40,000 of the ordinaries. Oh, I'm not saying there is anything in Agricolas, but Agricolas may counteract another thing that I shall get 5 per cent. out of. It's a pure spec. on my part, but I've had a bit of luck lately, and I'm backing it."

"Come into a fortune?" the broker asked.

"No, I haven't," Brayton said crisply. "Buy all that you can get for the amount. Good-bye."

He strolled off quietly, and patiently awaited his game. He had parted with all his available capital, and in return he possessed forty thousand Agricola ordinary shares, with a possibility of as many more. Within ten days he would have to find a further thousand pounds or carry over. But the carrying-over would be easy enough, as Brayton very well knew. Within ten days those shares would be standing at a premium of at least five pounds, and he was pretty certain to make half a million of money. A couple of days drifted by, and Brayton was satisfied. There were no more Agricolas to be had. On Thursday morning they were asked for, on Thursday, at closing time, as much as eight shillings were bid. By midday on Friday the stock stood at par, and then the secret leaked out. Whence it came nobody seemed to know or care. Syme's co-directors, harassed out of their lives, cabled to the mine asking pertinent questions of their engineer. His little conspiracy had failed; Syme's tragic death had pricked the bubble, and it behoved the engineer to save his face. He was shocked to find that Syme had suppressed his code message, or perhaps Syme had not received it. At any rate, he begged to repeat his cable, and did so. The directors sighed with relief. At any rate, their holdings were intact; the Agricola was a good thing, and they prepared without delay to call the shareholders together and tell them so. The City rang with the story.

On the day of the extraordinary general meeting Agricolas stood at £4 10s. Brayton turned into the Cannon Street Hotel with the easy mind and placid assurance of one who feels himself in the possession of half a million of money. There were shareholders there who were not shareholders at all. They had parted with their holdings, and they came sadly curious to know how the swindle had been worked. Syme was dead and done with, but assuredly he had had confederates who had engineered the swindle, and who was going to benefit by it. Possibly the chairman of directors would be able to tell them something.

Brayton glanced curiously around him. He began to wish that he had stayed away. Some of those faces were by no means pleasant to look at. There was an old clergyman with frayed coat and a collar evidently trimmed at the edges, a half-blind working-man led by a little girl. And there was a tall lady in deep black with two children by her side. And there was Mr. Stannard with a white, anxious face and a twitching of the lips that told its own tale. And last, there was Gertrude Mallison, grey-lipped and forlorn, with an expression in her eyes that brought Brayton to her side.

"I—I did not expect to see you here," he stammered. "I sincerely hope——"

"Oh, we are all in the same boat," Gertrude smiled wistfully. "Only, don't say anything to Mr. Stannard. He is heart-broken about it. Oh, yes, all my money. He says that he must have been mad. You see, my father gave him absolute discretion. And he meant to make me very rich—he——"

What was going on? Oh, yes, the chairman was speaking. But the chairman had very little to say. He and his colleagues had not sold for various reasons. They had lost nothing. But they were quite prepared to pool their shares for the benefit of the company generally. At the huge premium at which the shares stood to-day, something substantial would be done to mitigate the distress. There had been some dirty, underhand work, and certain people had benefited. Those people were strangers, and the chairman understood that one of them was in the room at the moment. Perhaps he would like to say a few words. If not, then there was very little to be said. Perhaps the Board of Trade——

"You are alluding to me," Brayton said. "To be quite frank, I hold four-fifths of the shares. I bought them for very little on exclusive information. You engineer betrayed you, and the exclusive information dispatched for Syme's benefit came unexpectedly into my hands. Why I kept the information to myself I need not say. I could not give it to Mr. Syme, because he had gone to his account elsewhere. Neither am I going to explain why I bought those shares. If I had not done so sooner or later, there would have been a rush on the part of the shrewd City speculator, and instead of one man to contend with you would have had a hundred. As a matter of sheer business my position is unassailable. You cannot touch me. But there is another way in which you can touch me and you have. I am touched by the appearance of certain people here. Their silence is more eloquent than words. If I like to leave the room with my hands in my pockets I can do so, and no process, legal or otherwise, can stop me. But I am not going to do it. And I am not going to have my motive questioned either. Call it a tardy repentance on my part, call it what you like, say that I did this to save you from the City sharks, say I did it because a lady shareholder is a great friend of mine and I wanted above all things to stand well in her eyes. But I'm going to give all those shares back to the people who sold them to me, and the price is exactly what I gave for them. And—and that's all."

The greatest fool in the City of London walked out into Cannon Street feeling at peace with all the world. A hand was laid on his shoulder. He turned round to meet Gertrude's eyes.

"My cab is here," she said. "Please get in. I am going to take you as far as my flat. Did you suppose that I was going to let you run off in that fashion? Oh, I know something about business. My father was a business man, remember. We shall be quite alone there. Please get in."

Brayton obeyed mechanically enough. Right away to Kensington Gertrude kept her face averted from him. She said no word till the flat was reached. The tears were in her eyes still.

"Sit down in that chair," she commanded "And tell me everything. Everything, mind!"

Brayton told the story. He omitted nothing. It seemed strange that he should be baring his soul to this girl in so free a fashion. He spoke of his hopes and fears, of the artistic temperament, of his loathing for the City.

"And there it was, thrown at me, Miss Mallison," he said. "Especially——"

"Gertrude," the girl said. "Call me Gertrude, please."

"Well, Gertrude, darling. I could be rich. Why should I consider other people? I—I could ask the girl I love to marry me without any chance of being called a fortune-hunter."

"I—is the girl rich?" Gertrude whispered. "I mean was she rich this morning?"

"Well, she wasn't," Brayton said. "But she is now, and I am poor, and there is an end of the matter. But, thank God, she knows my story now, and if she thinks none the worse of me——"

"Worse of you, Lawrence! Worse of you! Oh, the boy is clearly mad. Why, you acted splendidly. You acted as few people would have done. You gave everything back to those poor people, you were going to give up the girl you loved so that—— What nonsense, what delicious, romantic nonsense! And what does it matter who has the money so long as it belongs to one of the two?"

"I—I don't know what you mean," Brayton stammered.

"Yes, you do, Lawrence. Look at me. Come here. Now put your arms round me like that—and kiss me. And I'll put my arms round you—like this—and I'll kiss you. Oh, my dearest boy, have not you seen for a long time that there was nobody but you? I thought that I should have to ask you. But now that you have given me back my fortune I must offer you something in return. Well, I do, dear! Let me hide my face on your breast and so save my blushes——"

"I don't believe you're blushing a bit, Gertrude."

"Well, then, I'm not. I'm not a bit ashamed of myself. Lawrence, what can I do for you?"

He bent down and kissed her long and passionately.

"Take me to the Wellesley to dinner to-night," he said. "With you opposite me with that love-light in your glorious eyes, even the artistic temperament would have no more to ask for."

THE HOUSING PROBLEM.

MINISTER'S ANNOUNCEMENT.

Addressing his Glasgow constituents on the housing problem, Mr. Wheatley (Minister of Health) said though unable as yet to announce the Government policy on the matter, the difficulties in the way of solution did not seem to him insurmountable. The problem was how to bring idle men into touch wih building materials in the face of an army of people exploiting national necessities. It might be possible to apply the principles of the Trades Facilities Act to the working classes, thus enabling them to produce the necessaries of life. Previous Governments had failed in the task because they had applied wrong principles. They must think of houses in millions.

SERVICE PENSIONERS' CASES.

Mr. F. O. Roberts (the new Pensions Minister) had a message for service pensioners when he addressed the Pavilion Racecourse Brotherhood at Northampton. "I must not," he said, "for more than one reason, attempt to outline what is likely to be the policy of the Government. I can only assure you that so far as is humanly possible, and so far as I can personally devote myself to framing regulations to meet such difficult cases, the fullest and most sympathetic action will be taken. When further consideration has been given to the matter, there will be definite pronouncements made and proposals put forward by the Government to meet some of the cases which are undoubtedly deserving of a little more generous treatment than hitherto they have had."

DEATH OF SIR F. HOLLINS.

Sir Frank Hollins, Bart., one of the foremost figures in the cotton trade, who was chairman of Horrockses, Crewdson, and Co., Ltd., the famous cotton spinners and manufacturers, has died at Bridgnorth. He was in his eighty-first year.

The business of Horrockses, Crewdson, and Co., which was formed by the amalgamation of three firms in 1887, was sold in 1919 to the Amalgamated Cotton Mills Trust. The paid-up capital of the company was £1,200,000, and the purchase price paid by the trust was £8,000,000. Sir Frank Hollins joined the board of the trust. "Horrockses" employ about 27,000 persons, and its mills contain 8,000 looms, comprising 450,000 spindles. The firm's long-cloth is known all over the world.

Sir Frank Hollins was created a baronet in 1907. He was president of the Lancashire County Cricket Club.

A "MYSTERY WOMAN."

"This woman must be described as a mystery woman, and I am afraid that she is contemplating a very serious crime."

That statement was made by Police-superintendent Davis, at Aldershot Police-court, of Elizabeth Young (29), who was charged with wandering and not giving a good account of herself. The superintendent said letters found upon the woman showed that she had independent means, was married, and came recently from Glasgow. Until five or six days ago she was employed as a domestic servant in Aldershot, but she disappeared, and was missing until recently, when she was found asking for lodgings in the Aldershot streets.

Accused was remanded for inquiries.

MISCARRIAGE OF JUSTICE AVOIDED.

At the Tower Bridge (London) Police-court, Edward Beiderman was accused of being drunk and disorderly. He said he worked an addition sum, wrote a sentence, and did all the doctor asked him, finally being told that he was not drunk. The constable in the case said he was not told that the man had been seen by a doctor.

The magistrate said: There might have been a serious miscarriage of justice in this case, and I cannot understand why I was not informed of the fact that this man had been examined by a doctor who had certified that he was not drunk at the time of his examination, though suffering from the after effects of drink. I think the police should see that the court is made cognisant of such facts in future.

The defendant was discharged.

STRANGE CHURCH SCENE.

While the Dean of Westminster was pronouncing the Blessing at the new church of St. Matthew at Portsmouth, a man left the congregation and walked up to the chancel steps, where he took off his coat and engaged in loud prayer. He was removed to the vestry, where he claimed to be the prophet Elijah.

FALL OF COLLIERY ROOF.

Three tons of roof fell at Cwmaman Colliery the other night, killing Mark Ashman (45), married, and seriously injuring John Williams (35), married, and John Isaac Daniels, aged 16. The men were under the fall some hours, the discovery being made by Daniels' father, who went to the level where the fall occurred because the boy had not arrived home at his usual time.

CONVICTIONS QUASHED.

A Court of Criminal Appeal quashed the convictions of Harold Malcolm Graham and Thomas Anderson, who, at Leeds, were found guilty of uttering a forged share certificate, Graham being sentenced to seven years and Anderson to three years.

The Lord Chief Justice said it was unfortunate that by an accidental means it was made abundantly clear to the jury, even before the trial, that there was a list of convictions against one prisoner, while afterwards evidence of convictions against both was given.

The report of the inter-departmental committee appointed by Mr. Bonar Law last year to examine the existing arrangements for the grant of public assistance on account of sickness, unemployment and destitution has been issued as a Command Paper.

At Lambeth County Court Judge Parry awarded Ambrose Sanger, a newsagent, £200 damages and costs for injuries received through being knocked down and run over by a motor gully-cleansing machine belonging to the Lambeth Borough Council.

NOTES ON NEWS.

A Gilbert and Sullivan opera number asserts that "a policeman's lot is not a happy one." Be that as it may, there is every reason to believe that the lot of the Prime Minister of Great Britain is in these days the very reverse of a bed of roses. Mr. Ramsay MacDonald takes over a grave load of problems, not the least of these being the diminished respect paid to the British point of view on the Continent, particularly in France. Specifically British policy is faced with a devastated Ruhr, dangerous hooliganism in the Palatinate, the Gallicisation of the Saar, and depreciated currencies. At home, widespread unemployment is still a saddening and disquieting fact, while the tragic inadequacy of housing accommodation is a continual threat to national health and well-being. If the new Government, with the help of the Liberals, effects a definite improvement in any of these particulars, it will evoke public gratitude. The difficulties are immense, but so are the opportunities.

The Public and the Strike.

The public in and around London have seemed to be more deeply concerned about the railway strike than with the advent and composition of the new Ministry. Though the very extensive inconvenience and loss caused by the suspension of more than half our train facilities have been endured with characteristic patience, the apparent good humour of this attitude must not be misunderstood. There has been strong and general condemnation of the engineman who ran away from the signatures of their representatives on the National Wages Board, which was a nasty jolt to some people's confidence in collective bargaining. Generally the principal sufferers have been the rank and file of workers in offices, factories, and shops, who although no parties to the dispute, unjustly enough had to bear the brunt of it. One of the sorriest things about the unfortunate business is the public quarrel between the two railway unions—the charges, counter-charges and recriminations. This sort of thing does trade unionism a great disservice.

The Experts and German Problems.

The two Committees appointed by the Reparation Commission are now at grips with their tough tasks, though the news regarding their deliberations is of a scanty description. As Mr. Reginald McKenna is chairman of the Second Committee, the public may rest assured that all that searching analysis and vigorous recommendations can accomplish will be done. This Committee has the duty of inquiring into the extent of German capital holdings in foreign countries and the most practical means of bringing these sums into the control of the German Government, which might then use them for reparation payments. It is stated that this Committee will devote itself whole-heartedly to its task without consideration of the political issues which might depend upon its findings. The first Committee has been considering the possibility of the establishment of a German bank for the issue of gold and notes, and their special duty is to deal with the problems of German currency and the balancing of the Budget.

Sidelights on Ministers.

Some interesting facts emerge from an analysis of the careers of the members of the Labour Administration. For instance, Nonconformity is well represented. Mr. Arthur Henderson, the new Home Secretary, has been actively identified with the Wesleyan Methodist Church for many years. Mr. C. G. Ammon, Parliamentary Secretary to the Admiralty, is a Wesleyan local preacher and Brotherhood advocate; and Mr. J. J. Lawson, Financial Secretary to the War Office, is also a Wesleyan local preacher. For many years Mr. A. V. Alexander, Parliamentary Secretary, Board of Trade, was a Baptist lay preacher, while Mr. W. Lunn, Parliamentary Secretary, Overseas Trade Department, is a Primitive Methodist. Mr. H. H. Slesser, K.C., the Solicitor-General, is associated with the Industrial Christian Fellowship and the Anglo-Catholic Congress. At the same time, it is interesting to bear in mind that Mr. A. Ponsonby, Under-Secretary for the Colonies, and younger son of General Sir H. Ponsonby, private secretary of Queen Victoria, last year published an admirable anthology of English diaries, and that Mr. Patrick Hastings, Attorney-General, is author of a four-act play.

"Bunty" Again.

One of the most welcome theatrical revivals that have taken place of late is that of "Bunty Pulls the Strings," at the Garrick Theatre. For weeks after its first appearance a few years ago the title of this play was in general use as a synonym for the managing ways of a certain type of adroit woman. The acting is as excellent as ever. Miss Winifred Moffat as "Bunty," and Mr. Graham Moffat as "Tammas Biggar," are fine pourtrayals of Scottish character. Once more the thoughtful Southerner is made to marvel at what appears to be the unfailing appeal of Scottish customs and emotions, not to speak of the dialect and the crinoline, which dates this particular comedy. Another interesting revival is that of Barrie's "Alice Sit by the Fire," at the Comedy Theatre, with a strong last.

Commission of Fine Arts.

It is satisfactory to know that at long last a Commission of Fine Arts for England has been set up. This advisory body consists of Lord Crawford and Balcarres, Lord Curzon, Sir Aston Webb, P.R.A., Sir Reginald Blomfield, R.A., Sir Edwin Lutyens, R.A., Mr. Alfred J. Gotch, Mr. D. Y. Cameron, R.A., Sir George Frampton, R.A., and Mr. T. H. Marson. All these appointments are honorary ones. The new commission has no powers of compulsion, and is purely advisory. Little or no imagination is needed in order to apprehend the nature of the services that can be rendered by such an authoritative body of experienced men of artistic knowledge and taste, for it is intended that a very wide meaning shall be read into the words "Fine Arts." The Government and municipal bodies have now at call a permanent standard of good taste in respect to all the arts expressing public sentiments and public requirements.

The Debt of Honour.

Some facts which should be generally pondered were brought out in a letter to the "Times," by Sir William Purchase, Chairman, National Appointments Committee (Ministry of Labour and Officers' Association). Their record of endeavour from 1918 to 1923 is as follows: total number of ex-officers, etc., placed in employment, 76,354; total placed during 1923, 5,316; average weekly placings during 1923, 102. "Unfortunately," says Sir William, "there still remain on the books 4,585 men, and the debt which the nation owes to them can only be honoured by the generous assistance of employers and the public generally, and I earnestly hope this may be forthcoming without delay." In spite of the depressed state of many businesses and industries, vacancies are already occurring, and if only those who have the responsibility of making appointments will remember that a variety of talent and ability is represented by the 4,585 unemployed ex-officers on the register of the Appointments' Committee, that number will rapidly decrease. The address of this organisation is 324, Clement's Inn, Strand, London, W.C. 2.

EPITOME OF NEWS.

Douglas Barker, a schoolboy, was run over and killed by a motor-lorry in West Hampstead.

Mr. J. L. Paton is resigning his post as High Master of Manchester Grammar School.

Mr. E. Coombes, of Hale (Cheshire), after dancing with his daughter, suddenly collapsed and died.

Penarth Mutual Building Society has accepted a contract for the building of 40 houses at a cost of £20,465.

Mr. Philip Coley, late director of the Co-operative Wholesale Society, died suddenly on his doorstep at Sunderland.

Mr. Francis Draper, a friend of Charles Dickens, has died at his residence in Regent's Park, at the age of 92.

The death is reported from Goeschenen of Carl Senn, aged 91, a well-known mountain guide, and the oldest in the Canton of Uri.

The Rev. Dr. J. G. James, minister, Victoria-road Congregational Church, Southsea, died suddenly at Portsmouth, aged 87.

As a consequence of heavy and continuous rainfall, the Thames has been flooded at many places between Oxford and Teddington.

Mr. J. H. Thomas has resigned the secretaryship of the National Union of Railwaymen, on acceptance of a Secretaryship of State.

The restoration of the memorial to Charles Dibdin (the song writer) in St. Martin's-gardens, St. Pancras, London, has now been carried out.

A man armed with a rifle ran amok in the Botanic Gardens in Melbourne and killed two men and one woman and wounded two other persons.

A public billiard saloon and 28 tables, together with a fruit and banana ripening stores at Burton-on-Trent have been destroyed by fire.

The Rev. E. T. Vernon, the newly appointed minister of Willesden Presbyterian Church, has been golf champion of Kinross for the past two years.

The writing table at which Lord Morley sat when at work on his lives of Gladstone and Cobden was knocked down for thirty guineas at the sale at Wimbledon.

The Duchess of Atholl, M.P., and Lady Astor, M.P., were among the speakers at a luncheon given to Mrs. Kellogg, at the American Women's Club in London.

Until recently a director of Lincoln City Football Club, George Doughty, newsagent of Lincoln, was fined £10 for using his premises for football coupon betting.

When the anniversary sermon on the death of General Gordon was preached at Sandringham Church the offertory for the Gordon Boys' Home amounted to £235.

The Hull trawler Pretoria has been sunk in a collision with the trawler Ellesmere in the North Sea. The crew, nine in number, were rescued and transferred to the trawler Juliet.

The Rev. W. Pari Huws, minister of the Welsh Congregational Church, Dolgelly, and President of the Welsh Congregational Union has announced his intention to retire in June.

Forty thousand pounds damage was caused by fire which destroyed the main building at the Co-operative Wholesale Society's paint, varnish and colour works in Rochdale.

At Wald, Canton of Zurich, three children, while walking in a street, were buried under a mass of snow which fell from the roof of a house. One was rescued, but the two others were killed.

The President and Directors of the Rentenbank have informed the Berlin Government that they object to further payments being made for the costs of the armies of occupation on the Rhine.

Returning with troops from the East, the transport Glengorm Castle landed most of the soldiers at Portsmouth instead of going on to Southampton, where there is no barrack accommodation.

The roof of a house, together with part of the house itself, at Bentley, a colliery village near Doncaster, collapsed early the other morning. The occupants, who were in bed, had narrow escapes.

Mr. Berkeley Crowe, land steward at Castle Estate, Buncrana, County Derry, staggered into his house the other night suffering from a shot wound. He died before his wife could fetch a doctor.

Cyril Doutch, the well-known Guernsey footballer, on returning to Guernsey with his bride of a month, was detained on a charge of embezzlement. The sorrow-stricken bride proceeded home alone.

After an illness lasting two days, Mr. John Jones, a noted centenarian, of Pwllheli, has died. Nine months ago the inhabitants of Pwllheli presented him with a cheque for 100 guineas to celebrate his 100th birthday.

The Government of the Indian Punjab has decided to take over from the Lahore Municipality the statue of Lord Lawrence, the inscription on which has, for a year past, been made a ground for extremist agitation.

Divisional Commisaire Faralicq, of the French Police, laid a wreath on the Police War Memorial at Scotland Yard on behalf of the members of the Paris Gendarmerie Athletic Club, who are guests at Scotland Yard.

"I have had a good run. I have done all the golf clubs about here," Benjamin Hills, a Mitcham labourer, is alleged to have said when charged with breaking into the pavilion of Pollards Hill Golf Club, Norbury.

Parliamentary confirmation is being sought by the Aberdare and Mountain Ash Urban District Councils to their recent agreement to purchase the disused Aberdare Canal. The sale price is said to be £2,338.

The Soane Medallion and £150 for design have been awarded to Mr. John Scott Kelsall, Eastbourne, and the Owen Jones Studentship of £100 for ornament and coloured decoration to Mr. J. H. Sexton, Battersea.

A verdict of "Death from strychnine poisoning" was returned at the inquest on the body of Walter Alder, of Winchmore Hill, but the jury added that there was insufficient evidence to show how it was administered.

To the protest of the Coalville Urban Council against the increased rent of council houses, the Ministry of Health has replied that the decision of the tribunal is final. Some tenants have refused to pay the increase.

The Convention between the British Empire and the United States permitting the search, outside the three miles limit, of vessels suspected of intending to infringe the liquor laws of the United States was signed at Washington.

Ernest Olivier, a French subject, owner of the lost steamship El Kahira, was committed for trial at London Mansion House on a charge of having "aided and abetted" in failing to provide the vessel with a wireless installation.

At a meeting of the Central Asian Society Sir Maurice de Bunsen, the chairman, presented to Lieut.-Colonel A. C. Yate, on behalf of the members, a silver bowl, suitably inscribed, in appreciation of his services as hon. secretary since 1918.