

It is late at night, in a disreputable district of London, in about 1890, the height of the Victorian era. Antonio Feira, a well-dressed Latin of about 45, stands alone in a darkened room, looking out of the window at the fog roiling over the river. From the next room comes the sound of a woman screaming and crying for help. Feira takes no notice.

His mind is on business. He is the London agent of a South American government. His job is to raise loans for his country on the London money market. This he has done with remarkable success for the last 20 years, developing a close relationship with the merchant bank of Pilasters. Lenders have eagerly taken up bond issues because Feira's country has rich natural resources; but the government has not used the money wisely. The last issue was not a success, the government wants more, there is unrest in the cities. Feira has just heard that an agent of the opposition has been sent to London to try to prevent any further loans. The best way to achieve this may well be for the agent to kill Feira.

The cries stop and a woman bursts out of the room, naked and bleeding, clutching her clothes in a bundle. Feira is shocked by how badly she is hurt, but he maintains an air of indifference. The woman abuses him, saying he misled her and let her in for much more than she had bargained for. He gives her

a large sum of money and says: "With that you can buy a little house in Brighton and retire from the streets." She replies: "I know, but still I wouldn't have done it if I'd known what he's like." Says Feira: "That's why I didn't warn you."

She dresses and stumbles out into the fog. When she has gone, a man comes out of the room smoking a cigar. He is Edward Pilaster, 50, senior partner in the bank. Neither he nor Feira mentions the woman, now or later. Instead they talk business. Feira presses Pilaster to issue another five million pounds of debt. Pilaster says the last issue was a disaster and another one could break the bank. But Feira insists, and he has a hold over Pilaster; and in the end Pilaster says he will try.

At the other end of London a party is taking place in an opulent dining room.

The host is Sidney Miller, one of the richest businessmen in town. An American by birth, he is a partner in Pilasters bank. Although he has a large investment in the bank, he is semi-retired and no longer concerns himself with day-to-day business.

Miller is a rigid man, strait-laced and hard-hearted, tough in business and in private life. However, he is scrupulously honest and straightforward in all his dealings. His soft spot is for his wife, Dolly. She is a small, round, silly woman, but he is blind to her faults and adores her. Unlike him, she has never succeeded in acquiring the social graces to go with their

financial status. Mainly because of Dolly, Miller's partner's, though they value his acumen, have never accepted him socially, and this has wounded him.

Now, however, he is ensuring that his grandchildren will never be looked down upon in that way. His principal guests tonight are the Duke and Duchess of Southwold who, although completely broke, rank far higher than any of the Pilaster family. Miller's daughter is going to marry the Duke's son in a classic alliance of old nobility and new money. However, this is not a forced marriage. It is true that the Duke's son has no option but to marry money; but nevertheless he and the girl are in love.

In the middle of dinner, the butler whispers in Miller's ear that a rather lowly bank employee has come and is insisting on seeing him. Leaving the dinner table to deal with a matter of business is just the kind of tradesmanlike behaviour that makes aristocrats wince; but nothing is more important than business to Miller, and he goes.

The employee tells him that Pilasters is on the very edge of bankruptcy.

The bank is a partnership, not a limited company, and all the partners are liable for the bank's debts up to the last farthing of their personal wealth. Miller stands to lose everything, including his home and furniture. And his daughter will not be able to marry the man she loves.

Miller has advance warning, and he could use this time to

make a binding settlement on his daughter. But he will do no such thing. The money belongs to the bank's creditors, he will say; it is no longer his to give away.

His scruples will not let him take the easy way out, but he is not yet ready to give up. He makes up his mind to do all he can to save the bank and the good name of Pilaster.

In another part of the foggy city, a group of people are planning a robbery.

The leader of the gang is Maisie Roberts, an attractive working-class woman in her prime. Thirty-nine years old, she is humorous, sensual, sentimental and strong-willed. Contemptuous of respectable society, she has lived her life on the edge of the law and prospered. She has been an actress, theatrical impresario, brothel madam and property developer. Now she is planning to hijack a shipment of gold belonging to Pilasters bank.

For reasons which will become clear, she nurses a passionate hatred of the Pilaster family.

The crisis of Pilasters bank will be resolved, one way or another, within a week; but they have been much longer getting to this point.

It was twenty years ago that Antonio Feira arrived in London, a young man with loads of ambition and nothing else. He had convinced the government back home that he was a well-

connected international businessman, and had been commissioned to secure a one million pound loan. At the time his country had no credit rating, and it seemed an impossible task until he met young Edward Pilaster, an uptight, screwed-up junior partner in the bank. Feira wormed his way into Edward's confidence and persuaded him to propose the loan.

At the bank, Edward's proposal was backed by his father, Joseph, the senior partner, but opposed by Edward's cousin Hugh, a junior partner, and others.

At this time Sidney Miller came on the scene. Born in Boston, the son of a corn merchant, he had become US agent for Pilasters when the bank did relatively little American business, but he had built up the agency so successfully that at the age of forty he was made a full partner and brought to London. He arrived full of pride and hope. Welcomed as an asset at the office, he was ignored socially, and his wife Dolly was snubbed by the Pilaster wives. Miller swallowed his pride and concentrated on his work, taking consolation in the continuing success of his business dealings; and soon Dolly had a baby girl to occupy her; but neither of them would ever forget the way the Pilasters treated them.

The snubbing of Dolly was organised by the strongest character in the Pilaster family--Augusta, the wife of senior partner Joseph and mother of Edward. Joseph himself was a steamroller of a man, impatient, wilful, self-righteous and mean. Augusta was subtler: patient where her husband was impulsive;

manipulative where he was bullying. She did everything for the sake of her children, but in that cause she was utterly ruthless.

Her eldest son Edward had his father's impulsiveness without the restraint of meanness, and this would make him a bad banker. Nevertheless Augusta was determined he should be senior partner, not his cousin Hugh, an altogether nicer character.

Into their lives came Maisie Roberts, a sexy working-class girl on the make. An out-of-work actress, she got hired as a maid at the Pilaster mansion in Carlton Terrace. Hugh fell in love with her. Edward saw them kissing, became inflamed and obsessed, and eventually raped Maisie. There was an almighty row. Augusta dismissed Maisie and Hugh lost track of her. He was so disgusted by his family's behaviour that he went to America.

Consequently the field was left clear for Edward; and Antonio Feira got his first loan.

In the intervening years, Feira strengthened his hold over Edward, and the bank issued a series of South American loans. Fortunately lenders took to them in a big way, seeing South America as the next big boom area, although wiser heads shook dubiously.

Maisie continued a blood feud with Augusta in various ways, including turning up at Joseph's funeral with a child she claimed was his grandson and entitled to part of the inheritance.

The Pilasters quarrelled bitterly with their main rivals,

Greenbournes. The senior Greenbourne was proposed for a peerage, but Joseph jealously used his influence with the Liberal party to block it, saying that no Jew had ever been made a peer (a rule that would not be relaxed until the Queen was romanced by a Jewish Prime Minister, Disraeli).

Meanwhile Edward became more and more peculiar, developing a need to inflict violence upon women; a taste that Feira encouraged and helped him satisfy.

In the climax, Sidney Miller tries to save the bank, his daughter's marriage and the good name of Pilaster. The crisis is complicated by the robbery of a consignment of coined gold belonging to the bank.

Miller goes to Greenbournes and asks for their help. They owe Pilasters no favours, but Miller points out that if Pilasters should crash the vibrations could damage every bank in London.

With the co-operation of Greenbournes he puts together a syndicate to guarantee Pilasters' debts. The partners in Pilasters will still have to liquidate all their assets, of course; but now this can be done in an orderly fashion.

Now Miller pulls his masterstroke. He realises that this crisis, handled properly, can actually enhance the reputation of the Pilasters: after all, if they can get through a financial collapse without renegeing on a single debt that makes them doubly reliable. He puts his mansion on the market with a fanfare, and persuades the children to have a dramatically low-

budget wedding, all to publicise the incredible probity of the partners in Pilasters. Then he floats a new company, Pilasters Ltd, with the younger generation as directors. The new company will simply take over all the regular business of the old partnership. This is a great success.

Now Feira comes back on the scene and demands a loan. The new company refuses to have anything to do with him. But Feira has a new card up his sleeve: Edward has actually killed a girl. Feira tries to blackmail the Pilasters.

The trouble is, this scandal could undo all Miller's good work.

However, there is still an agent of the opposition in London, and he ensures that the loan will not go through by assassinating Edward.