

**ENVOY
EXTRAODINORY**

E. PHILIPS OPPENHEIM

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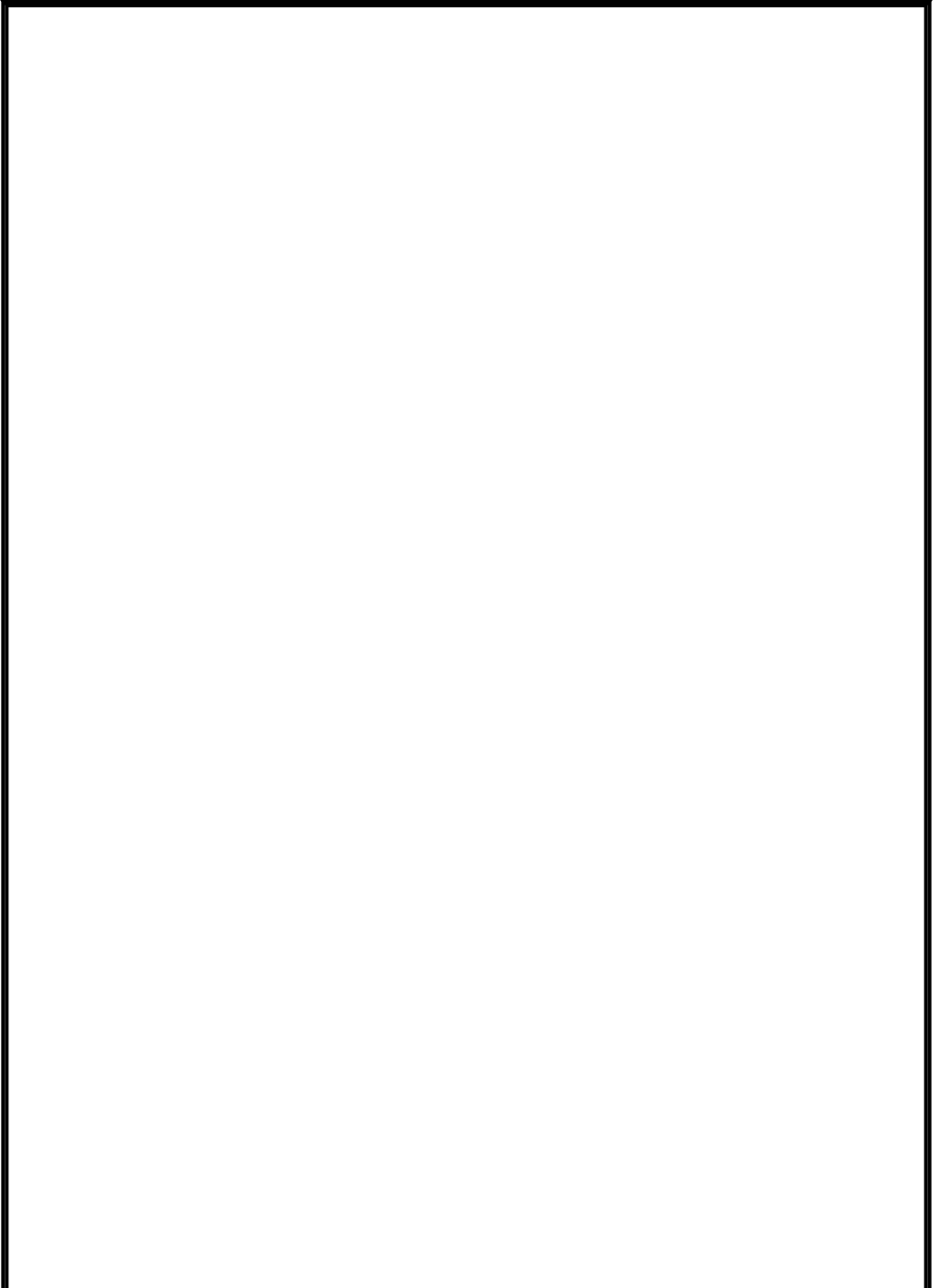
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By

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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ENVOY EXTRAORDINARY

CHAPTER I

Through the windy darkness of the late winter evening, along a muddy country lane which was little better than a cart track with a high hedge on one side and a wood on the other, a man, half shuffling, half running, was making such progress as was possible over the sodden slippery surface. What appearance he might have presented when he had started upon his wild expedition it was impossible to say, for he was covered now with mud from head to foot, a driving rain beating in his face. His dark coat was soaked, his collar and tie simply pulp. He was hatless and his black hair, streaked with grey, was plastered about his face. He ran not as an athlete but with long, uneven strides, and he was evidently completely out of condition for such an exploit. He was breathing heavily. The drops of sweat were mingled with the rain which was pouring down his cheeks. He seemed unable to keep a straight course and he blundered from one side of the narrow way to the other, scratching his face against the hedge only to recoil and slip about in the low wire-protected ditch on the other side. His physical strength was already exhausted, but he continued to stumble on as though inspired with some desperate sense of urgency. The only parts of him which seemed still alive were his eyes, and in their fixed stare there was all the dogged fear of a man seeking to escape from something worse than death.

In the midst of the wall of darkness which he seemed to have set himself to penetrate, his staggering progress came suddenly to an end. He crashed into a gate, swayed for a moment and,

recovering himself, clutched its topmost bar with both hands. His neck was strained forward. He made a gurgling little noise in his throat. In front of him, less than a mile away, was the goal towards which he was stumbling, a sinister yet somehow enthralling sight: upon the opposite hillside there stretched the outline of a house large enough to be called a mansion, a building which from end to end and along both of its spreading irregular wings, seemed flaming with lights. It was like a palace of fire blazing out of a well of black chaotic gloom.

The man began to climb the gate. In his state of over-exhaustion the effort was an act of madness. He pulled himself up to the topmost bar but his attempt to slither down on the other side was disastrous. He fell on his face into a field of roots, rolled over on his side and passed after one faint struggle into unconsciousness.

Some uneasy and convulsive gesture seemed to have crept into the spirit of that black, windy night. From the heights of the winding mountain road, flaming as it seemed from the bosom of the low drifting clouds, the far-reaching headlights of an automobile driven at a furious speed pierced with long stabs of illumination the shrouded spaces. The driver, as he swung round the last corner, passing the muddy lane along which the pedestrian had come to grief and making swaying progress towards the small harbour, was conscious, through the fury of the night, of two curious phenomena. The first was that long blazing panorama of lights from the mansion inland, the other was the rise to incredible heights and the subsequent fall to the level of the dark water of the single lamp at the masthead of

some craft making gallant entrance into the tiny harbour. The quay was lined with a thin crowd of oil-skinned fishermen shouting instructions to the unseen crew. One of them, with a coil of rope around his arm, found his passage momentarily blocked by the long car with its flaming headlights. He stared at it and the dark outline of its driver in amazement.

5

“You’re ower near the deep water, mister,” he shouted. “There be a great tide to-night and it be still rising. You’n best back the car.”

The indistinguishable figure at the wheel was prompt to realise his danger and did as he was bidden.

“Thanks,” he called out. “Is that a boat coming in?”

“It be surely a craft of some sort, mister. She be past the beam of the lighthouse and we ain’t none of us seen her properly yet.”

The driver of the car pointed inland to the flaring windows.

“What’s the trouble there?” he asked.

“They be the lights of the Great House,” the man answered. “She might seem to be afire but she ain’t. ’Tis a whim of her ladyship’s to have them blazing on wild nights. ’Tis a landmark from the sea and a guide for they upon the road and they do say it’s to-night his lordship is expected home. Be you careful with that long car of yours when you turn up at the jetty.”

Inch by inch the man at the wheel backed his car, a swift road to eternity in the tumbled mass of black waters upon one side, a low grey wall upon the other. Arrived safely in the small

cobbled square before the inn, he came to a standstill and pushed on his hand brake. He stood up deliberately, a tall, slim figure, and looked back towards the harbour. A sturdy little ketch of about fifty tons, with a few yards of canvas still taut, was making a valiant effort to enter the small inner pool. At the end of the pier one of the local fishermen was holding a lantern high above his head while he shouted advice. The light swung round and the automobilist gave vent to a sudden exclamation. Gripping the wheel, holding the ketch up against the wind with almost Herculean strength, was the huge figure of a man, bare-headed and without oilskins, with the face and figure of a Viking. The low throb of the engine and the man's gigantic strength were pitted against the tearing wind. Inch by inch the entrance to the pool seemed to grow narrower. Suddenly there was a roar of orders from the figure at the wheel. The anchor was thrown overboard, coiled-up masses of rope were hung down on the lee side of the ketch. The fall of the anchor seemed to have been perfectly timed. The man at the wheel had triumphed. He brought her up with barely a tremor against the guardian fenders of hemp which hung from the quay. To the sound of lusty cheers she was roped in by the little crowd of willing helpers. The huge figure at the helm shouted a few last orders to them, then he leaned forward to the other side of the cockpit and the throbbing of the engine died away.

6

The automobilist resumed his seat at the sound of that low throaty cheering. He himself had the same impulse as had stirred the group of fishermen and villagers, yet although he was not a person of undue sensibility, he felt a sudden chill when he thought of that moment when the lantern had flashed its unexpected light upon the gigantic figure of the man who was

fighting the wind and the storm, a figure for a sculptor, a magnificent representation of the triumph of brute force over the raging elements. But the face—if ever a more modern Epstein had been fired with a sudden ambition to create a new type of Satan, there was his study ready at hand—the man who had fought the storm. 7

The automobilist released his brakes, pushed his car into low gear and threaded his way towards the dimly visible opening in the chaos of darkness, far above which flamed the lights of the Great House.

Behind that welcoming blaze of illumination, which seemed somehow or other to offer a silent defiance to the fury of the wind-torn night, in her small boudoir, once a consecrated chapel, now the annex to a famous suite of reception rooms, Matilda, Countess of Matresser, sat in a high-backed, luxuriously cushioned chair before a huge fire of cedar and pine logs burning in an open grate. Her hands were folded in front of her, neither book nor any other form of diversion interfering in the steady effort at listening which had absorbed her for the last hour. The spell was suddenly broken. She heard at last the sound for which she had waited. She touched the jade knob of an ornamental bell which stood on the table by her side.

“His lordship has arrived,” she told the footman who entered promptly. “Please let him know that I am awaiting him here.”

The man hurried off. In the hall below there was already a small gathering of servants respectfully greeting the new arrival. The latter, a dark-complexioned, slim young man, who was being

relieved of his motoring attire, nodded and turned towards the broad staircase. With his hand already upon the banisters, however, he lingered to ask just one question.

“Any unexpected visitors to-day, Burrows?” he enquired of the butler.

“No one unexpected that I have heard of, your lordship,” the man replied. “Mr. Hennerley is here with Lady Alice, and we are expecting a few people to dinner. Only a very small party.”

8

“I was not thinking so much about guests,” Matresser admitted. “Mr. Yates is here, I suppose?”

“Certainly, milord. He has been very busy in his room all day.”

“The messenger I was expecting would probably have reported to him.”

“No one has arrived who has asked either for your lordship or for Mr. Yates,” the butler pronounced.

Matresser nodded.

“If anyone should arrive, see that I am informed,” he said. “The weather is bad enough to stop anyone if they were coming by road.”

“I believe, your lordship,” Burrows confided, “that Humphreys would like to see you about to-morrow’s shooting for a minute or two, or he will come up after dinner if that is more convenient.”

“I will see him in the gunroom before I change,” Matresser promised. “No, you need not announce me, Burrows. I am sure her ladyship must have heard the car.”

He mounted the stairs with swift, lithe movements, passed through two very beautiful rooms, one hung with rare tapestry, the other decorated, and since untouched, by a famous Frenchman of the period of Watteau. In a few moments he passed into the Sanctuary Chamber, as it had been called for generations. With a slight gesture, half foreign, perhaps, but entirely natural, he sank on one knee by the side of the woman whose arms were out-stretched towards him and drew her into his embrace.

“Ronald!” she murmured.

“Dearest.”

9

There were no other words. A moment or two later, still with her fingers upon his cheeks, he leaned a little back.

“You are the most wonderful woman in the world,” he declared as he looked into her deep-set but still brilliant eyes. “Yours is the complexion of a child. You grow more beautiful with the years.”

She laughed softly.

“You will never lose your marvellous gift of flattery, dear Ronald,” she said. “Of course, I love you to say so but what do my looks matter now?”

“You have a family tradition to uphold,” he reminded her.

“Every Matresser has married not only a beautiful woman but a woman who has remained beautiful.”

“When are you prepared to carry on the family record?” she asked.

He saw the slight anxiety with which she was regarding him, rose to his feet and touched a bell.

“May I?” he begged. “Just one glass of sherry together, mother, before I go to change. Am I more of a skeleton than ever? It was nothing but a touch of fever which left me long before we passed Gibraltar.”

She shook her head.

“Those lines have bitten a little deeper into your face, my son,” she told him. “Isn’t it time you left off these restless bouts of travelling? Are you not weary of shooting rare animals and discovering hidden cities?”

“Sick to death,” he assured her cheerfully.

He strolled over to the small Chippendale sideboard upon which a servant had set out decanters, a silver bowl of ice and a cocktail shaker.

“I will mix you the latest concoction in the way of *apéritifs*—straight from Raffles’ Bar at Singapore,” he told her. “I should have liked a lime but lemon must do. . . . There. How’s that?” he asked a moment or two later.

“Delicious. When were you at Singapore, Ronald?”

“A few months ago,” he answered carelessly, “and only for a few hours then. I must tell you all about my travels later on.”

She set down her glass for a moment.

“Do you ever tell anyone in the world all about your travels, Ronald?” she asked.

He looked at her with a faint but discerning smile.

“There are some things I am saving up, of course,” he admitted. “When I am Lord Lieutenant of the County, bobbing about opening charity bazaars, God-blessing the Boy Scouts and that sort of thing, I shall have to write a book. Then I shall have no more secrets. By the by, that reminds me, may I ask Mrs. Howard to have a room prepared for a man who is bringing me down a letter and some papers? It is just an odd job of surveying I did for the Government while I was in Africa and they seem to be rather in a hurry to report upon it. He will be here I expect to-night or to-morrow.”

“Of course,” his mother acquiesced. “He can have one of the bachelor suites, then he will have his own sitting-room. Will he join the house party? There will be only one or two of us—the Dean and his wife, and Stephen and Alice are already here.”

“He would rather shut himself up, I expect.”

Lady Matresser rose to her feet with a sigh. Her maid was standing enquiringly by the portière.

“Would your ladyship prefer that I came a little later?” the young woman suggested.

“Not one second later,” her mistress replied, glancing at the clock. “You must attend me at once, Hortense. This is my son who is just back from abroad. He is always the severest critic of my toilette so we must take care to satisfy him to-night.”

The girl curtsied very slightly.

“I shall do my best to satisfy monsieur,” she said. “With madame as subject it should not be difficult.”

Matresser nodded politely. He was tapping a cigarette against his case but he continued to look across to where the girl was standing holding the curtain back for her mistress. Her eyes drooped respectfully. Her manner was a perfect mixture of respect for the master of the house and interest in his arrival. Matresser lit his cigarette and offered his mother his arm.

“What a disobedient old dear you are,” he whispered in her ear as Hortense fell behind. “Did I not beg of you—no foreign servants?”

She indulged in a slight grimace.

“But a personal maid, my dear Ronald,” she remonstrated. “English girls are never a success. Don’t terrify me,” she continued, “you may find worse to come.”

His tone was once more light and cheerful.

“So long as you have not an Italian chauffeur and half a dozen Russian gardeners,” he murmured.

CHAPTER II

Matresser threw himself into a battered easy chair before the fire in the gunroom, lit a cigarette and reflected for a moment. A few yards away from him Humphreys, the head keeper, was standing hat in hand. It was obvious from a certain air of tension and from the man's solemn demeanour that the story which he had just finished concerned matters more serious than the mere arrangement of the day's sport.

"This seems a queer sort of business, Humphreys," his master observed. "Sit down whilst I ask you a few questions."

The man established himself on the extreme edge of a cane chair, dropped his hat into position by his side and mumbled half to himself whilst awaiting his master's interrogation.

"Such a thing has never happened before in my recollection. 'Tis a pity that we did leave off the barbed wire from they gates. 'Tis the wire that does more than anything else in this world to keep out trespassers."

"Was there any vehicle left lying about?" Matresser asked.

"None as I did see, milord."

"Not even a bicycle?"

"Nowt of any sort, milord. It seemed to me from a casual glance around like as though he were trying to reach the Great House

by a short cut across they turnips by the side of Farmer Reynolds' covert. A vexing thing for him to do for we put nine to a dozen coveys of birds in before sundown and there they would have rested for sure."

"Was he conscious when you found him?"

"His eyes were open and he mumbled summat," the keeper acknowledged, "but what it was I couldna' rightly say. Anyway, we put him in the game cart and took him along to the doctor's. There he be now for all I know."

"Sure he was not a poacher?" Matresser asked. "Some of those Norwich shoe hands who used to plague us so much always put on their Sunday clothes when they paid us a visit."

"There's one thing I can tell 'ee sure, milord. That 'un never snared fowl nor beast in his life nor had he worked at any of they machines which the shoe factories are chockablock with nowadays. His hands were as white as a lady's and his shoes were made of that there patent leather that's only worn by the gentry. He waren't no poacher and he were a stranger to these parts. That I can tell you for sure."

Matresser's fingers toyed with the small closely clipped black moustache upon his upper lip.

"Yet you found this fellow lying in a field of wet roots with nothing in the world to show how he got there. Perhaps he was on his way to do a little burgling up here."

"He didn't look tough enough for any man's job to me," Humphreys pronounced. "What he did come to these parts for is

right mysterious but if they birds as were lying so snug be all gone to-morrow morning it will be him as has done it. As to being a stranger there's one thing sure, your lordship. He bain't anyone who dwells in these parts. There's no one who don't know that it is our big shoot to-morrow and not even Farmer Reynolds himself would set foot in any field of roots round the coverts after me and the lads has done our walking in. He be a stranger and a damn' nuisance."

Matresser rose to his feet.

"You had better look in at the doctor's to-night, Humphreys," he directed. "Ask him to step up and see me any time after half-past nine."

"To-night, milord?"

"Yes, to-night. I should like to have his report. I never care about strangers hanging round the place."

The man touched his forehead.

"The doctor he do be shooting with us come to-morrow," he ventured. "He bain't what you might call a fine shot like your lordship and the Colonel but he do know they outsides like a book and he's a rare 'un for guessing which way the birds will break."

Matresser frowned very slightly but impressively. No one belonging to the lands over which Matresser had rule cared to see that frown repeated.

"I will be round along with the doctor about half-past nine,

milord,” the gamekeeper announced hastily.

The Countess of Matresser greeted her only son with a welcoming smile as he entered the drawing-room. She was wearing a black dress designed by the Rue de la Paix *couturière* whom she visited twice every season, the two rows of famous Matresser pearls her only ornament. She sat propped up by cushions in the centre of a high-backed divan and it was understood that an invitation to sit by her side was a rarely accorded honour. She possessed the unusual distinction of having preserved her complexion as well as her figure, and Matresser’s bow was one of genuine admiration.

15

“You are the most wonderful woman in the world,” he declared. “I come home from my wanderings each time to find you younger.”

She smiled gaily up at him.

“You will have to keep your enthusiasms in future for another member of the family,” she told him. “You have seen Ann?”

“Not yet.”

“She will be the beauty of the family. Her picture in the Academy by that Hungarian man was the success of the season. Watch her now. She has just seen you.”

He turned round. His younger sister was coming towards him, her arms outstretched, moving with the swift, joyous speed of a young Atalanta.

“Ronald!” she cried. “At last!”

One swift glance of admiration and then a queer stoppage of all sensation. His eyes seemed to pass her, to be fastened upon the girl who had entered the room by her side but who was lingering now in the background. Of himself Matresser used always to say that he had not a pictorially retentive mind, that reminiscences with him were always of a fragmentary type. Yet in those few seconds the world seemed to fall away. The stately, exquisitely proportioned room with its carved ceilings and mantelpieces, its air of somehow Victorian comprehensiveness seemed suddenly to dissolve into the mists. He was back again in the wilder spots of the world. The perfume of the night flowers was in his nostrils, the hubbub of strange voices speaking in a strange tongue sounding in his ears, a few minutes of half-forgotten madness—and there were very few in the life of Ronald Matresser—stealing into his pulses.

16

“Am I a ghost, Ronnie?” his sister laughed, as she threw herself into his arms. “Why do you look through me? Have I lost substance in your eyes?”

Danger! That was what had been at the bottom of that sudden shock. A sense of danger mingled with the tinkling of music, the breathlessness, the tropical air, the sound of those faint shots in the distance and the nearer growl of an angry people. He laughed it all into the background as he embraced his sister.

“My dear Ann!” he exclaimed. “I never dreamed that you were to become the beauty of the family.”

“I’m not really,” she laughed, holding his arm tightly. “I am a

whim, the result of one of those little tricks of dress or pose or something which a great artist catches up and immortalises. Lazlo himself says that it is not I whom he has painted. He has immortalised one of his own fancies and chosen me as the medium. It is very rude of him to say so and it is awfully hard to live up to.”

The girl in white was standing now only a few feet away. She was tall but not very tall, her complexion was pale but might more adequately be described as creamy, and her hair was either a very pleasant shade of light brown or golden according to the lights that played upon it. Her eyes, which at that moment were looking searchingly into his, were a curious shade of hazel—soft and promising.

“I was so excited seeing you again I quite forgot,” Ann apologised. “This is my brother, Lord Matresser—Mademoiselle Stamier.”

Matresser was himself again—the same kindly, half-cynical smile upon his lips, the same air of a man who has travelled far ahead of his years looking back down the too familiar avenues of time.

17

“I am very happy to welcome my sister’s friend.”

“It has been arranged,” his mother confided, “that Mademoiselle Stamier is to be Ann’s companion for a time. It was very fortunate that she was able to come to us.”

Then there was a sudden influx of the remaining guests. Alice, the elder daughter of the house, a comely woman of early middle age, married to Stephen Hennerley, a barrister and rising

Member of Parliament, first made her appearance. Her husband followed with the Dean. The local doctor, a good sportsman but of the rougher type, brought up the rear. During the few minutes' general conversation, Matresser found opportunity to carry his cocktail over to where the doctor was standing on the outside of a little circle.

“Tell me about the fellow who was picked up in the field of turnips,” he begged, after they had shaken hands. “What’s wrong with him? Who is he and how did he come to be wandering about there on foot? I didn’t know that you were dining to-night so I told Humphreys to call round and bring you up after dinner if you could manage it.”

“I can soon tell you all I know,” the doctor replied. “What he is suffering from is slight concussion and superexhaustion. I had to pump adrenalin into him before I could get him to mumble even a word. I left him asleep. He should be able to talk all right by the time I get back.”

“Is he English?”

“I really cannot tell you a thing about him,” Andrews admitted frankly. “We didn’t go through his pockets, naturally, when we took his clothes off. It didn’t seem necessary so long as we were pumping the life back into him and there seemed no complications.”

18

Matresser finished his cocktail and then set the glass down.

“Well,” he remarked, “I don’t think I am a person cursed with the vice of undue curiosity, but when a man who is a stranger to everyone is picked up in one of my root fields, through which

there is no right of way or anything of that sort, wearing patent-leather shoes, I must confess that I feel inquisitive.”

The doctor refused to take the matter seriously.

“I expect we shall find in the morning,” he said, “that it is a case of temporary lapse of memory or something of that sort.”

“Well, don’t let him go in the morning until you have communicated with me. I shall exercise my privileges as a magistrate in any case.”

“I think you are quite right,” the doctor agreed. “I certainly won’t let him go. In any case you have the right to help yourself to his name and address. . . . You are looking wonderfully fit, Matresser. Irresponsible travel seems to agree with you.”

Matresser smiled. There was something so boyish about that smile that it might almost have been called a grin. It was followed by a few seconds of gravity.

“Yes, I am fit enough, Andrews,” he declared. “I suppose, after all, that a really lazy life with no responsibilities is the healthiest. Come on, we have to make our way in to dinner. Forty of us to-morrow, I’m told, but only ourselves to-night. I’m for the Dean’s wife. You will bring in Lady Alice, I expect. We will have our usual pipe together before you go. I may have a few more words with you about your patient.”

CHAPTER III

Matresser laid down the *Times* and rose to his feet as Mademoiselle Stamier came a little doubtfully into the small reception room.

“I am afraid, mademoiselle,” he said, “that you see your doom. The Dean and his wife have engaged in a desperate struggle of bridge with my sister and brother-in-law and Ann’s badminton with the doctor seems to be a nightly affair. It is clearly your duty to come and talk to me.”

She moved smilingly towards the divan where he had been seated.

“To tell you the truth,” she confided, “I came to see whether I was wanted. I drove my little car into Norwich this afternoon and the wind coming back—well, you know for yourself what it was.”

“You have a headache?”

She nodded but nevertheless she sank into the divan and surrounded herself with cushions.

“I expected to find the whole family at your feet,” she said, “listening to your exploits.”

“I am afraid,” he complained, “my people don’t take very much interest in my travellings.”

“That may be your fault,” she pointed out. “Ann thinks you are very secretive. She has no address, however urgently she may wish to communicate with you, except the address of a bank in London.”

“That’s why I always receive my letters,” he remarked. “It is impossible to let a dozen people know just where you are. One person I keep informed from every post office and cable station I reach. Anything addressed to me there is only subject to the minimum of delay.”

21

“It sounds very businesslike,” she admitted.

“Thank you.”

“And efficient.”

He occupied himself in holding a light to the cigarette to which she had helped herself.

“As a matter of fact,” he reiterated, “it is a fact that my people are very little interested in my wanderings. My mother would very much rather I stayed at home and my brother-in-law, Stephen Hennerley, thinks it is the duty of every Englishman to be proclaiming his country’s danger either from the hustings or from one of the Houses. Ann, little hussy, thinks I ought to stay at home and keep the house filled with amusing guests, and Margaret and His Reverence are convinced that the Kingdom of Heaven lies somewhere in the diocese of Norwich.”

She laughed quietly.

“Poor Lord Matresser! No wonder you are not encouraged to

talk about your wanderings.”

“You yourself,” he reflected, “are not altogether a stay-at-home.”

“Explain that, please,” she begged.

“Well, you were entertaining for your uncle when he had Rome and your aunt was ill. Before that you travelled with him when he undertook a certain mission for his country and that, by the by, brought me my first glimpse of you.”

“So you remembered.”

“So I remembered. You are not a person, mademoiselle, whom one easily forgets. Apart from that, those were stirring moments. I have heard it said that but for your uncle’s intervention at that time all Morocco would have been in a blaze.”

22

“It is curious that you should say that,” she murmured.

“Why?”

“Because I heard another story.”

“And that was?”

“That if a certain Englishman had not taken a very daring risk and presented an ultimatum from his country to that madman who had suddenly collected about a hundred thousand tribesmen, the work of twenty-five years would have been swept away in one whirlwind campaign and heaven knows how

many lives lost. My uncle was there as a neutral. He had no definite authority behind him or if he had, diplomacy forbade his using it. He is not one who takes risks.”

“Those days are past,” Matresser replied, “but it is queer to meet you again, mademoiselle.”

“Why?”

“Because then the world was more or less in peril. To-day one hears—I am no politician—one understands that there are even greater dangers still threatening.”

“Tell me about them,” she begged.

He shook his head.

“It is I who should ask you for news,” he replied. “I have been away for over two years. I have not even seen a copy of the *Times* for many months.”

She leaned back amongst her cushions and there was a very sad light in her eyes.

“As for me,” she sighed, “there has been nothing for years but suffering and distress. I am after all an Austrian and whatever faults we may have as a nation we love our country. If your wanderings had ever led you to visit Vienna and if you gave yourself the trouble to compare the present with the past you would realise the bitter sufferings and humiliations through which we have passed.”

“But you still have hopes.”

She looked at him with a swift intensive glance of enquiry. His face, as it always seemed, was like a mask.

“You mean,” she said under her breath, “if we, the only nation which has preserved its aristocracy, were to throw in our weight with the people’s god.”

“I do not believe,” he protested, “that any one of your statesmen would lend himself to such a suggestion.”

She leaned towards him.

“What other hope have we?”

“Why ask me? I only know, as many others must, that Hellstern has created a Frankenstein and must have outside help or be crushed himself. Tell me about your uncle. He was always my idea of a great statesman. I hear, by the by, that he is very popular indeed at Court here.”

“It is a pleasant thing to know,” she said, “but alas, where will that lead to? He is almost an old man, you know, Lord Matresser. He has not the force or the courage left to strike a blow for his country. Let us talk of this no more. . . . Even at this terrible time of the year I cannot tell you how much I admire this peaceful English country of yours; also, I admire so much, your mother. A *grande dame* in a living world. And Ann—such a brilliant young person. I never thought I would care for another girl as I do for Ann.”

“It was a great surprise to find you here,” he meditated.

“It was not, I hope, an unhappy one?” she asked.

He did not at once reply. She looked at him curiously.

“I am not a sentimental person,” he said, “but I may tell you this—may I not? I have always hoped that we might meet again. It is a great, a very great pleasure for me to return and find you a member of my household. Still, it is also a great surprise.”

“Why?”

“We never met in those few days of tragedy,” he explained, “but of course one heard you spoken of. Your family was supposed to be one of the fortunate ones who had survived the war and was still wealthy and powerful.”

“We were wealthy and powerful still because we owned great estates in Germany and Hungary as well as in Austria. These were confiscated and all the income that came from them. You know what has happened to our currency. If it had not been for the great store of jewels which none of my people has ever been content to part with we should have been as badly off as the others. As it is, I am glad to be here, but that is chiefly because I love to be with Ann. If some day none of you like me any more and you send me away—well, even then I should not be like some of my less fortunate fellow countrywomen—I should not starve.”

The badminton was broken up. Ann came over and joined them.

“You do not play to-night, Elisabeth?” she asked.

“You will excuse, please,” the girl answered. “That wind this afternoon—I think I hear it still in my ears. I should have had a headache but it has passed while I have been talking

to your brother.”

“You ought not to have gone out on such a day,” Ann expostulated. “I know quite well that it was because you had promised to do something for mother. It would have been much better if we had telephoned.”

“I rather like driving in the rain,” Elisabeth declared, “and as for the roads—you should see what we have to go over at home—twelve miles of mule track in the mountains, almost impassable, and even if we had the money, we are not allowed to employ anyone to work on them. All the labour must be spent on the railways and the main roads. It is quite right but it makes a part of the world like this a paradise in which to dwell.”

The last rubber of bridge had come to an end. Matresser strolled across the room.

“Will you have a whisky and soda here, sir,” he asked the Dean, “or down in my den?”

“If I may be excused,” the latter begged. “I took an extra glass of your wonderful port and I feel happy and sleepy.”

“Notwithstanding a revoke,” his wife observed severely.

“Since you mention the fact, I believe that some slight incident of the sort did occur,” the Dean admitted.

“On the other hand you must admit that I played that last hand marvellously,” Stephen Hennerley chuckled. “We won the rubber and deserved to. Very enjoyable bridge on the whole.”

“Delightful,” the Dean’s wife assented. “I only hope that we shall be able to steal away from all these wonderful players tomorrow night.”

“I’ll guarantee it,” Matresser promised. “You shall have a specially arranged table. What about you, Stephen? Are you coming down for a nightcap?”

26

“I would rather not, if you don’t mind,” his brother-in-law begged. “If I do change my mind I know I shall find everything I want in our sitting-room.”

“Then come along, Andrews,” Matresser said, waving his hand. “You and I will be the only dissolute ones.”

27

CHAPTER IV

A pipe, a final whisky and soda and a tête-à-tête in the gunroom at the Great House was the usual way of ending an evening during the shooting season when Matresser was at home and the doctor one of the guests. The latter threw himself into an easy chair and leaned back with a sigh of satisfaction as the door closed behind them.

“Cigar or cigarette?” his host enquired.

“I will smoke my pipe, if I may,” the doctor replied, producing it from his pocket. “I say, it is good to have you back again, Matresser.”

“I’m not sorry to be here myself, especially as I won a three-to-one bet that I would never reach Norfolk alive. Say when.”

“Just a splash more soda, please. Thanks.”

Andrews accepted his glass, lit his pipe and presented the appearance of a man thoroughly at ease with himself and the world.

“You will forgive me, won’t you, Matresser,” he begged, “but what do you mean about that bet? I never saw a man in my life who looked fitter than you do, and you can’t be more than—let me see—thirty-seven or thirty-eight. You were twenty-eight when you succeeded, weren’t you?”

“That’s right,” Matresser acquiesced, producing his own pipe and filling it gravely. “You must not take me too seriously, doctor,” he went on with a twinkle in his eyes. “It was not exactly a matter of health. The fact of it is that I chose to interfere in a matter which my friend thought a little indiscreet and he was trying to bring me into a saner frame of mind.”

“Oh, that was it, was it?”

Matresser nodded.

“I honestly believe,” he continued, “that I am in as perfect health as any man of my age could hope to be. It was not that at all. When one has led the sort of life I have, knocking about all the time in foreign countries, and there’s a chance of real adventure, one is inclined to take risks which would seem appalling enough home here. Anyway, you see, I have won my bet. Here I am safe and sound and wondering whether I have forgotten how to swing a shotgun. I have carried nothing but a rifle for months.”

“It won’t make any difference to you,” the doctor sighed. “If I were in your place I should do nothing but poke at the birds for a week. You will bring them down with that lazy graceful sweep of yours with never a miss.”

“Wish I could believe it.”

There was a brief pause. Matresser pushed the tobacco a little further down into the bowl of his pipe.

“By the by, you are a great pal of my mother’s, Andrews,” he remarked. “Have you any idea why she suddenly decided that Ann needed a companion and what made her bring

Mademoiselle Stamier down into this part of the world?”

The doctor smoked on in silence for several moments.

“Your mother does occasionally come to me for advice,” he admitted. “On this occasion she did not. We were none of us prepared for such a visitation.”

“Visitation?” Matresser queried thoughtfully.

29

“Can’t think of any other word for the moment,” Andrews confessed. “She has been here a little over a year and there’s not a man I know who hasn’t lost his heart to her.”

“Including yourself?”

“Including myself,” Andrews groaned. “It’s no good—I know that all right—but for the rest of my life I shall go on thinking that she is the most beautiful creature God ever created. I’d marry her to-morrow if she’d have me.”

Matresser, through half-closed eyes, looked across at his guest and took careful note of him. Samuel Andrews, M.D., was a very fair type of the country doctor—a short man, stockily built, with correct manners, narrow vision, sufficient knowledge of his craft to earn something of a reputation and absolutely content with his life.

“I should put her out of my mind, if I were you,” Matresser advised.

“I have never allowed myself to put her there,” was the mournful reply.

“What I cannot make out,” Matresser continued, “is why she consented to come. She strikes me as a young lady who has been used to a very different atmosphere.”

“I saw you look at her when she came in,” Andrews confessed. “To tell you the truth it put a queer idea into my head. I wondered whether you had ever met her before.”

“Hard to remember exactly,” was the careless reply. “One meets so many people. A month in the cities and a year or more in the wild spots of the world and you find that your memory is perforated—everything has slipped away. All the same you can make sure of one thing. Whether I have ever seen her before or not it was a great surprise to me to see her established in this household.”

30

“I can’t understand how any man could ever have met Mademoiselle Stamier before and forgotten her,” the doctor said stubbornly.

“That might depend upon the life one was leading at the time. I do hope, Andrews,” his host continued, looking across at him earnestly, “that you are not taking this affair seriously?”

“I am not because I know that it is hopeless. I have nothing to offer a woman like that. All the same if I thought that there was the slightest chance of her saying yes I would ask her to marry me to-morrow.”

Matresser shook his head.

“Get it out of your head, old chap,” he begged. “Mademoiselle is charming to look at, wonderful to listen to, but I don’t think

that she is intensely marriageable.”

“Are you sure that you have never met her before?” the doctor asked point-blank.

There followed a few moments of brief significant silence. The little doctor felt his cheek burning. He was afraid to meet the mildly questioning gaze of the man who lounged in the opposite chair. He was thinking of the days when he had been the willing fag and slave of the young Lord of Matresser, honoured by his notice, proud of each distinction which he collected with such facile effortless ease. The inferiority complex of years seemed suddenly to have returned. He would sooner have bitten his tongue out than have repeated that clumsy question.

“If I had,” Matresser answered, and though his voice was raised scarcely above a whisper it seemed to Andrews that an icy chill had crept into the room, “it would not suit me just at the moment to divulge the fact. Have you your car outside?”

31

“Of course.”

“I should like to drive back with you and have a look at your patient. I should be perfectly within my province as chief magistrate for the district in asking him a few questions.”

The doctor removed his pipe from his mouth. He was frankly astonished.

“Do you mean to come down with me to-night to the surgery just to interrogate this fellow?”

“Why not? It is only a few minutes’ drive and the night is young. We all have our foibles, you know. I dislike strangers hanging about the place.”

The doctor rose to his feet.

“Well, you are the Lord of the Manor and the great man of the neighbourhood,” he acknowledged. “If you feel that it is worth your while, I am at your service. I will fetch my coat and hat.”

“You don’t need to,” his host replied, knocking out the ashes from his pipe. “You will find them in your car outside the private entrance here. I made up my mind soon after dinner that I should ask you to take me for this little spin. We don’t want to wake up anyone at the front.”

“What an organiser,” the doctor observed. “I forgot that you had a private entrance here.”

“We need one,” was the careless explanation. “Two of the keepers are up here every morning to get out the guns and fill the cartridge bags when there’s much doing. This way!”

It was about a mile and a half to the doctor’s house along an almost typical Norfolk lane. They had jogged along about half of the distance with only the side lights burning, when Andrews broke off in the middle of a thrilling account of the misdemeanours of a certain magistrate and, with a startled exclamation, jammed down his brakes, swung almost into the hedge on the left-hand side and blew his hooter furiously. The night was still a ragged one. The wind was blowing half a gale behind them from seawards and a scurry of black clouds blotted out the feeble light of the moon. Matresser had been conscious

of nothing save a slight pushing against the side of the car but, like most men who have led a more or less adventurous life, he was leaning forward in his place, tense and expectant. The doctor threw open the door and sprang into the middle of the road. He stood there looking down the lane in the direction from which they had come, and his language was distinctly unprofessional. Matresser stepped lightly to his side.

“What on earth was that?” he asked.

“A car driven by a lunatic,” Andrews exclaimed furiously.

“Curse the fellow! Not a single light showing. Not a thing to be heard with this accursed wind blowing and he must have been travelling at forty miles an hour. If I had not just managed that slight swing away we should have had him on top of us.”

Matresser stood looking for a moment earnestly into the pool of blackness and beyond on the right-hand side to the faintly shining harbour lamp.

“Let me see,” he reflected, “unless you have been building any new roads during the last two years, Andrews, this lane only leads to the Great House and the quay.”

“That’s all,” the doctor acquiesced. “I don’t know what you think, Matresser, but I am all for turning round and going after the fellow. He can’t get any further than the harbour and if he’s as mad as he seems to be he will drive straight into it.”

Matresser thrust his head inside the doctor’s coupé whilst he lit a cigarette.

“The fellow might go into hiding anywhere if he thinks he has done any damage,” he pointed out. “There are two lanes into the woods, you know. When you drive me back we could have a look for him.”

They started off again with a cautionary hoot or two and headlights blazing. There was no sign of any other traffic on the road, however, and the lights in the straggling village of Upper Matresser were all extinguished as the doctor brought his car to a standstill before a long house of ancient red brick fronting the street.

“The surgery entrance, if you don’t mind,” Andrews proposed. “I see my housekeeper has gone to bed so that means the patient is asleep. He is in the room I call my clinic just above the surgery. I’ll take you up there and you can have a word or two with him whilst I knock up the constable and tell him about that car.”

He led the way after a few minutes’ fumbling for the key through the surgery across a small oak-panelled hall of irregular shape and dimensions to a flight of crazy stairs. Arrived on the first floor, he paused to listen for a moment outside one of the rooms.

“Quite all right,” he whispered, opening the door. “Not a sound. The fellow’s asleep. I gave him a mild dose of bromidia before I went out—just enough to keep him quiet.”

Matresser passed on into the sleeping chamber, a pleasant airy room with old-fashioned furniture and chintz hangings. A motionless figure was lying humped up underneath the coverlet of a small four-poster bed. The room was a picture

of neatness except for a disordered mass of garments which seemed to have been thrown at random upon the floor. The doctor glanced at them with a puzzled frown and hurried to the bedside. He pulled down the coverlet and examined his patient briefly. When he turned away he was clearly puzzled.

“Anything wrong?” Matresser asked.

Andrews shook his head.

“Not actually wrong,” he replied. “A trifle confusing—that’s all. There’s only my old housekeeper, Anna Foulds, in the place and she’s a model of neatness. This fellow has not been out of bed since I left. I can tell, because I arranged the pillow and blankets myself. His clothes were all neatly folded up and laid out on that sofa. Now, as you can see, it looks as though an earthquake had struck them.”

“How do you account for it?” Matresser asked quietly.

The doctor had learnt his lesson for the evening and he knew enough to keep the irritation out of his tone as he replied: “I can’t.”

“Do you suggest that a third person has been here—a nonresident of the house?”

“It seems absurd,” the doctor replied, “but what else is there to think? Mrs. Foulds would never have left his clothes in that condition and I’ll wager my patient hasn’t left the bed.”

“She may have let in a caller during your absence,” Matresser suggested.

“Anything like this is possible, of course,” Andrews admitted. “Anyhow, it is not worth while making a mystery of it. You can wake him up quite safely, Matresser, and ask him any questions you want. I will just step across to the police station, then I’ll come back and bandage his head up for the night.”

Matresser acquiesced silently. He waited until Andrews had descended, until in fact he heard his footsteps in the street below, then he moved over to the bedside and laid his fingers upon the sleeping man’s shoulder.

“Fergus,” he cried softly. “Wake up! Do you hear? Wake up!”

The man opened his eyes. He stared hard at Matresser, with only a troubled sort of recognition.

“Pull yourself together, Fergus. You seem to have been in the wars but you are all right now. You recognise me?”

The sick man raised himself a little.

“You are Matresser, aren’t you?” he asked in a puzzled tone. “Where on earth am I and how did I get here? Did I reach the Great House after all?”

“You were picked up in a field within half a mile of the Great House,” his visitor told him. “They brought you to the local doctor’s. You will be all right in a day or two but you have had a nasty blow. Remember how you came by it?”

The man raised himself a little further in the bed. He was still pale but there was a livid spot of colour in each cheek. It was

obvious that he was only making troubled progress towards recovery.

“I remember perfectly well,” he confided. “It all came back to me in a sort of dream about an hour or so ago. Ever since then I have been lying here kicking myself. I deserve to be thrown out of the service. I probably shall.”

36

“Tell me about it, anyway,” Matresser persisted.

“I was motoring down,” he recounted, “in a small government car—a Morris, as a matter of fact—and just as I was mounting the hill to Cley, someone on a motor bicycle passed me, wheeled round and stood with his hand up in the air. I thought he wanted to ask the way, or something, and I pulled up, too.”

“On government service,” Matresser reminded him quietly.

“No use rubbing it in, sir,” the man replied. “I would not have stopped anywhere, in any other country, but here I was in one of the quietest corners of England and very near the end of my journey and, frankly, it never entered into my head that this was anything but an ordinary request for help of some sort. No use making excuses, I know. I did it. The person who had descended asked me if I could oblige him with a spanner. He had left his while tightening up a joint on Newmarket Heath. I went round the back of my car to unstrap the toolbox and whilst I was doing it I got a blow on the back of my head which almost knocked me out.”

“And after that?”

“I was not quite unconscious,” the other went on, “and when I

came to I was lying on my back in the road, my mackintosh and overcoat had been torn open and the man was feeling in my inner pocket where, as a matter of fact, the letter I was bringing to you is concealed. I gave myself another ten seconds whilst the fellow fumbled—he did not seem much of an expert—and then I made my effort. I rolled over on my side, kicked him on the shin and staggered to my feet. Then we had something of a set-to. I suppose he would have laid me out in time but just at first it seemed to me that I was getting the better of him. I had a revolver in the car pocket and I tried all the time to struggle near to the door which was left open. Then we both fell away for a moment—we saw some motor lights flashing down the hill and knew that a car was coming. He jumped on his motor bicycle and started off straight for the coast. I wasted a few seconds taking out my revolver. I let fly the moment I had it out but his lamp went out, he rode away slap into the darkness and I don't think I ever came near him.”

37

“And then?”

“More bungling, I suppose,” the man in bed groaned. “The motor van—it was too large for an ordinary car—turned at right angles at the top of the hill back to Blakeney. The storm was so bad that I don't think I could ever have turned round and caught him up and it seemed to me that I'd better make a dash for Matresser. When I tried to drive the car, however, I found that my head was going round so that I could scarcely steer. I got some water and bathed my head and tried again but after a mile or two I went straight into the ditch. I was close here then but it was no good my trying to drive the car. I tried to get here on foot and I was within sight of the house when I had to climb a gate. That's the last thing I remember.”

“Tell me, what were you bringing to me?”

“A document of some sort. It was wrapped up in a piece of oilcloth.”

“Did the man on the road get away with it?”

“He did not,” was the fervent answer. “You will find the letter in my inside pocket. I am only praying that you will take it away with you.”

38

“I will do that,” Matresser promised. “After all,” he added a little more kindly, “the final test—especially in our sort of work—is whether you bring it off or not. Your job was to bring that letter to me and so long as you have done it the few little slips you seem to have made can be forgotten.”

The man smiled gravely.

“Would you mind?” he begged. “The doctor said I might have a drink if I woke up. It is on the table there.”

Matresser poured some water into a glass. The patient sipped it greedily.

“That’s better, sir,” he sighed. “I am beginning to see things more clearly. You are Lord Matresser, aren’t you?”

“Quite right.”

“I wonder, would you mind going over to my coat and helping yourself to the letter. It’s in the inner pocket.”

“You’re in a hurry to get rid of it,” Matresser remarked good-humouredly.

The man on the bed raised himself slightly and clasped his head with both hands.

“Of course,” he acknowledged, “I am half crazy. I know that. But everything seems to have gone so queerly with me since I got that knock on the head. This evening I was sleeping quite peacefully and I seemed to have a sort of dream. . . . There was a woman—not the old lady who put me to bed and sponged me when I was brought here, but a younger woman—dark. I thought I saw her lean over the coat and I suppose I made a noise. . . . She came over to the bed and I . . . It’s awfully hard to explain! One moment the woman was looking down at me with 39 great angry eyes and then she seemed to float away. . . . I felt a prick in my arm. . . . I opened my eyes and she was still there, then I slept again or dozed until just now when you came in. God! How the room swims!”

“Don’t talk any more,” Matresser enjoined.

It seemed a needless command, for the man had closed his eyes and was breathing heavily. Matresser crossed the room, picked up the Norfolk jacket and thrust his hand into the pocket which Fergus had indicated. He brought out two strips of cardboard cut through the middle and a sheet of oilcloth cut into four squares. The place where the letter had been was clearly indicated. But there was no letter!

Matresser stole back on tiptoe to the bed. Fergus had closed his eyes and seemed to be still dozing heavily. Cautiously his

visitor stretched out his hand, stooped, picked up from the carpet a sinister-looking small object which seemed to have rolled an inch or two under the bed. He turned it over between his fingers. It was a clinical syringe, curiously shaped. He looked at it more closely. After all, it might be harmless. Suddenly Fergus spoke—thickly, eagerly—but there was a sort of film over his eyes and his voice was indistinct.

“You have it all right, sir?”

Matresser thrust the oilcloth, the cardboard and the syringe into his pocket.

“Everything all right, Fergus,” he said. “Try and drop off to sleep if you can.”

The man on the bed drew a sigh of relief. His breathing became more regular. He slept.

CHAPTER V

The doctor was in the inner surgery making up a bottle of medicine. Matresser watched until he had finished, then he drew him back into the cosy sitting-room.

“What about a small peg before we take the road again, Andrews?” he suggested.

“An excellent idea,” was the cheerful reply.

The doctor mixed the drinks. His visitor lolled back in the well-worn leather chair watching him. When his tumbler arrived, he took a contemplative sip and set the glass down.

“I am going to let you into a secret, Andrews,” he announced.

“Your patient upstairs was bringing a rather important message down to me from an official source in London. He was attacked on the road but he seems to have got down here all right.”

“The devil!” the doctor murmured. “Has he handed the letter over?”

“He thinks he has,” Matresser replied, “but as a matter of fact he hasn’t. It appears to have been stolen.”

Andrews set down his glass and stared across the room.

“I can’t follow you,” he said simply.

“Trifle confusing, isn’t it?” Matresser observed. “Well then, this is what happened. Fergus—his name is Fergus—told me in which pocket of his coat to find the letter. I searched that pocket and I found the oilcloth in which the letter had been enclosed carefully cut open, also the pieces of cardboard. The place where the letter should have been was there. The letter itself was gone.”

“Who does he think could have got at it?”

“He doesn’t know that it was not there,” Matresser explained patiently. “Listen, Andrews. The man’s ill—I’m sure of that. He needs sleep and rest. He would not get either if I told him that the letter had been stolen. I let him think, therefore, that it was in my pocket and that his job had been safely accomplished. You must back me up if he asks any questions.”

“If the letter was of any importance,” the doctor observed, “you are being very decent about it, Matresser.”

“Not at all. There is nothing to be gained by worrying Fergus and I am not at all sure that he is pulling through quite as well as you think. However, that’s not the point for the moment. Accepting his story of the whole affair, which I am willing to do without reservation, who is there who has had a chance of stealing that letter?”

Andrews reflected.

“The person who attacked him on the road,” he suggested.

“Impossible,” was the calm reply. “The oilcloth and cardboard were cut through with a pocket knife and without undue haste.

That could not have been done during a struggle. Nothing happened to him in the inn, where he stopped for water, therefore the first opportunity was whilst he was lying unconscious in that field of roots. Humphreys was the first to find him and he was brought straight here.”

“Precisely. My household consists of Mrs. Foulds and myself. You cannot suspect either of us of pocket-picking.”

“Granted,” Matresser agreed. “Anyone else possess a key to your surgery?”

“Not a—not a soul,” Andrews declared.

42

“Why the break in your sentence?”

“It’s a queer coincidence, but it can’t amount to anything,” the doctor meditated. “It seemed funny at the time, that’s all. You see,” he went on, “I always keep my surgery key in the right-hand pocket of my overcoat. When we reached here to-night you saw me fumble about for some time. I ultimately discovered it in the left-hand pocket of my coat.”

“You think someone may have borrowed it while you were dining, eh?”

“I left it in one pocket when I gave my things to your butler,” Andrews declared obstinately. “It was in a different pocket when I reached home to-night. If you can make anything of that, do. I can’t.”

“Mystery upon mystery,” Matresser said lightly as he rose to his feet. “We will let the matter rest there for the moment, I think.

Don't let the man know that the letter is missing, and have another look at him before you go to bed. I didn't exactly like his appearance, but it may have been fancy. Are you ready to take me back now or have you any late visits?"

"Taking you back right away."

"Do you remember the place," Matresser asked as soon as they had started, "where that mysterious vehicle nearly ran into us?"

"I shall never forget it."

"Just stop there for a minute, then, there's a good fellow."

The doctor, who was driving with full headlights on, did as he was asked.

"Got a torch?" Matresser enquired.

His companion produced one from the pocket of the car. Matresser disappeared for several moments, but when he returned he was smiling.

43

"Andrews," he declared as he took his place in the automobile, "if I were to start life again I should choose to be a detective."

"Why?"

"I should walk through the world in lowlier mood because I should know what a fool I was."

Matresser let himself into the Great House by the insignificant

side entrance which communicated with the gunroom below and his own private suite of apartments on the first floor. He was scarcely surprised to find Henry Yates, deeply absorbed in a detective story, waiting up for him.

“Anything special?”

Yates gravely marked the page in his story and laid the volume down.

“MI7B rang up about a quarter of an hour ago,” he reported. “They have established a special private line between Norwich and here. They wish to speak to you upon it.”

“You can get them,” Matresser directed.

In five minutes, Matresser found himself speaking to an office in Whitehall. The low confidential voice at the other end was easily recognisable.

“That’s Lord Matresser?”

“Speaking.”

“Sir Francis would like a word or two with you personally. This is a private line upon which we are established now. Could you wait for a few minutes?”

“Certainly,” Matresser replied. “I shall await Sir Francis’ convenience.”

There was a brief silence. Matresser lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair. Presently a familiar voice spoke.

“Matresser?”

“Speaking.”

“I sent you a long letter yesterday.”

“So I understand. Your messenger, Fergus, is lying in the local doctor’s clinic with concussion. He was attacked on the road and the letter stolen. I have just come from his bedside.”

“Whereabouts was he attacked?”

“Within a few miles of here. Can you send me a copy of the letter?”

“I must consider that. Tell me, have you or Fergus any ideas about this theft?”

“At present none.”

“The French are very busy, of course. Anything stirring in that direction that you know of?”

“Nothing.”

There was a groan either of dissatisfaction or doubt.

“You won’t be leaving the country without notice?”

“I have only one engagement,” Matresser replied. “Sandringham to shoot, dine and sleep on the thirtieth.”

“I shall be there between now and then. We must not clash.

Remember that, Matresser. There could not be a worse place for us to meet, and you had better take from the third to the eighth out of your diary. You may find those days exceptionally occupied. The contents of that letter would have explained how. I prefer for the moment to leave it.”

“I am quite content to know nothing about the letter,” Matresser said.

“Better so,” the other approved. “We have just had specifications from our liaison man in the telegraphs of a new invention that taps the telephone by wireless. Still, I will go so far as to tell you this. As regards Colony Number Seven—”

45

A thin squeaky voice intervened.

“The connection is interrupted,” it announced. “An attempt is being made between Norwich and Holt to tap the private line.”

Matresser replaced his receiver. He looked thoughtfully across at Yates.

“By the by, Henry,” he said, “you don’t happen to have come across her ladyship’s new lady’s maid? Hortense her name is, I think. Brilliant eyes—very Parisian.”

Henry Yates smiled.

“I have received a note from the young lady,” he confided. “She admits to feeling very lonely here because none of the other servants speak French. She asks if half an hour’s conversation now and then would be possible.”

Matresser smiled.

“Go to it, Henry,” he advised. “Mademoiselle Hortense has already the too eager gleam in her eyes. She will give herself away.”

“But what has mademoiselle to learn from us?” Yates proceeded. “We are her allies.”

“France mistrusts everybody,” Matresser told his secretary as he rose to his feet, “but just now, believe me, if there is any nation whom she mistrusts more than any other, it is England.”

CHAPTER VI

Matresser, at the close of the last partridge drive before luncheon on the following morning, waited for Andrews, who was struggling along in the rear, and who hurried up full of apologies.

“Terribly sorry to have missed a slice out of the morning, Matresser,” he apologised. “I simply couldn’t help it.”

“My friend who got into trouble on his way down was not responsible, I hope?”

“No, it was an outside patient altogether,” the doctor confided. “A man who brought a small private yacht into the harbour last night. He seems to have twisted his ankle, and one or two of the crew had cuts and bruises. I didn’t know how serious it might have been so I felt obliged to go. I called in to tell Humphreys on the way down. I hear you have had a thundering good morning.”

“I forget what we get here generally,” Matresser admitted, “but everyone seems to have been shooting very well. The pheasants flew really high over the home woods. You arrived here in time for that, I was glad to see.”

“Best shooting I ever had in my life,” Andrews declared enthusiastically.

“Who is this new patient of yours on the yacht?” Matresser

enquired.

“Tells me that he is a Dutchman and that his name is Jan van Westrheene. He is a perfect giant of a fellow—pretty glum, with the air of trying to make himself amiable all the time.”

47

“I caught a glimpse of him bringing the boat in,” Matresser observed. “He looked like a Viking who had taken the wrong turn. Nothing serious the matter with him, I suppose?”

“Bruises and a slight sprain, that’s all,” the doctor confided. “He must be something of a seaman to have brought in a boat that size. The pier master told me that he was at the helm all the time and that he never saw a finer piece of work.”

“What brought him into these parts at this time of the year, I wonder?” Matresser speculated.

“Just what I wanted to ask him myself, but he didn’t give me any encouragement.”

“Did he say how long he was staying?”

“Not for very long, I gathered, but he can’t leave the harbour just yet. The wind’s only fallen on the land. Just one of those extraordinary Norfolk tempests, yesterday’s seems to have been, that blow themselves out and then fade dead away. It is as still as possible everywhere here but there’s a swell out at sea and will be for days in these narrow approaches. A boat like his would be almost unmanageable by the estuary.”

“And how is your home patient?” Matresser enquired, glancing

across at the village.

“To tell you the truth,” the other confessed, “I have not been in to see him this morning. I should think you will be able to get him away whenever you want. The only thing that puzzles me is where and how anyone could have taken that letter away from him.”

The two men looked round at the sound of galloping hoofs coming down the ride. Lady Ann and Elisabeth Stamier cantered up to them.

48

“We have come to lunch, Ronnie. Is that all right?” the former called out.

“I should say so,” her brother assented hospitably. “Your mother may be coming down. Mrs. Humphreys is getting the best parlour ready I know.”

He handed his gun to his loader and crossed to Elisabeth’s side.

“I’m afraid you find this branch of our English sport rather tame, Mademoiselle Stamier,” he remarked.

“But on the contrary I love it,” she assured him. “There are so many other things beside the actual shooting. A morning like this when there are so many changing lights and colourings, your country is very beautiful—and your home and its entourage reminds me, except that we have not the sea, of some of our own country châteaux as they used to be when I was a child.”

He lingered by her side, although he found conversation with her difficult.

“Do you ride a great deal when you are at home?” he asked her.

“I have no home nowadays,” she told him. “Both our winter and summer places were given up for hospitals and then convalescent homes and finally those in the cities for Bureaux of Public Works. It was a great thing for me that although my uncle is, of course, a Royalist, the government always keep him working for them. That is why I am able to travel, why I was in Paris when I met your mother and Ann.”

“You have been here long?” he asked.

“Here and in Paris. My uncle’s French is not very good and owing to the frequent changes of government we are never properly represented in any place. My uncle has often been sent to France on special missions and then I go with him. Those are not very often joyous expeditions. Paris is less like itself since the war than any other city.”

49

“It is unfortunate,” he agreed, “but it is very true. At the present moment there is no country which is expressing itself so feebly as France.”

“It brought me one happy adventure at any rate,” Elisabeth said with a smile. “I met your mother there and she asked me to come and stay with Ann for a time. That has been altogether delightful.”

“You will find it restful here, at least. You are young, though, to need rest.”

“If I am sometimes fatigued,” she answered, looking upwards through the stark branches of the leafless trees, “it is because I

spend myself in useless efforts.”

“You should avoid that at all costs,” he told her. “There may be great work to be done before very long but just now one needs to be very careful. To help France especially is extraordinarily difficult. France is like a hydra-headed monster. It is so easy to pat the wrong head and to be drowned in the storm of that man’s failure.”

She leaned towards him.

“You are not talking,” she said, “like the Earl of Matresser of the Great House, Chief of the Bench of Magistrates and soon to be Lord Lieutenant of this County!”

“I am not,” he admitted, “and I have said more to you than I would say to any other person alive. Is there any return you can make me?”

She waited, but purposely he asked no more questions. She leaned forward and patted her mare’s neck, bringing her to a standstill for a moment. She pointed down one of the cross drives.

50

“Your woods are so beautiful,” she said, “even now in winter when the trees are bare and one can see so much of the sky. In spring they tell me the undergrowth is full of bluebells and primroses. That must be lovely.”

“You will be here to see them, I hope.”

“Do you really hope that, Lord Matresser?” she asked, a faint wistfulness in her tone.

“I do,” he answered. “I think that you are much better here than in Paris, for example.”

“I am not sure,” she murmured. “Just now the whole world is so unsettled. England alone remains calm and composed. It rests one to be here. Germany terrifies me. My own country is a country of sad-eyed toilers with broken ambitions and broken hearts. France, still powerful, is like a mighty anthill of nerves. Oh, I do not know! I think England is the most peaceful country.”

“I suppose that depends upon what one seeks in life. You have, I should imagine,” he meditated as they rounded a corner and came within sight of the others, “a somewhat restless disposition.”

“Do not tell your mother that,” she begged. “I think that was her only fear when she brought me here. Of course it is true. I cannot help feeling the fever sometimes. You, too—yes? You are what they call in your own language something of a fraud. You do not lead the quiet life of the English nobleman who loves only his country sports and his home politics. That is not your entire rôle in life, although you would have others believe it!”

“A counter attack,” he observed smiling.

“In your mind you probably add to yourself an impertinence,” she sighed. “You are perhaps right but I should like you to be fair to me.”

51

“I should be miserable if I were anything else,” he assured her.

“You are not an easy person to understand,” she went on. “Even your mother admits that. You are silent because there is a great

deal at the back of your mind that you could share with no one, but I should like you to have just enough feeling for me—enough faith, shall I say?—to remain oblivious to anything which troubles you.”

He looked down the avenue for a moment, without speech, to the meadow at the opening of the woods and the gamekeeper’s lodge beyond, on the lawn of which the beaters were busy laying out the game. In the background, the Great House dominated the landscape, somewhat grim in the clear winter light with its lordly towers and long rows of mullioned windows, an incongruous and yet in a way a harmonious structure.

“Well, I’ll try,” he promised. “I am not really so suspicious as I seem but I have not quite forgotten, you know, that chance meeting. You were with your uncle—you remember it?—somewhere in North Africa.”

“Yes, I remember it,” she answered unwillingly.

“Cannot you see how difficult that makes it for me to look upon you as an ordinary member of my household?” he asked.

She was silent for a moment. Her left hand suddenly rested upon his shoulder. It stayed there scarcely a second but he seemed to feel the thrill of its caress through the leather patch on his heavy shooting jacket.

“We should never be enemies,” she told him softly. “We have both of us too much the spirit for right living. All that I ask of you just now is that you remain a little tolerant. Do not think of me as even a possible enemy. That could never be. Talk

with me sometimes. Please try to know me a little better. I have no evil thoughts in anything I do but the greatest passion in my life is my love of my country. If something should arrive which made it possible for me to help her, I should do it, but I would do nothing to harm anyone like yourself under whose roof I am living.”

Her last words, although in a sense consolatory, left him with a faint feeling of uneasiness which lingered with him more or less throughout the day. Nevertheless, he performed flawlessly his duty as host to a very distinguished gathering of sportsmen. He shot very little himself after lunch but he was always on the spot to comment upon the prowess of others of the party or to change a place which had been indifferently chosen. It was not until his guests from other parts of the county had taken their leave and the house party had changed into slacks and smoking suits and settled down to tea or bridge, that he felt able to slip quietly away.

In the library of his private suite, Matresser found waiting for him the man whom he had often declared in various places to be the only person he had ever known in any walk of life who had never made a mistake. He was engaged at the moment of his employer's entrance in manipulating with the fingers of one hand only but with incredible speed a noiseless typewriter. He rose at once to his feet, an undersized man, frail, with a short brown beard streaked with grey and wearing thick glasses.

“Good evening, Henry,” Matresser greeted him as he took up a position on the hearthrug with his back to the log fire. “Heaps of news for you. Anything happened here?”

“A note from the gentleman who arrived in the harbour during the storm of last night,” Henry Yates reported. “You would like, perhaps, to glance at it yourself.”

Matresser drew a blue sheet of note paper from the square envelope which Yates handed to him, and read the few lines:

Yacht Daphne.

My Lord,

A stranger driven into your harbour by distress of weather would esteem the honour of paying his respects to you at any suitable hour.

Faithfully yours,

JAN VAN WESTRHEENE.

“Foreign trick, that, isn’t it?” Matresser remarked, tapping a cigarette against his case and lighting it.

“I suppose it is a foreign habit, sir, to call first upon any person of distinction. In any case, I thought you might like to see him. I ventured to tell him six o’clock.”

“Excellent.”

“Furthermore,” Yates continued, “I noticed through my glasses at luncheontime that the yacht is flying the ensign, which apparently is out of order as Van Westrheene is not a member of the Squadron or of the Royal Thames Yacht Club.”

“He must be a bit of a seaman all the same,” Matresser

observed. "All the more so if the yacht is a chartered one. I saw him bring her in himself last night. That reminds me, Yates. You will have to look out for yourself. Seems to me we are drifting back into prehistoric times. You heard part of my conversation with Sir Francis Tring last night. Someone had a whack at that poor chap who is lying at the doctor's with concussion. Someone near here, too. He was carrying a letter addressed to me which is missing."

"I understood, of course, that something of the sort had happened," Yates acknowledged, "but I was hoping that the letter itself would turn up. Have you any idea of the nature of its contents, sir?"

"Not exactly," Matresser admitted. "I fancy that Tring is coming down. The most disquieting thing is that it should have happened at all. Who can there be in this neighbourhood who has us under observation?"

"Has your lordship enquired into the credentials of Mademoiselle Stamier?" Yates ventured.

Matresser nodded frowning.

"I am in rather an awkward position about that young lady," he admitted. "Apparently she is here as a sort of companion to my sister, her credentials are official and beyond dispute. She may be working for France, as I daresay she is, and I will admit that we are not quite ready to take France into our whole confidence on certain matters, but that will all be explained so soon that I do not want any trouble. You know how anxious I am that not a soul in our household—"

“Will you pardon my interrupting,” Yates begged, “but the situation is perfectly clear to me. I think it would be unwise to interfere with the young lady in any way. She will be continually under our observation and I do not look upon her as a possible source of danger.”

“You mean,” Matresser remarked, “that she may be more useful than dangerous to us now that she is under surveillance. Besides, in the present instance it is quite impossible that she could have committed a personal assault upon the messenger.”

55

There was a knock at the door. A footman appeared ushering in a visitor.

“Mr. Van Westrheene to see your lordship,” he announced.

Matresser stepped forward with a word of welcome. Henry Yates, from behind the typewriter, ventured to gasp. The visitor was a man considerably over six feet and a half. He was splendidly proportioned and, although his fair hair and short pointed beard were streaked with white, his tanned complexion gave him the appearance of extraordinary health and vigour. He carried a stick in his left hand, however, and limped slightly.

“I have the honour of addressing the Earl of Matresser?” he said, holding out his hand and bowing in severe military fashion. “It is very good of you to receive a chance visitor.”

Again at the touch of the man’s fingers—cold, hard and with a grip suggesting neither cordiality nor friendship—Matresser felt that wave of dislike sweep over him. There was something of evil both in the man’s expression and in his bearing. The smile,

which was meant to express courtesy, was an unpleasant contraction of ill-shaped lips. Even Matresser, whose natural bearing was so entirely courteous and distinguished, felt some difficulty in receiving his visitor with his usual suaveness.

“Very happy to make your acquaintance, Mijnheer Van Westrheene,” he replied formally. “My secretary and I were just speaking of your skill in handling your boat last night. No easy waters, ours, for a stranger.”

56

“I have encountered worse,” the Dutchman confided. “In Sweden, where I often cruise, the currents are not only difficult but dangerous.”

Matresser indicated an easy chair and seated himself opposite.

“I must apologise for fixing so late an hour for your visit,” he said. “I have just returned home after a somewhat prolonged absence and we have had a fairly large shooting party here to-day. I was sorry to hear from our local doctor that some of your men got knocked about in the storm.”

“Nothing serious arrived,” the visitor assured his host. “I myself took a slight toss. This I may explain,” he added, touching his foot with his stick, “is not a permanent—what is the word?—infirmity. Your little doctor soon set us all to rights. An amiable person wildly anxious to get back to his sport, I think.”

“He is a good chap, Andrews, and a country doctor gets a pretty dull time of it. You shoot yourself?”

“I have some thousands of acres preserved on my own land,” the other admitted. “I do not often shoot, however. I prefer the

sea.”

Matresser looked over his shoulder to where Yates was seated, an immovable figure, behind his machine.

“Ring for Burrows, will you, Henry,” he enjoined. “What can I offer you, sir—a cocktail, sherry, whisky?”

The Dutchman beamed.

“It would give me great pleasure to drink a cocktail with you. You say that you have just returned from abroad?”

Matresser nodded.

57

“I have been out of the country for some time.”

“It is good to travel now and then,” his caller observed. “I understood, or did I see it in your newspapers, that you have been big-game shooting in Africa?”

Matresser scarcely heard. The problem of his late whereabouts seemed without interest to him.

“A handy little ketch that of yours,” he remarked. “I had a good view of her whilst I was shaving this morning.”

“She is of the type usually built in my own country,” Van Westrheene confided. “A craft of that sort does not make much speed but it is very good in rough weather. My engines need attention, otherwise I am very well satisfied with the way she stood the storm. I must wait a few days until this swell goes down, then I think I shall probably extend my cruise.”

“Rather an unusual season of the year for this part of the world,” Matresser observed.

“I shall go southwards. If the weather should be propitious, perhaps you would care for a sheltered cruise one day. Your car could meet you anywhere you chose.”

Matresser’s smile carried with it a world of meaning which only Yates, however, was able to appreciate.

“My dear fellow,” Matresser said, “I would not trust myself on board for anything in the world. The fact is, I love the sea but I am a rotten sailor. You will find this cocktail pretty good,” he added. “I have really, as Yates himself knows very well, not enough work for a secretary, but every time I hint as much, he makes a fresh cocktail and when I have drunk it I know that I can never part with him.”

“Mixed, shaken and poured out, too, with one hand,” Van Westrheene remarked, with a note in his voice which was probably as near sympathy as he was ever likely to get. “You type also with the same disadvantage,” he added as he accepted a beautifully frosted glass. “It was the war perhaps—yes?”

58

“It was the war,” Matresser acquiesced. “He would not tell you so himself—infernally modest fellow he is—but he was a great little man in those days. I believe that he possesses more medals than anyone else in the house at the present moment.”

“You were yourself engaged without a doubt?” the visitor asked politely.

“I went out with the Yeomanry, a branch of the service which

was hopelessly muddled up at the commencement of the war. We were too large a force to form an independent unit and after we were disbanded they scarcely knew what to do with us. They took me on in the Artillery at last, but it was a dreary business. If you stay here long enough, Mijnheer Van Westrheene, would you care for a small shoot one day, or a larger one perhaps next week?"

"Any form of shooting would give me great pleasure," the visitor assented. "I have weapons of a sort on board and I would despatch a man to Norwich in search of the requisite ammunition."

"I beg that you will do nothing of the sort," Matresser protested. "We can fit you out with anything you require here."

The caller accepted another cocktail, holding his glass with steady fingers until it was completely filled.

"You have the reputation, Lord Matresser," he said, "of being a great traveller."

"Then my reputation belies me," was the dry response.

"English country life becomes at times monotonous and one is glad then to disappear for a time, but my journeyings are all within a certain orbit. I have never climbed an unknown mountain or named a newly discovered lake."

59

Mijnheer Van Westrheene stroked his sharply pointed beard thoughtfully. His blue eyes were fixed upon his host.

"You have not then, I gather, the same tastes as your father," he observed. "If my memory serves me he was Ambassador at St.

Petersburg in the old days and after that at Rome.”

“My father was considered a brilliant diplomat,” Matresser replied. “He was also a considerable figure in the political world, which I could never be. I had a brother with brains who might have gone in for that sort of thing, but we lost him during the war.”

Van Westrheene rose to his feet. He bowed to Yates, who took his glass from him.

“My congratulations to you,” he said. “I have never tasted a better cocktail.”

“You are very kind, sir,” was the gratified reply.

“I will give myself the pleasure of returning your call within the next few days,” Matresser said. “We have rather a houseful now and it is difficult to get away. Thursday, if you can shoot, I will send a car for you at ten o’clock. You will dine with us afterwards, I trust. My mother, I am sure, would be delighted.”

Van Westrheene did not hesitate for a second. He accepted promptly.

“It will give me great pleasure,” he said solemnly, “to meet her ladyship your mother.”

He crossed the room towards the door—a huge, impressive figure dwarfing in his progress all the contents of the room. On the threshold he turned and bowed again. The footman who had been summoned closed the door. Matresser remained for several moments silent, listening to his firm

footsteps upon the hard oak stairs. He turned to Yates.

“What about that, my astute secretary?”

“I think that before he leaves,” Henry Yates replied, “he will give us something to think about.”

CHAPTER VII

Nothing but their natural good breeding and a certain sense of stupefaction kept Matresser's guests, gathered together at a fixed rendezvous within the park, in a sober frame of mind when Mr. Jan van Westrheene joined the group on Thursday morning. He seemed to disentangle himself inch by inch from the interior of the torpedo-shaped racing car which had fetched him from the harbour, until at last the whole six feet seven inches of him stood—a strange and towering figure—amongst the by no means undersized group of men which comprised the house party. His costume and outfit, too, seemed to add to the unusualness of his appearance. He wore a short double-breasted shooting coat with an enormous collar, both trimmed with thick fur, beneath which his legs, clad in tight riding breeches and gaiters, had slowly appeared, their length unduly exaggerated and the gaiters themselves overlapping a pair of wonderful Hessian boots. His hat was a dark green Homburg felt, ornamented with a row of woodcock pinfeathers on the one side and a single cock's feather on the other. He wore an eyeglass, and his lips assumed their usual fixed contraction—a satyrlike caricature of a smile. He was pleased to see everybody. He had hung a cartridge bag, which must have contained nearly three hundred cartridges, over his shoulder and he had a gun under either arm. He protested smilingly when Humphreys brought up his loader, to whom, however, he was persuaded to transfer all his sporting impedimenta with the exception of his shooting stick. His host was the only one who seemed to take him entirely as a matter of course.

“We are starting with a partridge drive, Van Westrheene,” he announced. “Shoot a high cock pheasant if one comes over. Leave the low hens as they are bound to come out again from the wood.”

“I shoot the hares and rabbits—yes?” Mijnheer Van Westrheene enquired anxiously.

“Rather. We have too many hares. Glad you thought to ask me.”

“Your keeper—he blows a horn, perhaps, when the game rises?”

“He blows a whistle—same thing. The beaters are all waiting now behind those fields of roots. You see the guns on the other side of you? You are number two where your loader is standing and I am number one at the corner there.”

Van Westrheene glanced to the right and to the left, then, as the whistle sounded, he planted his shooting stick in the ground, took up a firm stance in front of it and leaned forward. At the finish of the drive there was no longer anyone inclined to think of him in the least as a figure of fun. Without a tremor, like a perfect machine, he swung his gun and he swept everything on the wing from the skies. Not a smile or a wrinkle on his face betrayed any satisfaction, even when he brought down a woodcock which had been missed all along the line. He took his second gun from the loader with only the slightest movement of the body. His long arms seemed to reach everywhere. Hares were perpetually turning somersaults on either side of him. Matresser, who had shot very little himself at the first, perhaps because he was filled with a certain vague

uneasiness as to what was likely to happen, was surrounded at the end of the drive.

“What on earth is this you have brought down to make us look like farmers on a bank holiday shoot?” Bemrose, the Lord Lieutenant asked him. “Is he a trickster or is this his usual performance?”

“Never saw him before three days ago,” Matresser exclaimed. “He brought his little yacht into the harbour and called at the house to pay his respects. Dutch custom, I suppose. I thought I had better ask him to shoot one day but I never expected a circus turn-out like this.”

“The man is a juggler,” Bemrose declared. “I never saw such shooting. He killed everything within fifty yards, including those His Reverence the Dean missed.”

“Sheer butchery I call it,” another man grumbled.

“No, he shot like a sportsman,” Matresser conceded. “For example, I just asked him to leave the low hens alone and he never raised his gun to one.”

“Van Westrheene,” Bemrose reflected. “I seem to know the name. Has he estates in Holland?”

“He told me he had several thousand acres of shooting there,” Matresser replied.

They made their way down towards the woods. Matresser, during their progress to the stands, caught up with his foreign guest.

“My dear fellow,” he exclaimed, “you have completely astonished our local sportsmen. I never saw anyone shoot with such precision in my life.”

Van Westrheene removed from his lips the cigarette which he had lit, and bowed gravely. Notwithstanding the aroma of the tobacco, the odour of his perfumes and his hair tonic still seemed almost nauseous. His hair in the sunlight seemed whiter and his cheeks pinker than ever.

64

“It is good sport, that,” he declared. “There is plenty of game. I like to kill. If my guns are good and the cartridges are fresh, it is not often that I fail.”

Matresser left him at his stand and passed on to join his sister and Elisabeth Stamier.

“For heaven’s sake,” Ann implored, “tell us who is your picturesque-looking triumph.”

Matresser opened his lips to reply but some nameless impulse kept him silent for a moment and he found himself watching Elisabeth. She was looking away over the tops of the trees. Even his somewhat prolonged pause had no effect.

“The gentleman calls himself Mr. Jan van Westrheene,” he confided. “He brought that little yacht in on Monday night and called to pay his respects the day after.”

“If you all shot like he did,” Ann remarked, “I don’t think I should ever come out with you again.”

“That’s only an idea, Ann,” her brother reproved her quietly.

“The most humane way to shoot is to kill.”

She shivered a little.

“I suppose that’s right,” she admitted, “but there was something even about the way he raised his gun which I hated. He dealt out death as though he had some special joy in killing.”

“I expect,” Elisabeth said, “that in real life he is a very kindly person.”

“To me,” Ann persisted, “he looked like a butcher. Nothing would ever convince me that in private life—whatever he may be—he has not the instincts of a butcher.”

She turned to Elisabeth.

“How does he strike you?” she asked.

65

“I think that you are letting your imagination run away with you,” she said. “I have taken no special notice of Mr. Van Westrheene, but he seems to shoot in the same fashion as the others, only very much better than some of them.”

“Look out!” Matresser warned them. “Here he comes.”

Van Westrheene came swinging down the ride, followed by his loader and with an abject and obsequious underkeeper by his side. He was being conducted to his stand as though he were royalty. He raised his hat with a flourish as he neared the little group.

“Van Westrheene,” Matresser said, “let me present you to my

sister, Lady Ann Matresser, and Mademoiselle Elisabeth Stamier.”

Again Van Westrheene, from his great height, bowed stiffly but with an attempt at geniality.

“It is a great pleasure,” he murmured. “I find this, Lady Ann, if I may say so, a most beautiful family property of yours—so near to the sea, such beautiful woods, such entrancing country. It surprises me only that your brother, with such possessions, should be such a great traveller.”

“My brother is turning over a new leaf now,” Ann confided. “He is going to settle down at home and look after us all.”

“It is a decision,” Mr. Van Westrheene said, “taken with excellent taste.”

Another flourish of the hat and he passed on. Matresser turned to Ann.

“If you girls want to see any shooting,” he proposed, “you had better take that ride to the left. Make your way along it for about half a mile without talking and just after you have passed one of the shelters turn to the right and you will come to a five-barred gate. I am going to walk on the outside of the wood down as far as there, and if you open it softly and come and sit on the knoll and wait for me there ought to be something doing, but you would not find it pleasant walking down outside with me. There are two streams to cross and a lot of boggy land.”

Ann nodded and drew her companion away. Matresser, with his loader in attendance, made his way into the meadow. He shot a

high pigeon and a few minutes later a snipe, then he had a somewhat profitless walk across some rough country until he reached the bend before the knoll. Here there was a pause while the left wing of the beaters swung round. Matresser tied his handkerchief to the end of his shooting stick and waved it for a moment above his head. Almost immediately, a white gate leading out into the road was opened and a small man came briskly through. He was a stubby, undistinguished-looking little person with one arm and a very quaintly made suit of sporting clothes. Nevertheless, there was something almost like affection in Matresser's eyes as he watched him approach.

“Any news about Fergus, Yates?” he enquired.

The little man shook his head and Matresser realised that there was tragedy in his face.

“There's bad news about him, sir,” he confided. “They have just fetched Dr. Andrews from the other side of the wood. The poor fellow had a fit of delirium this morning.”

“Delirium? But I thought he was almost himself again.”

“So the doctor thought, sir. So we all thought. He was to have got up to-day. Mrs. Foulds took him up a bath and found him on the floor. He gave one moan when she came in and fell over. She sent a boy on his bicycle to fetch the doctor but they are afraid that he is dead.”

67

Matresser was silent for several moments, then he shivered slightly.

“Keep as quiet as you can about this, Yates,” he enjoined. “I

should think that you will probably find it is only a relapse. As soon as you can get any news, send a card down to Humphreys' lodge. I shall get it at luncheontime."

"There is nothing else I can do, sir?"

"Nothing except keep this quiet," Matresser insisted earnestly. "Don't let a soul know what has happened."

"I understand, sir, perfectly."

Matresser turned his head. His loader stepped forward.

"You will excuse me, your lordship," he said. "Humphreys' whistle went two minutes ago. The birds are coming over the knoll. The young ladies are there beckoning to you."

Matresser snatched up one of his guns and hurried off. Elisabeth Stamier greeted him with a curious look of apprehension in her eyes.

"Why were you talking to that little man for so long while all these pheasants were getting away?" she asked.

Matresser exercised the privilege of a man with a gun. He went on shooting and remained silent.

CHAPTER VIII

At dinner that evening the Countess of Matresser made what was almost an official announcement. She had been talking for some time of her son to the Earl of Bemrose, who was seated on her right.

“Ronald has practically given me his word,” she confided, “that his wanderings are over. He is going to settle down and do his duty to his neighbours. We have been without a man here long enough.”

“It will be good news for the County, of course,” he admitted, “and as you know, the Lord Lieutenancy is his for the asking. On the other hand, I cannot help wondering sometimes whether he will be quite content.”

“I might share that fear,” she confessed, “if only there had been more point about Ronnie’s travels. If he had been an explorer, for instance, or a climber, had discovered new countries or sailed in strange seas and written about these places, then I could have sympathised with him, but he wanders off without any fixed intentions. He shoots a great deal, of course, but a healthy man’s appetite for that sort of thing must decline before middle age. He seems to have the real wanderlust. Do you know that when he goes away we can only correspond with him through an office in London? They forward our letters to him and he writes to us care of them. He makes no plans. There is no system whatever about his travels.”

Bemrose twirled his grey moustache.

“I sometimes wonder whether you quite do your son justice, Lady Matresser,” he said. “Don’t you think it possible that he may be doing a little work we none of us know anything about?”

69

“Do you really believe that?” she asked curiously. “Have you ever heard anything that would lead you to think so?”

“Well, I would not go so far as that,” was the cautious admission, “but I do know that the Foreign Office has sent for him several times before he went abroad and I have heard it said by people who ought to know that if only he would work on more rigid lines he would be invaluable to the government.”

“First time I have ever heard such a thing hinted at,” Lady Matresser confessed frankly.

“Perhaps I have said more than I ought to have done. Still, just before the Abyssinian war I do know that he was the first person sent for by the permanent Foreign Secretary, that he had appointments with Cabinet ministers and that sort of thing for a fortnight and everyone considered his opinion extraordinarily valuable. Master Ronald does not go about the world with his eyes closed, you know.”

“You are giving me new ideas about my son,” she acknowledged.

“I hope to heavens I am not making mischief,” Bemrose exclaimed. “I am just telling you what I have heard said. On the other hand he has never shown the slightest signs of any

ambition to take a governorship or anything of that sort so the whole thing seems to lead nowhere. That is why I am glad of your news that he is thinking of settling down. There are so few of the old order,” he concluded with a sigh, “who can afford to live on their estates as Matresser could. To tell you the honest truth, I only kept on the County this last year because I was horrified when I heard who my successor was likely to be. If Ronald will play up it will be a great load off my mind.”

70

“Well, as I told you, I have almost a promise from him,” Lady Matresser said.

“You will have to face his marrying, of course,” her neighbour reminded her.

“My dear Charles,” she replied, “don’t you know me well enough to realise that nothing in the world would make me happier than that? The Dower House here is a perfect gem of a place and I have refused to let it, except yearly, just hoping that Ronnie would turn sensible. I should be the happiest woman in the world there.”

The conversation halted for a few moments. The Countess’ neighbour on her other side leaned towards her.

“Lady Alice has been telling me of this shocking affair in the village,” he said.

“I am so sorry for Dr. Andrews,” Lady Matresser confided. “Of course, everyone will say that he ought to have sent a man as ill as that to the hospital: certainly not to have left him alone with the housekeeper whilst he shot to-day. I daresay, though, there’s some further explanation.”

“I heard,” Bemrose observed, “that he was supposed to be down here with letters for someone or other in the neighbourhood.”

“We have heard nothing,” the Countess declared.

“Seems queer after our recent conversation,” Bemrose went on, “but Grantley, my second boy, you know, who is in the Foreign Office, had an idea that this man came from there. We must ask Matresser if he knows anything about it.”

Old World habits were strictly observed in the Great House and a few minutes later a fluttering little concourse of women followed their hostess to the drawing-rooms. Matresser left his place and came down to the other end of the table to where his principal male guests were seated. The port was reverently handed round.

71

“What happened to Andrews?” a neighbour asked his host.

“He was fetched away whilst we were shooting Sheddon’s Wood,” Matresser replied. “The chap he picked up after an accident and to whom he played the good Samaritan had the bad taste to peg out.”

“Such a careful fellow—Andrews,” Bemrose remarked. “I wonder he came out at all if the man was in any danger.”

“Concussion is a queer thing,” Matresser reflected, leaning forward and helping himself to nuts. “Is it my fancy, Rowans,” he went on, addressing a vis-à-vis, “or is this ’70 getting a little thin? I always look upon you as a great connoisseur.”

“It is one of the most perfect bottles of a marvellous vintage I ever tasted,” was the emphatic reply.

“I find it wonderful,” Bemrose acquiesced. “To go back to this poor fellow, though. Shouldn’t you say that it was a little unusual, Matresser, for a man who has been properly vetted and left in the care of a very respectable woman like Andrews’ housekeeper—an old nurse, too, she was—to go off suddenly like that?”

“Unusual, I suppose,” Matresser agreed, “but that sort of thing happens every day.”

“Poor little Andrews is all fussed up about it, anyway,” Rowans observed. “He went off to Aylsham to see the coroner and then to Norwich to the hospital.”

“I hadn’t heard that,” Matresser admitted with a distinct frown.

72

“One of your keepers told me. I went down into the gunroom before dinner to ask for my guns to be ready early as I have to get over to Hatherley Hall. That long chap who looks after your Merton beat had just got back from leaving the doctor some pheasants and heard the news from the housekeeper.”

A mighty figure, his wine glass in his hand, rose from a distant place and approached the spot where his host was seated. With a stiff, comprehensive bow he sank into a vacant place.

“You will perhaps pardon me if I join you,” he said. “I was interested, or should I say grieved, to hear that one of my fellow victims of Monday night’s storm was dead.”

“Mr. Van Westrheene,” Matresser explained to the others around, “brought a fifty-ton ketch into port in the midst of that storm the other night. Quite an achievement, but he and his men all got a little knocked about.”

“I myself have recovered,” Van Westrheene announced. “A slight sprain—not more. My steward, however, must go to the hospital. This poor fellow who has died was injured by a fallen tree, I heard it said.”

“That is what we understand,” Matresser agreed.

“I must say that I admire your courage, or perhaps your ignorance, Mr. Van Westrheene,” Colonel Rowans declared. “I keep a sizable ketch in these waters most of the time but I must say I would not like to have brought her home past Brancaster Beaches into this port on Monday night. You evidently handle a boat with the same skill as a gun, sir.”

“From my boyhood I have been used to both,” Van Westrheene admitted.

73

Bemrose leaned forward in his place. Like all the other guests he was intrigued by this tawny Viking.

“In what part of Holland do you live, Mr. Van Westrheene?” he asked. “I have shot there twice with my friend Baron de Buyl.”

“I own property some forty miles from the De Buyl estates,” was the measured reply. “I am, however, seldom there. I have interests in other countries. Only lately I returned from a seven months’ cruise. I am fond of the sea.”

“Do any deep-sea fishing?”

“Off the coast of New Zealand,” Mr. Van Westrheene recounted, “I have landed two tunny fish of between five and six hundred pounds each. It is a dangerous sport but it lacks variety.”

“Tell us,” Bemrose asked, “what then is your favourite sport, Van Westrheene? You have shot lions without a doubt.”

“And every description of wild beast,” was the deep-throated reply. “As to my favourite sport, you ask me a difficult question.”

It was probably by chance just at that moment that he looked across the table straight into the eyes of his host. The hesitation became a pause. There was a little quiver round the corners of Matresser’s lips.

“Perhaps,” the latter said, “to answer that question, Mr. Van Westrheene, you would require a definition of sport.”

To all appearance, Mr. Van Westrheene remained the weather-battered sphinx with unchanging expression. There was no sign of discomposure in his smooth face. His fixed 74 eyeglass seemed as though it had been there since the day of his birth and would remain without a quiver until the day of his death. Even his deep voice when he answered retained its toneless quality.

“The end of all sport,” he pronounced, “as sport is understood by man, is to kill.”

There was a little murmur of qualified dissent. The butler, who

had been waiting for his opportunity, leaned forward from behind his master's chair.

"I beg your lordship's pardon," he announced apologetically, "but Dr. Andrews assured me that the message was an urgent one. Will you speak to him for a minute?"

"Where is the doctor?"

"In the gunroom, milord."

"Take him into my study," Matresser directed. "I will be there directly."

The man hurried away.

"May I ask to be excused for a moment?" Matresser begged. "You all know your way about, I think. Don't hurry them off, Bemrose, but I daresay the ladies would like some bridge. There's the billiard-room going, too, and the radio. I shall only be a few minutes. Andrews seems to want a little advice."

"Is it that I can be of any assistance?" Mr. Van Westrheene asked, and if it was possible for expression to creep into his steely voice there was a certain wistfulness in it.

Matresser shook his head.

"It is merely an official decision, I expect," he replied. "I am chairman of the Bench of Magistrates for this division of the County and Andrews naturally does not want to make a mistake."

CHAPTER IX

The doctor was without a doubt suffering badly from nerves. He was walking up and down Matresser's den when the latter entered, he was still wearing the clothes in which he had started the day's shooting, and by this time he presented a more or less dishevelled appearance.

"My dear fellow," Matresser remonstrated, "what on earth's the matter with you?"

His visitor made an obvious attempt to pull himself together and sank into the easy chair which Matresser had wheeled out for him.

"It's a rotten business, this, Matresser," he exclaimed. "It has worked out badly. It gets worse every minute I think of it."

"Well, let's talk it over sensibly. Whisky and soda, eh? And light your pipe. Nothing like a spot of tobacco for the nerves. That's right."

Matresser supplied his guest's wants and sat on the edge of the table by his side.

"Now, fire away," he enjoined. "Your patient has stolen a march on us, I gather, and pegged out unexpectedly."

"He was dead when I got home."

“And you are worrying about having left him?”

“It’s not only that. Frankly, I cannot understand it. I did all the usual things when he was first brought in—temperature, pulse, blood pressure—and I put him down as a strong man able to stand a tap on the head like he received, sleep it off easily with a mild sedative, which is all that I gave him, and be none the worse for it in two or three days’ time. When they fetched me back from Sheddon’s Wood this afternoon, he was stone dead and certain entirely new symptoms must have developed during the day. Well, I telephoned to the hospital at Norwich and got Ridgeway out. He was here within an hour and a half and at first he was just as puzzled as I was. There was apparently not the slightest reason why the man should have died.”

76

“And then?”

“Well, we took off his clothes and there were evidences of a puncture high up on his arm. Ridgeway could not tell what had been injected any more than I could, but there were other conditions of the body which made it absolutely necessary to have an autopsy.”

“Well, there’s no need for you to worry yourself to death,” Matresser consoled him. “No one is going to accuse you of carelessness. You didn’t give him that particular injection, I don’t suppose.”

“Not likely,” the doctor exclaimed scornfully. “Look here, Matresser, this is the devil of it. Mrs. Foulds had washed his neck and arms when we put him to bed on Monday. The

injection must have been administered since then and Ridgeway and I both believe—” The doctor hesitated.

“You believe that he died from the effects of the injection?”

“We do.”

“In short, that he was murdered.”

“I’m afraid that is the truth of it.”

“Very well, then let’s face the facts,” Matresser continued, with a cheerfulness which was not without its effect upon his listener. “We will rule you and Mrs. Foulds out of it. The possibilities seem to be myself or that someone else who drove by in a car without any lights whilst we were on our way to see the fellow. Supposing you rule me out for a moment, as might seem not unreasonable, then there is only that person who nearly succeeded in running us down. Is there any evidence to connect him with any human being we know of?”

“Not the slightest,” was the doctor’s almost savage reply.

“Well, there you are then,” Matresser observed. “We have a local police force. There is no necessity for you or for me to go playing the amateur detective. Leave it to the police. There will have to be an inquest, of course.”

“I suppose so,” the doctor assented. “But Matresser—”

“Well?”

“You will have to be one of the witnesses.”

“Naturally. So will you, for that matter.”

“What are we going to say about that car?”

“Just what we know—what we saw and heard. It doesn’t amount to much, does it?”

“You think we ought to mention it?”

“My dear fellow,” Matresser reminded him. “An inquest is a place where you are on your oath. Of course we must mention it.”

The room was by no means overheated, but Andrews was wiping the sweat from his forehead. He groaned as he became aware that his companion had noticed his discomfort.

“I can’t help it, Matresser,” he burst out. “The only person I know of who has a small car and who might have been going in that direction is Mademoiselle Stamier.”

“Is that all that’s troubling you?” Matresser asked.

78

“Not by any means,” the doctor went on, volubly enough now that the ice was broken. “The fellow was bringing a letter or papers or a message here for you. His name may have been Fergus but he looked like a foreigner and in the eyes of the people round here he was a foreigner. The only other person likely to have been out in a motor car was Mademoiselle Stamier. She also is a foreigner. The car that was being driven dangerously along this road must have been going either to the port or the Great House. If I am put on my oath I shall have to remember that I have known Mademoiselle Stamier driving

without lights before.”

“What became of the remainder of the things that were found in the fellow’s pockets?” Matresser asked.

“The police have them.”

“There was nothing beyond the fact that I knew who he was to identify him, then?”

“Nothing.”

“You didn’t at any time ask him his name, for instance?”

The doctor shook his head.

“I was not sufficiently interested,” he admitted.

Matresser glanced at the clock.

“I shall have to be off, Andrews,” he said. “My opinion is that you are making a mountain out of a molehill. The man is dead and what you have to do is just to pull yourself together, face the questions you have to answer like a man and answer them truthfully. I am not anxious to have this thing linked up with the Great House, I can tell you, but it is one of those times when we have to tell the truth. There’s no harm can come to you at any rate.”

“Or to you, Matresser.”

“Or to Mademoiselle Elisabeth Stamier,” Matresser declared. “You can make your mind quite easy about that.”

The doctor drew a long breath of relief.

“Thank heaven you’re on the spot, Matresser!”

Matresser, notwithstanding his long absence from such duties, proved himself an excellent after-dinner host. He saw that the bridge tables were going smoothly, finished rather brilliantly a snooker match for Bemrose, who had been called to the telephone, and he even made up an odd three at contract with the Dean and his wife and the clergyman of the parish. Presently, when the local guests had mostly taken their leave, he wandered into the smaller drawing-room adjoining his mother’s boudoir where Elisabeth was playing the piano. He motioned her to continue and sank into a chair by his mother’s side.

“Debussy,” he murmured. “What a touch! Shall we listen?”

His mother nodded. He took her fragile fingers in his and stroked them softly. Presently the melody faded away.

“Do go on,” he begged.

“If you wish that I play seriously,” she said, “I must fetch my music. You excuse—yes?”

“Of course, my dear,” Lady Matresser acquiesced. “You are giving us so much pleasure. We shall be here waiting for you.”

She smiled and disappeared through the parted curtains—an exquisitely graceful figure in her simply cut white satin gown.

“You were satisfied to-day, Ronnie?” his mother asked a little anxiously.

“More than satisfied, my dear,” he assured her. “I took all the outsidings I could and I couldn’t find a single spot where the shoot has been neglected in any way. Humphreys seems to me to be just as good as he was ten years ago and both his sons are capital fellows.”

“Because if you were really going to settle down—and you are,” she insisted, “you must have your shooting perfect. You know there’s nothing to prevent it. You have been drawing absolutely no income at all for the last two or three years. Mr. Purvis tells me that you keep him quite busy investing.”

“Capital!” Matresser exclaimed. “We’ll show them something when we start entertaining, mother.”

“Bemrose is looking forward to that time, I can tell you,” she went on. “It has been rather hard on him the last few years. An expensive family, too, and three unmarried daughters. I know when your father had the County, and that was before my money came into the family, he used to find that it squeezed him. Who was this mysterious stranger, Ronald, who came and died upon us, or rather upon poor Dr. Andrews?”

“No one knows for certain,” he told her, “but between ourselves I believe he came here to see me—rather, to bring me an invitation. In the language of Humphreys he was a ‘furriner.’ It shows what a self-enclosed county we are—everyone who looks or dresses a little differently is a ‘furriner.’”

“The most remarkable ‘furriner’ you have produced here for a very long time is your Dutchman,” the Countess observed. “I can’t believe he is real, half the time. He is so enormous, so

unbending and so precise. How is it one has not heard of him before?”

“I never saw him myself until the night of the storm,” Matresser confided. “He has been spending the last eight or ten years, he told me, cruising. After I had asked him to dine, I wondered whether I ought to have told him that we should be wearing tails.”

81

“He looked the picture of civilisation to-night,” Lady Matresser observed.

“Might have been turned out for a royal dinner party,” Matresser agreed. “Clever fellow to carry a wardrobe as comprehensive as that on a fifty-ton ketch.”

“Did you know anything about him, Ronnie, before you asked him to dine?”

“Not a thing. That’s the worst of having a son reappear from the wilds. I suppose I ought not to have done such a thing. He came to pay his respects, which, after all, is the courteous thing to do—if a little un-English—but the harbour is mine, the port and all the rest of it, and it seemed so natural to ask him to shoot, and nearly everyone who shoots at Matresser dines. So there you are!”

“My dear, don’t think for a moment that I was criticising,” his mother protested with a delightful sigh. “It was sheer curiosity. As a matter of fact, everyone was saying what a marvellous sportsman he was.”

Elisabeth came hesitatingly in, a roll of music under her arm.

She paused on the step which led into the boudoir.

“I am sure you two would rather talk,” she said.

“I am sure we should not,” Lady Matresser told her. “My son, although he is half a savage in some things, has kept his taste for music. You must play for him a short time now, my dear, because I am going to bed and he has been such a perfect host all day that he deserves some relaxation. You see, my maid is there waiting. She is the one person whom I never disobey.”

Matresser escorted his mother to the private exit by which she always left the room, then he returned to his place.

82

“Will you talk to me for a few minutes before you play, Mademoiselle Stamier?” he begged.

“It is for your pleasure,” she answered, sinking into the chair which he had drawn up close to his own. “I like to play but I like to talk to you also, and for that I have not so much opportunity.”

“I have just come from Dr. Andrews,” he confided. “The poor little man is nearly distraught.”

“I am so sorry. It is this unfortunate happening in his house—yes?”

“It is connected with that,” he admitted. “It seems that there are complications.”

“You must tell me,” she whispered. “I like Dr. Andrews. He has a good heart.”

“It appears that this stranger, whoever he was, did not die from concussion at all.”

“So long as he is dead,” she murmured, “which is, of course, very sad, does it matter so much what he died from?”

“Well, in this case I am afraid that it does,” he told her.

“And why?”

“Nothing is certain at present but it seems that the poor fellow has been given an injection lately.”

“An injection? Of what?”

“Poison.”

She drew back with a little shiver and gripped at his hand. Her fingers were icy cold. Terror was shining out of her eyes.

“You mean that someone killed him?”

“It seems possible,” he assented. “But I am afraid that I am distressing you. It is a sad happening but it really is not our affair.”

“It is always terrible to think about death, especially sudden death, violent death,” she murmured.

“Poor little Andrews is terribly tied up about it all,” he confided. “You see there may always be just a suggestion of negligence on his part and there will have to be an inquest.”

“A legal enquiry?” she exclaimed.

“Naturally. And the police will want to discover who entered the doctor’s house, gave this fellow the injection and got away again with the letter which should have been delivered to me.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I’m just answering your questions,” he told her. “I could think of many subjects I would rather discuss with you.”

“Have they found out who the man was?”

“There was no necessity for them to make any effort. I was able to identify him.”

“I believe,” she said, clasping her hands and bending her head, “I would rather have played to you than have you tell me this.”

“I have only told you what all the world will know to-morrow,” he pointed out, “so why not forget it? There is nothing more to be said.”

“Absolutely nothing?”

“Nothing whatever.”

“Then I will play to you,” she proposed. “I can think while I play.”

They crossed the polished floor to the piano. She threw down the roll of music she was carrying.

“That is no use,” she exclaimed. “I could not play a bar of it. It must be for another time. Sit by my side—not on the bench —on that chair. I like to feel that there is someone near.” 84

Her fingers were lost upon the keys. Relief seemed to come to her at once with the first chords of the music. He listened dreamily, his senses enthralled, his mind all the time questioning. It seemed to him that he heard something of the storm of the night of his return, could catch a faint expression of the horror which for a few moments had shone out of her strangely brilliant eyes. Then again there was no theme in what she played. He felt himself cut off. Her own terror was passing with the increasing clamour of the music she was drawing from the hidden places of her mind. He felt himself forgotten. Perhaps it was as well. . . .

She stopped suddenly and leaned towards him. Her fingers were playing now the tune he loved. There was a smile upon her lips. She watched for his approval. She stopped again and was silent.

“You are a great artist,” he said quietly.

“Sometimes I think that I might have become one,” she meditated. “Not a great artist—never that—but I might have learnt that wonderful gift—expression. I have a sister who plays divinely. She always says that I kept my music teacher too long. The business of making real music is a wild business. It is only the very great ones of the world who can accept discipline. And now tell me some more, my host. How will they set about finding this criminal?”

“Heaven knows,” he answered lightly. “After all, that injection

may mean nothing.”

“You must go back to your guests,” she told him abruptly.

“I will go if you come with me.”

85

They returned to the larger room and Mademoiselle Stamier was at once surrounded. Matresser took some of the men out to see a head which they had been discussing at dinnertime. Very soon the evening came to its natural termination. Ann, with two of her girl friends, and Mademoiselle Stamier, were the last to climb the stairs. Matresser unfolded a little twisted-up note which he had received a few minutes earlier. It read:

Will you please come to your study for a moment before you retire.

Y.

86

CHAPTER X

More than ever, Henry Yates resembled a faithful watchdog as he rose hastily from his place behind the desk and faced his employer. There was distress, however, in his anxious eyes as he removed his spectacles. He was evidently perturbed. He so far forgot himself as to address Matresser in the forbidden manner.

“Your lordship,” he announced, “the big man has been here.”

“What—the Dutchman?”

“Yes. He was looking for you, he said. He remembered his way to your den and he came to find you.”

“Liar,” Matresser murmured. “He knew well enough that I was with my guests, because he was one of them himself. It was you he came to see, Henry. Proceed.”

“You are probably right,” was the reluctant reply. “I did not wish to hear him talk. I tried to stop him. He brushed me away. He pretended not to hear. He, too, he said, was a great traveller like my distinguished master, only his travelling had a real and distinct purpose. He was writing a book. He had a list of questions he wished to ask concerning a certain country. There was no chance, he declared, of ever persuading a distinguished person like yourself to spare the time to give him the information he needed, therefore he suggested that I should answer them.”

“Simple,” Matresser scoffed. “How many questions were there?”

Yates smiled, a smile that broadened into a grin.

87

“One hundred and twenty-seven—all numbered,” he replied. “They all concern one country.”

“What method!” Matresser exclaimed admiringly. “One hundred and twenty-seven questions for you to answer, my hard-worked secretary. You ran the price up, I hope? I do most sincerely trust, Yates, that you did not do the offended virtue stunt or anything of that sort. You gave him line? He is a great sportsman, one understands, and he would appreciate that.”

“I certainly did not refuse,” Yates confided. “I am not a good actor but I did my best. I adopted a dubious attitude. The work would have to be done after hours and I was already hard-worked—besides it might cost me my place. At that Mr. Van Westrheene became if possible a little more enthusiastic. It was true, he asked, that I had been with you in all your travels since the war? I assured him that it was the truth and he was thereupon willing to buy me body and soul.”

“And the end of it all?”

“I am to meet him at the Matresser Arms at seven o’clock tomorrow evening.”

“Capital. Most intriguing.”

“He would have been here now, I think,” Yates continued, “but I thought we had gone far enough. I am not a good actor and he

went rather close to the wind twice. I hope you will agree with me, sir, in declining to accept Mr. Van Westrheene's description of himself as a Dutch gentleman of leisure."

"What do you think he is, then?"

"I think he came here after you. He had some reason, too, for running all those risks the night of the storm. He could have got into Lowestoft very easily. Even his charts would have told him that. He came here because it was so much easier to get into touch with you from your own harbour."

88

"And how long ago did you come to this conclusion?" his employer asked him.

"Immediately after Mr. Van Westrheene paid that furtive visit to me to-night," Henry Yates confided. "But I am not going by that alone, sir. I made the—er—acquaintance of the lady who is travelling on the boat with him the day after their arrival, and from the first I had my suspicions."

Matresser rose and stretched himself. He patted the little man on the shoulder with a gesture which was almost affectionate.

"What a lady's man you are!" he exclaimed. "Get off to bed now and have a good night's sleep. We will deal with Mr. Van Westrheene to-morrow. One hundred and twenty-seven questions to answer concerning my travels, eh? One hundred and twenty-seven times a Judas. These foreigners expect a lot for their money, Henry."

The little man gathered up his papers and closed his desk. He was feeling very happy, for he was conscious that his master

approved of the way he had treated this Dutch giant and his lady friend.

“Shall I leave you to lock up, sir?” he asked.

“I’ll see to everything,” Matresser promised. “You go to bed, you little scoundrel, and dream of what it feels like to have half a million guilders in the bank.”

“No amount was specified, sir.”

“He would spring to that all right for correct replies to those hundred and twenty-seven questions!”

Matresser mounted the stairs and made his way down the long corridor which led to his own apartments. Arrived there he made himself a whisky and soda, glanced through a pile of letters—mostly shooting invitations—without any particular interest and, drawing aside the curtains, looked out into the night. He stood there for several minutes whistling softly to himself some half-remembered fragment from the improvisations of Elisabeth Stamier. He never shirked issues and he was perfectly well aware that a certain restlessness which had possessed him during the last few days was entirely due to his meeting with and the presence under his roof of this girl. It was not a matter about which he permitted himself to think seriously, but he was still forced to realise the disturbance she had made. It was rapidly becoming a problem. It might become a serious one in a very short time. Fresh pieces of music drifted into his mind. Then he suddenly forgot all about her. Something entirely material had scattered his fancies. From the window of that dark building half hidden by the trees had

flashed a sudden light. He leaned forward. The light had become a steady one. Someone had turned on the illumination in the garage kept for his visitors' cars. He glanced behind him at the clock. It was well past the hour when the latest of his guests might have been expected to depart. He kicked off his patent shoes and replaced them with rubbers, exchanged his dress coat for a plain black one, showing no white front, slipped cartridges into a small Colt which he took from his drawer, helped himself to a bunch of keys and made his way quietly downstairs and out of the house. Fifty yards along the curving drive and he was outside the garage door. He listened for a moment. The light had been extinguished. He unlocked the door softly, stretched out his arm and turned on half a dozen switches at once. There was a startled but familiar exclamation. From the center of the medley of cars, Andrews, on his hands and knees, peered out.

“Matresser!” he exclaimed in dismay.

Matresser extinguished the lights, leaving the place once more in darkness.

“Come here,” he enjoined. “I will show you the way with my torch.”

From behind an old landaulette, Matresser made a pathway of illumination. Andrews stumbled to his feet and made shamefaced approach.

“What are you doing in here?” Matresser demanded coldly.

“You can guess,” was the desperate reply. “I wanted to get her car.”

“What were you going to do with it?”

“Drive it to the sea—get rid of it anyhow.”

Matresser withdrew into a vacant corner of the garage and turned on a single light.

“Andrews,” he said, “I have known you since you were a boy but I never realised before that you were a half-witted ass. The police will be here hunting for cars the day after to-morrow and the person most suspected will be the person whose car is found hidden or partly destroyed.”

“Perhaps it was not any good,” Andrews admitted pitifully. “I felt I had to do something, though.”

“The only thing you ran any chance of succeeding in doing,” Matresser told him sternly, “was to get Mademoiselle Stamier into trouble. Now listen to me. Did you examine the tyres of Mademoiselle Stamier’s Austin?”

“I glanced at them.”

“What make were they?”

91

“The new pattern Dunlop.”

“Quite right. Now, do you remember when I left the surgery the other night I asked you to stop the car at a certain place?”

“Of course I do,” the doctor agreed. “It was just where we nearly had the collision.”

“Evidently the driver of the car put on the brakes as he or she passed us, because for ten yards each way, even in that soft mud, there was not a recognisable mark. Afterwards it was very different. There were distinct evidences of the passing, one wheel on the lane and the other in the sodden private path, of a car having the new Michelin tyres. One of us—since you have taken the matter up it had better be you—should show a little intelligence in this matter. You should suggest that the road be searched for marks of the passing car. It won’t take them very long to discover the Number Seven Michelin tyre. They may pay a visit down here, my friend. What more natural? They will examine my friends’ cars one by one. When they get to Mademoiselle Stamier’s they will see that it is fitted with Dunlop tyres. There you are, then. Miss Stamier is a good deal further removed from complicity in this affair than she would have been by your blundering efforts to drive her car into the sea or leave it in a wood.”

“Do you mean me to understand that the tyres on Miss Stamier’s car have been changed?” Andrews asked hoarsely.

“Granted that you possess the usual amount of intelligence,” Matresser said smiling, “that fact would probably dawn upon you.”

“Who changed them?”

92

“The man who took out his torch and made the discovery.”

“And what about the Michelin tyres?”

“They exist no longer. Miss Stamier’s car, on all four wheels, has Dunlop tyres and there is no trace anywhere along the lane

to Upper Matresser of a Dunlop tyre having passed that way. Just a lesson to you, young fellow,” Matresser went on, lighting a cigarette, “not to meddle.”

“You are in earnest when you tell me that you did this?” Andrews asked breathlessly.

A moment later he regretted having asked the question. There was something terrifying about his companion’s silence.

“Where did you leave your car?” the latter demanded.

“In the back drive out of sight behind those laurel bushes.”

“Have I to put you in it,” Matresser asked, “or will you give me your word that you will go straight to where you left it and drive home?”

“I will do that,” Andrews promised humbly. “There does not seem to be any other damn fool thing for me to do.”

Matresser patted him on the back and his farewell words were spoken in an entirely different tone.

“Off you go then,” he directed, “and just remember this. Whatever happens I do not intend trouble to come to Miss Stamier. You tell the truth if this inquest comes off and leave the rest to me.”

CHAPTER XI

It was a small but very distinguished company of Norfolk notabilities who were gathered together two days later in the private coffee-room of the old-fashioned Crown and Anchor Hotel at Aylsham. There was the Earl of Bemrose, the Lord Lieutenant, drinking the famous old beer of the house from a tankard; General Hamilton, Deputy Chairman of the Board of Magistrates; Colonel Fulton; Sir Richard Scott Haverley and two other magistrates. Matresser and Mr. Phillips Poulteney of the firm of Fellowes, Son & Poulteney, Coroner for the district, were seated at one end of the long table exchanging confidences. The latter was a pleasant-faced man of middle age, a thorough countryman who wore with some difficulty the legal habiliments suitable to the occasion. He, too, held a tankard in his hand. The room in which they were holding their impromptu meeting was a private one and the door was locked. Poulteney rose to his feet and moved to the hearthrug.

“I can assure you gentlemen,” he said, “I have been Coroner for this district during twenty-seven years and my father before me nearly thirty, and I have never known such a happening.”

“You had some intimation, I suppose?” Bemrose asked.

“This much,” the Coroner explained. “I had a telephone message from the Home Secretary instructing me not to open the inquest until I received a written communication from him which was on its way. Also with the instructions there would be a person who would be able to identify the—er—the deceased.”

Naturally I had to act upon this and keep you gentlemen all waiting.”

“It is not the waiting so much,” General Hamilton declared with an irritable little cough. “It’s the damned mystery of it. I think some intimation of what was to happen should have been sent to the Lord Lieutenant and Matresser and to myself as Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Bench.”

“Well, anyhow,” the Coroner continued, “this Captain Fergus, who was able to identify the deceased as his brother, turned up a quarter of an hour before the time and he brought me instructions which were signed by the Home Secretary himself. I was practically forbidden to ask any questions but Captain Fergus has since told me that he has seen very little of the deceased for the last few years but understood he had some minor government post.”

“He was a King’s Messenger before the war,” Matresser volunteered. “I came across him once, I think, in some outlandish place but I must admit that I should never have recognised him.”

“Well, you all know what happened,” the Coroner went on, setting down his tankard and filling his pipe. “My instructions were to take Dr. Ridgeway’s evidence as to the cause of death, and Captain Fergus’ evidence of identification, to swear no other witnesses, to ask the jury for their verdict and close the Court. That I did. We know the deceased’s name was Phillip Boyd Fergus, that he was about fifty-six years of age, and his present place of residence the Cavalry Club. We have medical evidence from Dr. Ridgeway, who certainly does not beat

about the bush, that he found that death was caused by a powerful administration of a deadly poison injected hypodermically. On those two statements I was instructed without comment to ask the jury for a verdict. Naturally I received one and the only one possible—murder against some person or persons unknown—but even the local policeman was not allowed to enter the box. Further investigations are to be conducted by Scotland Yard men who arrive at five o'clock tonight. At the last minute the Home Secretary does put in an addendum to the effect that they will work with the local constabulary.”

“It’s a rum business,” Bemrose declared. “Something behind it all.”

“Talk about thrillers,” General Hamilton put in. “Did you ever hear of anything to beat this? Local Coroner muzzled. County Police paralysed. A man of good position murdered in the most mysterious and inexplicable way. Apparently London knows all about it but down here on the spot we know nothing. I call it rather rough on the poor little doctor who played the good Samaritan.”

“What do you think of it yourself, Matresser?” Bemrose asked.

“My dear fellow, I haven’t the faintest idea what to think of it,” Matresser assured him. “It seems to be the general opinion that Fergus was on his way to my house, but what he wanted with me I don’t know. I have done one or two odd jobs,” he added, “for the Foreign Office at different times, looked up a magistrate or a resident they were not so sure about in some out of the way part of the world, and given them my views, but nothing of the

slightest importance—nothing that could be connected with a tragedy like this.”

Bemrose set down his tankard.

“Nothing for it but to buzz off, I suppose,” he remarked.

“Anyone staying to lunch for the good of the house? I’m in the chair if anyone is for roast ribs of beef, boiled pork and Norfolk dumplings. Gin and bitters all round first, eh?”

“Sorry, you’ll have to count me out,” Matresser regretted. “I brought Andrews over and I promised to take him back as soon as the show was finished.”

“Bring him along,” Bemrose suggested. “I’d like to have a talk with him.”

“You wouldn’t just now,” Matresser declared. “The poor little chap is worried to death.”

“H’m. Queer for a doctor to be so bowled over.”

Matresser was shaking hands on his way to the door and he looked round with a final nod to Bemrose.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said. “When these fellows who stick at home all their lives and grow into the soil do take a knock they take it hard. He’ll be all right again directly but I brought him over and I promised I would take him back.”

He unlocked the door and closed it after him.

“Good fellow, Matresser,” Bemrose said warmly. “I’m glad he

looks like settling down. The County needs a man like that—brains, breeding and pots of money.”

“He has poked about in some odd corners of the world,” the Coroner observed. “Taken care of himself for all his hardships. Never saw a fellow look so fit, and he must be nearly forty. . . . Well, what about it? Gin and bitters each and our ribs of beef,” he suggested, pulling the bell-cord.

Matresser found Andrews pacing restlessly up and down in front of the hotel.

97

“What does it all mean, Matresser?” he asked eagerly. “There are the most extraordinary rumours going about.”

“It doesn’t mean anything so far as I have been able to find out,” was the indifferent reply.

“But is it true that the inquest was stopped by order of the Home Secretary?”

“Nothing of the sort,” Matresser assured him. “For some reason which no one understands there does seem to be a desire on the part of the Foreign Office to keep the fellow’s business in these parts secret, but there’s no idea of hushing the thing up altogether. Scotland Yard men are coming down and they won’t rest until they get to the bottom of it.”

“I didn’t want to go into Court,” the little doctor said, as he stepped into the car. “God knows I didn’t want to do that but it seemed extraordinary that I wasn’t even called.”

“No necessity,” Matresser pointed out. “Death did not come

from the concussion for which you were treating him. It came from something quite outside. There will be a murder trial some day I suppose but by that time they will know more about the whole affair than they do now, and the consequences of publicity will be less harmful.”

“Shall we ever know, I wonder,” the doctor reflected, “what made that fellow blunder into a wet turnip field in the middle of the storm?”

“Panic I should think and the effect of the concussion. Seems to me something or other had put him into a blue funk. I don’t like to suggest it of a man with a service club on his card, but what can you think?”

“He might have been trying to find his way to your house.”

98

“Everything is possible, but very boring to talk about,” Matresser observed. “By the by, doctor, there is one little point you don’t seem to have touched upon that ought to have brightened you up. If they didn’t let you go into the witness box to tell the Court how nicely you dealt with his concussion, you have not been asked, either, about that mysterious vehicle that nearly knocked us into the next world. Seems to me we might have spared our efforts on behalf of that young lady.”

“Come to think of it, you’re quite right,” Andrews agreed. “I shouldn’t be surprised, Matresser, if they don’t let the whole matter drop—for a time at any rate.”

“We will agree between ourselves to forget about it, anyway,” Matresser suggested cheerfully. “I am bored to death with all these speculations myself.”

“Those Scotland Yard fellows may be damned clever,” Andrews went on, “but unless they find the box of hypodermic needles under Mrs. Foulds’ pillow or in my surgery with one missing, I don’t see how they are going to tackle this business. The fellow didn’t belong to the place. His friends or his enemies were all outside and it was probably someone outside who did him in—someone who had been following him. Anything might be true about him. By the by, Matresser, I suppose we shall read to-morrow morning the few little things that must have happened at the inquest—who this man really was and that sort of thing.”

Matresser shook his head.

“There I’m afraid you are going to be disappointed,” he said. “The press were marched out with the general public.”

“Was—was Mademoiselle Stamier there?”

99

“Not that I know of,” Matresser replied. “No reason for her to be. She was not subpoenaed. As a matter of fact, I know she was not. She and Ann went over to Holcomb this morning beagling. Now, young fellow, I’m going to make a bargain with you,” Matresser went on, slowing down a little. “Finish with this rotten business. Not another word about it—or the inquest or anything to do with it. Wipe it out. Is it a bargain?”

“My God, yes,” the doctor agreed. “If I am to go on with my work that’s just what I’ve got to do.”

“And of course you’re going on with your work,” Matresser insisted. “That’s settled, then. Jove, we’ve come along, haven’t we?” he added as they sped through Cley. “Look in your diary

when you get back, Andrews, and see how many of your patients you can polish off in the next few days. I shall have to be running up to London and perhaps Paris the end of next week and I want to go through some of those small covers on the outside—just the two of us, eh? There are still far too many cocks. We could start latish and take the flighting duck and dine afterwards.”

“I’m all for it,” Andrews declared heartily.

“Thursday or Friday, then. Here you are, Doc.”

The car drew up outside Andrews’ pleasant little house. Matresser waved his hand and drove on. He passed the turn up to the Great House and pulled up outside the local inn. Mr. Hewells, the landlord, came hurrying out—a smile of delight upon his face.

“Good morning, your lordship,” he welcomed his visitor.

“Hewells,” his patron said, shutting off the engine and lighting a cigarette, “I am just a little too thirsty even to wait until I get to the House. I want some of that old beer of yours in a tankard. My God, how I wanted it sometimes a few months ago in Africa! How is Nancy?”

100

“You shall see for yourself, milord, in a minute,” the man replied as he hastened away. “I’ll send her out to pay her respects. It’s just like your lordship’s kindness to come and give us a call like this.”

He hurried back through the hospitably opened door. Matresser smoked thoughtfully, his eyes fixed upon the tall mast of the

Daphne which was lying in the middle of the pool. There were no signs of life on board but the dinghy was waiting by the side. He turned away to greet the girl who, with a pewter tray in her hand which shone like silver, was bringing him his tankard.

“Nancy, my dear, how are you?” he asked. “And how you’ve grown!”

“It’s two years since I have seen your lordship,” the girl reminded him shyly.

“Time flies, doesn’t it?”

She leaned towards him—an arrant little flirt.

“Time doesn’t fly when your lordship is away,” she said. “It will go fast now until you go away again.”

“Are you trying to turn my head?” he asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

“I would if I could,” she rejoined, with a responsive little laugh.

He took a second draught of the beer and considered the matter for a moment.

“You are getting dangerously pretty, Nancy,” he said. “Engaged yet?”

“I am not and I don’t want to be,” she declared. “I’m waiting for your lordship to choose someone for me.”

“Well, I shall have to see what I can do. Meanwhile,” he

added, inclining his head towards the *Daphne*, “how do you get on with the Dutchmen?”

“Not at all,” she answered firmly. “I can’t bear the sight of them. There’s not one of them knows how to behave and as for that great daddy longlegs who shouts the roof off whenever he gets in here, I run away and hide whenever I see him coming.”

“He showed our people how to handle a boat the other night, anyway. A fine feat of his, bringing that ketch in.”

The girl was unenthusiastic.

“He half killed most of the crew doing it,” she observed. “I don’t like him. He’s cruel.”

“What type of man do you really like?” Matresser asked her.

“Your lordship’s type,” she answered promptly.

“Of course if you hadn’t said that I should have burst into tears. Tell me—have you any lodgers now?”

She hesitated.

“We have and we haven’t,” she acknowledged. “There’s a room upstairs which we always let in the summer. The Dutchman took it for his lady friend the night after they arrived.”

“A dark, severe-looking woman who is peering over the muslin blind now?”

The girl nodded.

“She’s always watching me. I don’t like her and I don’t like him and I don’t see what they are doing here. The first thing he said when he took the room for her was that he didn’t wish it known that anyone from the boat was staying here. What did he mean by that?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” Matresser admitted.

She looked over her shoulder, then came a step nearer to the car.

“There’s something else seems to me queer, your lordship,” she went on. “Two of the crew arrived about a week ago and seem to have been doing nothing but hanging around Upper Matresser and asking questions. They say the Dutchman was short-handed. Why did he send these men on ahead if he needed them for the boat? And then, this lady friend. She came down with another of the crew that Monday night in a sort of motor contrivance which they took to pieces on the quay, and they went out again that very same night. I can’t make out what they came to these parts for at all.”

102

“Don’t worry your pretty head, Nancy,” Matresser smiled. “I’ve kept you here gossiping long enough. Jolly good beer. Buy a hat with the change, my dear.”

“But I don’t give a sovereign for my hats,” she laughed.

“Ah well, let yourself go for once,” he advised as he started the car. “With a mysterious rival on the premises you must look your best.”

He waved his hand and drove off. The luncheon gong was booming as the gates of the avenue swung open before him.

CHAPTER XII

At precisely a quarter-past six that evening, Henry Yates, his blue serge suit neatly brushed, wearing a Homburg hat and carrying a very smart cane, entered the Matresser Arms by the back yard with the air of an habitu  and opened the door of the small private parlour leading out of the bar. A woman who was lounging in an easy chair with her feet upon the table smoking a cigarette, waved her hand to him in cheerful greeting.

“Punctual to the moment, my Henry!” she exclaimed. “Order me a drink. I am thirsty and I am bored. Tell me all the news. What happened at the inquest? When are you going to be a little gentleman and do everything Rosa asks you?”

“In the first place I will order you a drink,” Henry Yates announced. “Shall it be the same as usual?”

The woman yawned.

“If you had known me longer, my little man,” she said, “you would understand that I change never my drinks nor my lovers. I will take a large glass of sherry. Wait for it at the bar and bring it yourself with your own whisky and soda. They are short-handed here to-day.”

Henry Yates did as he was bidden, pausing for a moment to shake hands and exchange a word of gossip with Mrs. Hewells, the wife of the innkeeper. She ventured upon a word of half-chaffing warning.

“You be careful, Mr. Yates,” she advised him. “That long Dutchman has an evil temper and he could break any ordinary man across his knee like an ash twig! He may not like you here flirting with his secretary, or whatever the lady may call herself.”

Henry Yates was properly shocked.

“Mrs. Hewells,” he protested, “at my age and in my position! Come, come! The young lady is agreeable and she likes to exchange a friendly word or two now and then. But with me—I ask you, Mrs. Hewells!”

“Ah well,” the lady retorted, “Nancy says she isn’t too sure about you. His lordship was down here this morning talking to her so of course she has been all in a dither ever since.”

“Well,” Mr. Yates remarked, as he retreated with the two glasses upon a tray, “I don’t think that I will ever set anyone in a dither—not even Miss Van Kampf. . . . The first of your commissions, Miss Van Kampf,” he announced as he re-entered the parlour.

“Rosa,” she corrected him.

“Rosa, then.”

“And behold,” she added, extending her hand, “your greeting, please.”

He kissed her hand awkwardly.

“Why do you try to make me learn these foreign tricks?” he

complained. "I'm much too old."

"I make you learn them," she said, "because you are too shy to greet a friend in friendly fashion. Now, if I were in Amsterdam or Paris and I took a drink with a gentleman and we were *intime* like this he would even venture a little kiss here and there," she showed him, touching two rather becoming dimples.

Mr. Yates coughed.

"Alas," he sighed, "there were days when I was young, perhaps."

She made a grimace.

105

"Englishmen are always young," she insisted. "That is what I like about them. They are always young enough to be foolish. However, we shall see. Day by day we shall get to know one another better—yes? You will have more courage? Please agree with me at once."

"I trust so."

Henry Yates with his whisky and soda and the girl with her large glass of sherry sat close to the small rose-wood table and quite close to one another. The young lady was dark, inclined to be robust, with features cast in severe mould and heavy eyebrows. She used cosmetics freely and her seminautical costume did not err on the side of modesty. Her smile and manner, however, were not altogether without allure. Matresser would probably have found it hard to believe that this was the same woman whose face he had seen peering over the muslin blind not so many hours before.

“Tell me about the inquest, my Henry,” she invited.

“I know no more than you do,” he assured her. “His lordship came into my room for a minute or two on his return and he simply looked through a few letters I had laid out for him and signed some cheques.”

“But at luncheontime surely he mentioned it?”

“I do not lunch with the family,” he told her. “I have only seen his lordship for a few minutes since. He goes always to his apartment for an hour after lunch and since then he has been playing squash with Lady Ann.”

“You disappointing man,” she sighed.

“I’m sorry,” he regretted. “Why do you care about the inquest?”

“It is my man,” she answered. “You would not believe it, he looks so huge and stolid, but he has every woman’s weakness. He has more curiosity in him—and about trifles, too—than any man I ever knew.”

106

“It is unfortunate,” Henry Yates declared.

“And the other matter?” she asked, her hand for a moment falling upon his. “Have you made up your mind?”

“It takes some thinking about,” he confessed. “Let me ask you a question, Rosa.”

“It is good, that,” she said, sidling a little closer to him. “Now I shall answer it graciously.”

“Supposing your employer were to take it into his head to come on shore—he could be here within five minutes of leaving the boat—what would be his—er—reaction, when he found us two sitting here together?”

“You are like every one of the lovers I have ever had,” she laughed. “You are afraid of that giant of mine, although he means less than nothing to me. Well, I do not blame you. To look at, he is fearful. But now I will show you something, Henry, my dear. I am not a fool. Look out of that window. Look past the stumpy little white house, past that sandy ridge right down the creek out to the sea. What do you see there?”

“A dinghy with a single sail up,” was the prompt reply.

“Quite right. And in that dinghy is one man and that one man is my employer. That is how he loves to pass the time. If he were suddenly to be suspicious of me at this moment it would take him something like an hour and a half to get back. I could lie here in your arms, my little brown bear, if you only happened by chance to care about that sort of thing as I do! We could watch that little sail and we should know all the time that we were as safe as though we were in another world. Are you answered?”

107

“In one way,” Yates acknowledged, “but I, too, am sometimes curious and I ask myself what liberties he permits.”

“None at all,” she sighed. “That is another of his feminine feelings. He is viciously, dangerously jealous. I am not one who runs risks where he is concerned. That I can assure you. . . . Now, let us come to the point. Let us speak of that other matter.

You should know your master by this time. Is he working at a great book to tell others about the wonderful countries he has visited? No. He plays games. That is like the English. My employer he plays no game for amusement only. He would write the book. We believe that you have the information he needs. To you it is useless. To us it is worth a great deal, my little man.”

“A book in the Dutch language,” Yates meditated.

“How little you know of such affairs,” she scoffed. “The book would be written in English, Dutch, French and German and published at the same time. Mr. Van Westrheene for all his faults is a very honest man. He would not wish to deceive you. He would gain a great deal of money if he could make that book as comprehensive as he wishes. He wishes you to have a share of that profit. It is not a small sum he would give if you are able to afford him the information he desires. Do not speak too hastily. I will not deceive you. It is I who have taken all the trouble in this matter. I, too, should expect a share of your profit.”

Henry Yates took off his spectacles and polished them. He was facing the window and he blinked for a moment in the strong light. The dinghy was almost out of sight now and her sail might have been the white wing of a seagull.

108

“This is to be purely a mercenary bargain, then,” he queried.

She looked at him for a moment with an inviting twist of her becarmined lips, then she laughed and threw her arms around his neck.

“So long as the dinghy is on the water,” she whispered, pulling his ear, “we might flirt just as much as you like. First, though,

we make the agreement. I draw a map—yes? I tell you what we want!” . . .

He drew a little away, finished his whisky and soda and smoothed his rumpled hair.

“Another drink, Rosa?” he suggested.

“Go and fetch it from the bar,” she begged. “I mount to my room. Soon I will show you the map. Then we talk business.”

She walked to the door with her arm resting upon his shoulder and ran up the stairs with a lightness which surprised him. Henry Yates accepted a little more mild badinage from Nancy’s mother, then returned to the sitting-room with the drinks. It was fully ten minutes before Miss Rosa van Kampf descended. She was carrying an oilskin-bound map or chart under her arm. She brought it to the table, opened it and slowly spread it out. All the time she was watching him. One corner she secured with a geranium pot, another with the inkstand, the other two with solid ash trays.

“This is the country concerning which Mijnheer Van Westrheene feels that he is as yet far too ignorant. Yet it must find a place in the record of his travels. The one hundred and twenty-seven questions of which he spoke are all connected with that territory there.”

109

“We can answer them all,” Henry Yates announced with a slight touch of grandiloquence.

“You have been there lately then?” she asked eagerly.

“Lately? It is not necessary that it should be lately. It is a country, that, which no one ever forgets.”

“What were you doing there?” she went on. “You and that English master of yours, who looks as though the land upon which he stood and the air he breathed were his by divine right.”

“I may tell you that,” he replied, “when the terms of our bargain are fixed, when it is settled whether or no I answer those hundred and twenty-seven questions.”

“They shall be fixed here, now—at this moment,” she declared. “I know how much money Mr. Van Westreene has. I know how much he is prepared to spend on this book business. It is an amount which may bring ruin upon him, but he is obstinate. His book shall be perfect or it will never be written. The story of that blue patch upon the map must be in it. There will be two thousand five hundred pounds for you, my little man, five hundred pounds of which you will give back to me, and if there is anything else you want,” she added, passing her fingers down his cheek, “it is yours—any time when the dinghy is the other side of the bar.”

His cheeks burned where her fingers had touched them.

“One thing,” he begged. “This is necessary. I will not start our negotiations by deceiving you.”

“Better not,” she warned him.

“I shall answer those hundred and twenty-seven questions, but when they are answered, everything worth knowing about that

strip of country will be there—but there will be the experiences of others as well as our own. To tell you the truth, it is some time since my master and I crossed the Wallapooly river.”

She was standing by his side, the chart still spread out before them. She gripped him by the shoulders. It might have been a friendly, even a passionate, grip, but he was not altogether comfortable.

“Listen,” she said. “Two years, seven and a half months ago, you and your master and the usual circuslike troop of retainers left Southampton on an official expedition.”

“With the exception that the expedition was not official and that our retinue consisted of one gunmaker, who was going out to look over his lordship’s sporting guns, the statement is correct,” Mr. Henry Yates acquiesced.

“During those two years and seven and a half months you did not visit this country—or here,” she added, tapping the blue patch upon the chart. “You never crossed the boundaries—no? That is what you must tell me. If you do not answer there is no two thousand five hundred pounds. And I—I am not for you.”

“I cannot see that it matters,” he pleaded. “I can answer every one of those questions and my answers will tell you all that you want to know.”

“I am tying you down to a definite yes or no,” she persisted. “During this last expedition of yours, lasting between two and three years, you either did or you did not visit this country.”

“We did,” Henry Yates assented, “but we were not there all the time. We visited also Persia, India and Beluchistan. I don’t see why you lay so much stress upon this. What difference should it make to our bargain? Every scrap of information you require I am able to pass over to you.”

She swung him round, looked at him long and steadily and for a few passionate moments drew him into her arms. Then she turned away with a slight shrug of the shoulders. She lit a cigarette and commenced her second glass of sherry.

“Well, I suppose it is all right,” she said, patting his cheek. “To-night I will talk with Van Westreene. He will tell me whether what you say contents him. If he is satisfied you had better get to work at once.”

Yates leaned back and looked out of the window. The wind had changed and the little centreboard leaning on her side was halfway home.

“I shall be able to work for myself to-night and perhaps to-morrow night,” he confided. “When I have answered, say, forty of the questions and the centreboard is on the other side of the bar, I will come.”

“To find me in yielding mood,” she warned him, “they will have to be well answered. I will tell you now, little man,” she added, patting his cheeks, “you could have had all you wanted more easily—money, love and everything—if you had come straight from that little blue patch there.”

She tapped it once more with her finger as she rolled up the map and glanced out of the window.

“He is coming in very quickly,” she pointed out. “The first thing he will do is to come over or send the dinghy for me.”

Henry Yates finished his whisky and soda, took up his hat and stick and accepted a salute of a chaster character.

“You will excuse?” she begged. “Always as he draws nearer I am afraid.”

At the bar, Henry Yates was chaffed lightly by the landlady for his attentions to her lodger.

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“Two double sherries, Mr. Yates,” she pointed out. “You *are* going it. Wait till I tell Nancy!”

Mr. Yates, who was happy to have escaped from that room with its odour of cosmetics, perfumes and intrigue, smiled cheerfully.

“Believe me,” he assured her, “if it had been Nancy playing a set of tennis with me or taking me for a run, she would have been welcome to four double sherries. I am not a marrying man, alas, Mrs. Hewells. Let my chances go by, I fancy. Most of the girls I meet nowadays laugh at me—make fun of my beard—although if you travel with his lordship in some of the wild places he will go to, you are a lucky man if you can shave once a month. But, as I was saying—”

“Yes, as you were saying,” Mrs. Hewells put in, cleaning a glass vigorously.

“If I were one of the lads of the village down here, Nancy would be my choice and no other.”

Mrs. Hewells completed her task, unfastened her apron and made preparations for departure. She would reappear in half an hour in a black silk gown and cameo brooch, and with other trifling additions to her toilette, prepared to spend a long evening amongst the local clientele.

“There’s one thing I always say about you, Mr. Yates. You talk civil, you act civil and his lordship likes you, and that’s enough for any of us in these parts. There’s not many as I like to have sitting about in my parlour with a foreign woman, but with you, Mr. Yates, I know it’s all right. If you have a fault, sir, it’s as Nancy herself said one day—you’re a thought too modest.”

Yates smiled.

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“You might pass that word along to Nancy when you have a chance,” he begged as he took his leave. “A little encouragement might work wonders.”

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CHAPTER XIII

In his fancies—although there was nothing in his outward demeanour towards the world to indicate that he had any—Matresser had always pictured Elisabeth in the clinging robes which a fashionable portrait painter had that season immortalised, a beautiful lady of the salon depending for her charm upon her exquisite fragility rather than her more Dianalike qualities. The sight of her swinging down one of the rides of Sheddon's Wood in her heather-coloured tweeds, her face uplifted as though to catch a glimpse of the sky between the overhanging trees, was a revelation to him. She walked with the loose and easy gait of some wild creature of the woods, except that in her movements she showed no signs of suspicion or fear—the natural habitude of all free animals. Her slight start of surprise as she recognised Matresser and his companion Humphreys, was in itself a beautiful gesture. Her eyes, the colour of the autumn leaves on which she trod, flashed out a welcome.

“Do I go to prison for this?” she asked. “I read that very severe notice and I almost turned back.”

“You go to prison and I am your jailer,” he declared, taking her lightly by the arm. “That will do, Humphreys,” he went on. “We have marked all the trees, I think, and remember to trim the holly bushes on the left of Flottan's Corner.”

“I will get to work on them this afternoon, your lordship,” the man replied, touching his hat and turning

away.

“And now, young lady,” Matresser asked, as they moved slowly on, side by side, “what are you doing in my woods?”

“Seeking solitude,” she confided. “The house is full of people this afternoon. There is a sort of squash tournament going on and all the young men in the neighbourhood seem to have turned up.”

“Thank heavens you’ve warned me,” he sighed fervently. “Are you tired?”

She smiled in derision.

“I have only walked down from the house,” she said, “beside which I do not think I have ever been physically tired in my life.”

“Then we will go round the bottom of the wood,” he proposed, “and come out on the quay.”

“So long as we do not meet your terrifying Dutchman,” she laughed.

“This is an occasion,” he declared after a few moments’ pause. “Do you realise, Mademoiselle Elisabeth Stamier, that I have never, practically, talked to you except when you have been making magic with your fingers and reducing my thoughts to pulp, or in our rather overheated drawing-rooms? I like to be out of doors.”

“I, too,” she agreed. “Tell me what you have been doing with your gamekeeper.”

He indulged in a slight grimace.

“The fates, coupled with the fact of my advancing years, seem to have agreed that I shall now settle down—whatever that means. I am taking an interest in my belongings and, like all selfish people, I am beginning with the things that I like best. Next week I shall ride around to call on some of the tenants. Just now I am planning out the work for Humphreys and his co-keepers to start upon directly we have finished shooting.”

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There was a lack of enthusiasm in her demeanour which he could scarcely fail to notice.

“I suppose you think I ought to leave my property to itself and look further afield for occupation,” he remarked.

“I would not presume,” she said gravely, “to criticise in any way, but—”

She hesitated.

“Well?”

“One sort of feels,” she went on, “that much of the practical side of managing estates could be done in an office and that the brains of the world, the knowledge and experience which you must have gained in all your travels, even if they have been chiefly for sport, might be better employed.”

“You think that, do you?” he meditated.

“I do indeed,” she said firmly. “You have been away from Europe for so long that it must be hard for you to realise, but to

me and many others who think about our countries at all, it does seem as though a sort of chaotic paralysis were creeping over the world. If it is not lethargy it is disaster.”

“You are in a serious frame of mind.”

“I am a serious person,” she told him. “I have every predisposition towards frivolity. I want to play all the time. I would love to find myself in a world in which there was no work to be done and only music to trouble one’s senses, but it is not possible. These are the days—to quote our enemy Hellstern—when a man’s hand must rest upon the sword.”

“And a woman’s?”

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Her manner stiffened a little.

“That was only allegorical, of course. I think that all humanity, all the nations—men, women and children—should be training themselves to do something in life to restore the lost balances.”

“That sounds very depressing,” he admitted, “especially coming from the daughter of one of the gayest nations in the civilised world.”

“Once perhaps the gayest,” she insisted. “Not now. Even you, if you were to spend a few months travelling closer at home through my country, for instance, instead of seeking always for new rivers to place upon the map in countries where human beings scarcely exist, or new animals to be shot to glorify the skill of the hunter, might see things a little differently. It is the cities and crowded places where human beings still live that are worth rediscovering. . . . And now,” she concluded, with a

laugh, "I have been almost rude to my host. I have been exceedingly impertinent. Let us talk of something else."

"I am depressed," he said. "You are a very severe critic, Mademoiselle Stamier. You do not seem to approve of me at all."

She made no reply. They had reached the end of the lane skirting the wood and Matresser leaned over the gate looking thoughtfully across the field to where the turrets and far-reaching front of the Great House were visible. She looked up at him questioningly.

"Admiring your property?" she enquired with gentle sarcasm. "It is a very magnificent mansion."

"I was engaged in a careful attempt at reconstruction," he acknowledged. "I was asking myself, in short, why any human being who was already half unconscious should have stumbled down this lane, climbed over this five-barred gate, only to collapse amongst those unpleasant-looking turnips."

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"Is this the spot where Fergus was found?"

"Within a half dozen yards of this gate. Probably in that little patch of roots which seems to have been rather disturbed. It was from here that they took him to Dr. Andrews'."

"Why did you bring me here?"

"I will atone by taking you away again," he answered with a smile. "It does not really lead anywhere."

They retraced their steps and leaving the lane at its junction with the main road, turned towards the village. Down in the harbour the *Daphne* was rolling in a strong swell coming in against the tide. A threat of rain was in the skies. The place was almost deserted. As they reached the quay, however, a mighty shape slowly drew itself up from the hatch of the *Daphne*. With legs wide apart and keeping perfect balance, notwithstanding the roll of the boat, Van Westrheene raised a pair of field glasses to his eyes and stood gazing landwards.

“Our Dutch friend does me the honour to be interested in my house, apparently,” Matresser murmured, following the sweep of the glasses.

Elisabeth made no reply. For more than a minute they watched him—a seagoing Colossus standing on the soles of his wide-spread feet, motionless and intent. Suddenly Elisabeth uttered a half-stifled exclamation. Matresser also was looking towards the House but he remained silent.

“Someone waved a handkerchief from one of those windows,” she declared.

“It did look like it, didn’t it?” her companion remarked indifferently.

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“What room is that—the seventh window from the left gable?”

“I’ll have to think,” Matresser answered. “It’s very near my own study.”

“But who could be waving?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“One of the servants, I should imagine,” he suggested. “Anyone who was in any of the rooms in the front there, who happened to see him looking up for such a long time, would probably wave.”

“Do you like Mr. Van Westrheene?” she asked.

“Horrible fellow,” Matresser replied, as they commenced the short descent into the village. “He shoots as well as most of us—a little better as a matter of fact—but he is hatefully inhuman. Rowans was telling me that he started to play a hundred up at billiards with him the other night. Rowans won the toss and gave the usual miss in baulk. Van Westrheene brought off the round the table cannon off the red with the utmost ease and scored a hundred and four without leaving himself a single difficult shot.”

“And then?”

“He just put up his cue and said to his partner without a smile—‘I win.’”

“I cannot think how he has stayed alive!” she exclaimed.

A reminiscent look was gleaming in Matresser’s eyes.

“I should think he has had some narrow shaves,” he said. “That one instance is significant of his whole sporting psychology. He brought off a fine shot but the glow of satisfaction he felt was not in the least owing to his own skill. It was simply because it ensured his being the winner in the game.”

They stood on the quay for a few minutes, but a sudden squall of snow and sleet from eastwards drove them into shelter. Matresser led the way to the inn. Mrs. Hewells was at the door to greet them, with a curtsy for Mademoiselle Stamier and a lower one still for Matresser.

“I’m that glad,” she said, “there’s a fine fire in the parlour. If you will go right in I will be getting your lordship and the young lady some tea.”

“Tea sounds very nice,” Elisabeth declared, “unless you think we ought not to stay,” she added, turning to Matresser.

“We’ll risk it,” he answered. “I remember what Mrs. Hewells’ buttered toast is like! Let me push your chair up to the fire.”

“One moment,” she begged.

She was standing at the window looking across towards the harbour. The rolling mists were rapidly becoming denser, but for one moment there was a view of the *Daphne*. She pointed it out to Matresser.

“I begin to wonder,” she observed, “whether that Dutchman has not taken a fancy to you. He brings his boat in at a tremendous risk, they all say, the night you arrive, comes to call on you the day afterwards and so far as I can see—I have noticed it twice before—he spends half his time with his field glasses examining the whole front of the Great House.”

“Not an easy fellow to forget if you had once seen him,” Matresser remarked.

“He is the tallest man I have ever met, except one of the Danish Royal Family,” she confided. “You will not think me foolish, will you? I have the feeling that I cannot breathe, that I cannot exist happily in the same room with him. I scarcely ate a mouthful that night he was next me at dinner. He seems to draw all the air down his own lungs. He is a monopolist, or I suppose I should say an individualist, in life. He lives for himself only.”

“Himself or what he represents,” Matresser said thoughtfully.

She gave a little start.

“What do you mean by that?” she asked.

“I could imagine him in other days in other clothing,” he explained, “as the leader of a savage tribe whose ethics were to kill that they might live. A simple code of existence. It could lead to a lot of bloodshed, I suppose, but it would also lead towards security.”

“What I think I should like to know,” Elisabeth said, her eyes resting pensively upon her companion, “is why he is spending his time here—why he has come to this place. Tragedy seemed to follow so quickly in his footsteps.”

“You don’t suppose he had anything to do with that poor chap Fergus’ death?”

“I do not know,” she replied deliberately. “How should I know? A few months ago this was the quietest, simplest corner of the world I had ever been in. Now there is a different atmosphere.”

“All since my return, apparently,” he observed.

“Well, you were rather a stormy petrel, were you not?”

Mrs. Hewells brought in the tea—a real farmhouse tea with scones and jam and piles of buttered toast.

“I think that this storm is very fortunate for us,” Elisabeth said, as she drew off her gloves and seated herself in the chair which Matresser had drawn up for her. “Now I make the tea for you. This is an English domestic scene. Of course, it is all wrong,” she went on. “I am here to be your sister’s companion—not yours.”

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“But see how naturally it has all happened,” he pointed out. “This is your afternoon off. You go for a walk. I meet you—a happy chance. A storm arrives—another happy chance. And we have tea together at Mrs. Hewells’. It gives me the opportunity to say something to you before I go away, something which I knew I should say very soon but which might not have been so easy up at the House.”

“You are very mysterious,” she said.

“I shan’t be for long,” he told her cheerfully. “One more small piece of sugar, please, to give me courage,” he went on, passing his cup. “I will be perfectly orthodox according to the best Meredithian tradition. Elisabeth, will you marry me?”

“Will I what?” she exclaimed.

“Oh, well, of course, I could talk about it forever,” he continued, “but having made up my mind what I want in life, I

am following my usual custom and asking for it. I know I have wasted a lot of time travelling about in, I suppose, a perfectly selfish fashion, but for a time at any rate that has to come to an end. I want to settle down here for the sake of other people and there is no one else I have ever known with whom I have wished to share my life.”

“But you cannot be in earnest,” she expostulated. “It is impossible. You know really nothing of me. I might be—I probably am—an adventuress.”

“You could be no more an adventuress in life,” he pointed out, “than I am an adventurer. I have an idea that I could make you happy and I suppose you know quite well that I could not have said one word of these things to you if I did not care. You have gathered, I suppose, that I am not demonstrative. That is, I think, because I have been a Jack-of-all-trades and turned over many pages of life. Love-making has not come very much my way. Look at me, please, Elisabeth. You know that I am fond of you.”

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His hand had fallen upon hers. It seemed to her an incredibly bewildering situation. She was curiously and inexplicably happy. She knew that so long as she lived she would carry with her the memory of this quaint little room, his strangely spoken words, the curious strain of earnestness which had suddenly crept into his tone and manner. He was shocked and yet thrilled to find that her eyes were full of tears.

“You must think that I am perfectly idiotic,” she said. “I will not pretend that you are the first man who has ever asked me to marry him, but there is something so altogether different about

the real thing when it comes.”

“I hope there is,” he agreed cheerfully.

“You must not think that I am being silly,” she begged, “or trying to play the ingénue, but however I felt about it I do not think I could ever marry you.”

“And why not?”

“Frankly because my life is already full of other very serious things,” she explained. “In England you are all so happy and comfortable. Success comes to you so easily. You have no broken institutions to lament. You have not a long procession of ruined relatives and friends to keep you sad.”

“You can bring as many of them as you like over here,” he promised. “We will do what we can. I should always want to do what I could to make your people happy.”

“But do you not see,” she went on, “it is more than a personal matter. It is my country which is suffering. Largesse to the government is nothing but slow poison. One needs to strike deeper than that.”

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“Please go on,” he begged. “I only wish to understand.”

“I know that you are too great a man ever to stoop so low, but if I tell you something, you will promise that you will forget it?”

“If you ask me to—yes.”

“I hold a position in your household and I try to do my duty, all

the same I am nothing more nor less than a spy—or rather, I should be if there were more opportunity.”

“God bless my soul!” he exclaimed. “What is there down here which could possibly help you?”

“I do not know,” she answered. “I may know any day. I only know that the position was found for me and I came.”

“Then get along with it, my dear,” he invited. “To tell you the truth it sounds most intriguing. Spies have not come my way very much, except in cruder countries with a rope round the neck. If I can help at any time let me know.”

She looked at him gravely.

“Are you making fun of me?” she asked.

“Of course I’m not, dear,” he answered. “The only thing is, it did sound rather absurd. I mean what I say, too. If you think there is anything to be found out down in these parts which will be of any use to your mysterious principals, let me know and I will help. By the by, for whom are you working? What is it you want to find out? I would rather help than stand in your way. Indeed—”

“Do you mind not saying any more?” she interrupted. “I know that you mean to be kind, but you hurt. The people for whom I work are worth while. That is all I can tell you. Will you please ask me no more questions.”

“I should like to ask you once more whether you won’t marry me,” he insisted.

She was half angry, half tearful.

“Do not spoil it all,” she begged. “If it is any pleasure to you to know it, I was very happy for a few minutes and you have given me something very beautiful to think about. Please let it stay at that. Do not treat me as though I were a stupid *intrigante*. The only passion I have ever known in life is my passion for my country. I am in earnest, however ineffectual I may be. It must be almost impossible for you to understand, but be kind, please, Lord Matresser.”

“My dear, I couldn’t be anything else,” he assured her. “I am too fond of you. I shall let you go your own misguided way, but when I judge the time has come for me to talk to you seriously again I shall do it. . . . I can see you are dying to get home.”

“Do you mind?” she pleaded. “It is all so difficult.”

“Come along,” he invited. “Mrs. Hewells telephoned for a car directly we got here. I will take you home.”

She rose promptly to her feet as he touched the bell.

“It has been such a lovely afternoon,” she said as she bade farewell to Mrs. Hewells. “And you,” she added a moment or two later to her host, “let me thank you, too—will you not? Do not think I am ungrateful. It is marvellous to have a home like yours and a mansion and great estates and to be an English nobleman, but when I see all these things and I look across, not only as far as Vienna but through all our beautiful country, do you really think that I could settle down here and be happy and forget?”

He held her hand quite tightly in his for the first few moments of their homeward drive. For a man who knew so little of her sex he was very wise indeed. He exercised the gift of silence.

They discovered a certain amount of agitation amongst the household when they reached home. Matresser was begged to go at once to his mother's boudoir. She welcomed him eagerly.

“My dear Ronald,” she confided, “until you rang up and we knew your whereabouts we were in great distress. A telephone message came at four o'clock from Sandringham. A certain gentleman from Downing Street—they were very mysterious—is leaving this evening and he wished to know if it would be convenient for him to dine and spend the night here on his way back.”

Matresser whistled softly to himself.

“Of course you said yes.”

“My dear boy,” his mother remonstrated, “for a Cabinet minister of such distinction we have opened up the Bishop's Suite in the west wing and I told Ann she must send her young soldier friends back to barracks. They can come over and dine any night they like after to-morrow. From the way the message was sent I am quite sure the visit is meant to be a private one, although I cannot imagine why.”

“Right as usual, my wonderful mother,” Matresser declared. “I am going into the library to study contemporary politics in the *Times*. What on earth can I find to talk about with a leading statesman?”

“For once, my dear,” his mother told him, with a mysterious light in her keen eyes, “you will have to break through that reserve of yours and talk about your travels.”

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CHAPTER XIV

The Right Honourable Sir Francis Tring, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, proved himself a very popular guest during his flying visit to the Great House. The first few moments after his meeting with the lady of the house, he completely dispelled that slight suspicion of annoyance which his telephone message had created.

“I hope you understand, Lady Matresser,” he explained, “that I had no idea whatever of interfering with any house party you might have been giving. We politicians have a very censorious press criticising our every move and we are passing through rather troublesome times. This is such a well-known country house for gay parties and wonderful sport that my visit here, when things are a little critical in London, might have seemed callous.”

“I am sure we all quite understand that,” Lady Matresser assented.

“I did want just a few words with your son,” Tring continued. “He has helped us before, you know, and I have a very high opinion of his judgment.”

Lady Matresser was not a woman who usually showed her emotions, but she was certainly surprised.

“I am delighted to hear you say so, Sir Francis. To tell you the truth I never imagined that Ronald’s travels were of any interest

to anybody except to the Royal Geographical Society and his sporting friends.”

“No one with the intelligence of your son can travel as much as he does without gathering something of the sentiment of the countries through which he passes,” Sir Francis pronounced. “A poor Foreign Secretary is often in trouble through not having travelled enough. If you had been a full house I should have contented myself with an hour’s conversation with Lord Matresser and have travelled on to-night. Wonderful roads from here to London and I believe there is a moon.”

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“I can assure you,” Lady Matresser said, “that we were much too honoured by your suggestion to have permitted anything of the sort. Our larger parties are over for the season and we simply had a lot of these young soldiers from Norwich about the place. One never knows whether they are staying or not, but it was very easy indeed to pack them off until next week. My son-in-law, Stephen Hennerley, is our only other guest, and you know him, I think.”

“Of course I do,” Sir Francis assented. “He belongs to our party and is a very useful Member of Parliament. There was a young lady—a foreigner, I believe—whom I thought very attractive. I only saw her for a moment.”

“Mademoiselle Stamier is a charming girl and very much admired. She is my daughter’s companion.”

“Is she by any chance of Austrian nationality?” Sir Francis enquired.

“She is a niece of the Austrian minister,” Lady Matresser

confided. "It seems very sad to think that people of such distinction should have to accept posts of that description, but she seems very happy here and my daughter is devoted to her."

"Austria will be one of our problems, I fear, for years to come," Sir Francis observed. "I think most English people have the warmest feelings of friendship towards her, but we never seem to be in a position to be able to translate our good will into practical help."

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Dinner was announced and the tête-à-tête came to an end. Sir Francis, who had the look of a harassed man, talked courteously but at no great length to his hostess and exchanged only a few remarks with Elisabeth who sat on his other side.

"You are going to join in one of these wonderful shooting parties, Sir Francis?" the latter enquired.

"I? My dear young lady," he told her, "I have not touched a gun this year. I have just called on my way back to town to have a few words with our host."

"With Lord Matresser?" she asked in surprise.

He nodded assent.

"We look upon Matresser," he went on, "as one of our unofficial ambassadors. He seems to have a special gift for dealing with some of these troublesome people in faraway countries. Within my memory we have three times asked for his advice. In each case, if we had followed it literally, we should have been better off."

Elisabeth was curiously interested.

“But the general idea seems to be,” she said, “that our host does not take the slightest interest in anything except shooting big game and trying for rare heads.”

Sir Francis turned to the footman who was serving an entrée and remained silent for a moment or two afterwards.

“Lord Matresser, of course, is a great sportsman,” he admitted after a pause, “but no one could travel as far and into such little-known places as he does without learning more of the countries than we stay-at-homes.”

“But are they countries which interest you?” she ventured.

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“Every square yard of land where the Union Jack has once been raised,” he declared with mock grandiloquence, “is of interest to us.”

“That sounds terribly like the hustings,” Hennerley observed with a smile. “I could imagine our local patriot ill-balanced upon a tub at Fakenham Market, getting off a squib of that description.”

“It would perhaps be better for the country,” Sir Francis remarked drily, “if there were a little more of that sort of talk abroad.”

“Much better,” Lady Matresser pronounced. “I read a speech of one of the Labour Party in this our own country last week which seems to have been listened to without the slightest interruption

and it was nothing more nor less than Communism.”

“You can hear plenty of that sort of drivel every Sunday in Hyde Park,” Hennerley said. “They have left off talking it in Russia now because they have had their own way, but I was there last month and a more dreary, comfortless country to live in I cannot conceive.”

“There are some excellent principles about Communism,” Matresser remarked. “The worst of it is that they presuppose mental and physical equality in its constituent atoms. As nature won’t oblige, a state built up on Communistic principles is bound to go phut. We are not too happily placed in England just now but we are in Paradise compared to where the Russians will be for twenty or thirty years.”

“That,” Elisabeth declared, with a note of genuine appreciation in her tone, “is practically the first serious speech I have ever heard from Lord Matresser.”

“Quite sound, although a trifle obvious,” his brother-in-law commented.

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“Communism is as dead as mutton in this country at any rate,” Matresser pronounced. “Common sense killed all that.”

“And Carter’s Little Liver Pills,” Ann put in flippantly. “This unwholesome desire for what you don’t possess and other people do, is just a form of biliousness. You needn’t glare at me. I’m only quoting an ex-Cabinet minister.”

Lady Matresser rose to her feet. Sir Francis walked with her as far as the corner of the picture gallery where coffee was usually

served when the party was small.

“May I say good-bye to you now, Lady Matresser,” he begged. “I know you will forgive my apparent breach of manners but I must be in London early in the morning so I have ventured to order my car for an unheard-of hour. Your son and I are going to have a talk in his den if you will excuse us.”

She shook hands with a somewhat mystified smile.

“We are sorry to see so little of you, Sir Francis,” she said, “but I am delighted to think that Ronald is likely to be of some use to you. He has so little to tell us as a rule when he returns home. I have never quite made up my mind whether it is really bad memory or a natural gift of reticence.”

“A little of both, perhaps,” was the somewhat vague reply.

Arrived in Matresser’s den, Sir Francis lit a cigar and Matresser his pipe. Burrows himself brought up their coffee and brandy and received his final instructions with regard to the early departure of this important guest.

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“I am delighted to see you here, of course, sir,” Matresser said as soon as they had settled down, “but isn’t it rather a breach of our arrangement?”

“It had to be,” Sir Francis acknowledged grimly. “I don’t know whether you quite realise what has happened. I sent an important message down to you by one of our most reliable men in the Foreign Office—Phillip Fergus. You know him, of course. I wrote you about that last report of yours, asking you some

questions and especially about a spot we are rather interested in just now, and I also mentioned a little trip we want you to prepare for very shortly. The fellow was first of all assaulted between Fakenham and Cley and afterwards deliberately, brutally murdered. Something must have leaked out about your travels, Matresser. Who is there down here likely to be playing the spy?"

"I wish I knew," Matresser rejoined. "I am pretty well surrounded by my own people."

"Then your own people will have to be put on the grill. The letter which Fergus was bringing you and which apparently you have never received was a very dangerous communication if it found its way into the wrong hands. We shall have to probe this matter in a more searching manner than we have ever before thought necessary. Any mishaps of this sort which have previously occurred we have ignored. It is generally the wisest policy. This time we cannot do so."

"What exactly do you mean by that?" Matresser asked.

"I mean that we are sending Finch down here to-morrow," the minister went on. "He is third in command at Scotland Yard but he was at MI7B during the war and he is pretty clever at this sort of business. Marlow is coming with him to see that the criminal side of the matter is kept within bounds. Before they get to work, Matresser, as man to man, and I can assure you a great deal depends upon your reply, are you shielding anyone or partially shielding him? Have you no suspicion whatever as to who it was who first assaulted and then murdered Fergus and is in possession of the letter

addressed to you, fortunately in very vague terms but definitely inviting you to take part in our pending conference?"

"I can assure you that I have no idea," Matresser declared earnestly. "The only stranger in these parts is a Dutchman called Van Westrheene, who brought his boat in here the night of the great storm and who has been up to shoot with me once and dine, a great sportsman but a disagreeable fellow. Then, besides him, the only persons who do not absolutely belong here are my mother's maid, whom I have satisfied myself is entirely harmless, and my sister's companion, Mademoiselle Stamier, whom you sat next at dinner and who I think I told you is a niece of the Austrian Minister."

"We will leave the young lady out of it for the moment," the Foreign Minister declared. "I have some slight acquaintance with Mademoiselle Stamier and she is scarcely likely to work against her sympathies. Van Westrheene is a Dutchman, you say. I will have him looked up directly I get back."

"Would you like to see the doctor in whose house the final tragedy happened?"

"How long has he been in the place?"

"He was born here and his father before him. He is what he calls himself—a real piece of Norfolk clay. He used to be ashamed of the fact but now he rather brags about it. He has never been outside England in his life. He has not even crossed the Channel."

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"I'll leave him to Finch," Sir Francis decided. "It seems to me at the moment as though someone had followed Fergus down

from London. If so, the letter is probably in Paris by now, and the result, so far as we are concerned, would be most unfortunate.”

“Are you going to tell me what was in that letter, sir?”
Matresser asked.

“Of course I am—in outline at any rate. That’s why I begged for an invitation to Sandringham so as to have a bona fide excuse for calling in to see you. It contained comments on your report on Territory Number Seven. The loss of that makes the whole business in which the Foreign Office is concerned extraordinarily difficult.”

“It is a record of plain unvarnished facts,” Matresser said firmly. “You wanted the truth and you got it.”

“My dear fellow, we realise that and we are tremendously grateful,” Sir Francis declared. “If those facts had leaked out afterwards, provided our great move comes off, there would have been an uproar. We should have had a red-hot press against us. You did what we asked you to do by telling us the simple truth, Matresser, and I won’t have a line of your report altered. We shall have to deal with Number Seven separately.”

“What about the other matter?”

“You will probably smile when I tell you, and it will take me the best part of an hour to explain exactly its significance. The letter contains an invitation from a certain person in mid-Europe to spend a fortnight with him at his shooting box in the Metzger Mountains.”

“A stranger?” Matresser exclaimed.

“I don’t think it likely that you have ever met him,” was the thoughtful reply. “He is a very charming person, however, and although he is not English himself, he appears to have a great affection for our race. You will remember that Lord Lonsdale used to pay frequent visits abroad purely for the sake of sport. The political significance of these visits was entirely ignored. Your invitation was worded and comes in exactly the same way. You will take with you the usual outfit—a rifle and I suppose a couple of shotguns, with cartridges from number twos to sevens. Let it look as much like a genuine sporting expedition as possible.”

“And when I arrive with this arsenal?”

Sir Francis was silent for several moments.

“I shall have to wander for a few minutes,” he said, “from the immediate subject of our discussion. You have shown yourself capable of helping us to such an extent that I am going to take you further still into our confidence.”

Matresser pulled up his chair closer to his visitor’s. He leaned forward and listened intently.

CHAPTER XV

“The fact of it is,” Sir Francis began, “that neither you nor anyone else outside the Cabinet knows exactly how serious the present situation is. Even the press daren’t acknowledge it. Our ambassadors keep us on the jump the whole of the time.”

“Where’s the danger, sir?” Matresser asked.

“Germany, of course. She is the strongest and best prepared nation in Europe and she knows it. The curious thing about it is that the man who is chiefly responsible for her strength, the man who has hammered militarism into the country, defied all Europe and broken every covenant, is the man who to-day desires peace.”

“That seems rather surprising,” Matresser observed quietly. “I don’t think that anybody who had only the newspapers to rely upon for their knowledge of day-by-day happenings would believe it.”

“I am not guessing,” Sir Francis assured him. “I am telling you the truth. Curtels has been hammering it into us for months but we could scarcely credit it. I was in Berlin myself, as you know, a short time ago. I had two interviews with the person whom I will call the Dictator. He acknowledged frankly that he was losing his hold upon the country, and he was losing it because, having weighed up all the possibilities, he has come to the conclusion that what Germany needs is peace.”

“Why?”

“You have asked a question,” the Foreign Secretary replied, “which I believe I am the only man in the world who could answer. The Dictator gave himself away at our last interview. I know what it is he is really fearing.”

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“A return to monarchy?”

“Precisely. There are at least three of the present generation of Hohenzollerns who are lusty, intellectual fellows and who have been living before their public in the one hope that some day the country will swing back and they might be chosen to take Hellstern’s place. The students are all with them and curiously enough, the army, fashioned and developed by the Dictator, is becoming more and more royalist every day. Not one of those three likely candidates for the throne of the new Germany can show himself in the streets to-day without being saluted and applauded wherever he goes.”

“And France?”

“Our alliance with France has become almost a fetish of honour with us all,” Sir Francis said gravely. “And frankly, Matresser, we may have to face at any moment a terrible decision. There’s not anyone in the Cabinet or out of it who could pretend that France has treated this country well since the war. She only once made a gesture of being our ally at Geneva and in the matter of sanctions she did her best to heap all the onus of making a decision upon us and us alone. She never for a single moment played the honest game. You know as well as I do, Matresser, that there is not a more unpopular country in France

to-day than England. They don't trust us. They don't believe in us. In the open press they call us a nation of hypocrites. We have been stupid often enough but we have not deserved such an attitude on their part. That is one of the things we are up against, Matresser. It boils itself down to this. Are we to risk everything that this nation stands for by fighting Germany for the sake of France?"

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"You are being extraordinarily candid with me, Sir Francis," Matresser observed.

"We have more faith in you than you have in yourself," was the blunt reply. "Now that we have begun, let us go through with it. There's Italy. Well, my own opinion is that Hellstern's turn-about-face is entirely due to the disaster which has befallen that country. Matorni embarked upon what he considered a perfectly safe and glorious war. The conquest of a semicivilised nation was inevitable enough but it has brought neither glory nor honour. No great man has ever lived from the cradle to his deathbed without making one mistake, and that was Matorni's. To-day he is the prophet without honour, a tyrant whose authority is falling away from him. Hellstern looks across the Alps and shudders. The only thing that could restore Matorni's popularity would be if he were able to join any combination of nations strong enough to make war against this country. Meanwhile, the Crown Prince of Italy, who at one time was utterly neglected, becomes more and more popular every day. Only last week he was received with cheers at the opening of the Opera whilst Matorni took his place alone and in silence. In Austria—well, the people don't even trouble to conceal the fact that the only thing they are praying for now is an Arnsburg back upon the throne and a monarchical government."

“I am more glad than ever that I am not a politician,” Matresser observed.

“We have to face the music,” Sir Francis said gravely, “but exactly what policy to embrace, which will enable us to retain our honourable place amongst the nations and yet keep England safe, is a dire problem. What we fear most—you see, I am being perfectly frank—is being dragged into a war with France as our ally against Italy, Germany and probably Austria. Germany is waiting with her hand already upon the sword. France, a shuddering mass of nerves suspecting our every action, is terrified every moment of being what she calls betrayed by perfidious Britain.”

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“You have taken note of the other possible complications?” Matresser asked.

“We have gambled upon your report,” the minister replied. “We studied it carefully, and without a dissentient voice we pinned our faith to it. We have accepted it as an axiom that in the face of a possible closer fusion between Japan and China, Russia will never move a single man westwards to the help of France even if she were otherwise inclined to do so. Your Chinese work was wonderful, Matresser. Without official recognition you seem to have won the confidence of all the men who stand for the new China and everything you predicted is justifying itself. It is, as you pointed out, a perfectly logical outcome of the spread of western civilisation—we call it that—amongst the yellow-skinned races that they should draw closer to one another and present a united front. We are with you also in all that you say about America, although there we have been able, without your report, to arrive at definite conclusions. America will never

interfere again in European quarrels. It is not to be asked of or expected from them, nor do I personally believe that Canada would ever send another soldier across the Atlantic to Europe. We had the opportunity after the war of making the British Empire impregnable. If we had had a Disraeli or a Pitt it might have been accomplished. The glorious opportunity passed and it will never come again. The most decent thing we as a nation have done since the war is valiantly to stick to our disarmament obligations, and for that we have received not a word of acknowledgment from any one of the nations. We have been sneered at by our allies and derided by our enemies. The whole farce is over now. We are spending all the money we have hoarded but we are spending it on a dearer market and we are spending it, I am afraid, too late.”

Matresser rose from his chair and paced the room thoughtfully for several minutes.

“A whisky and soda, sir?” he suggested.

“A mild one, then,” the minister begged. “I don’t care whether I go to bed or not but I am being called at four, as you know. I shall sleep in the car so it is not such a great hardship. Thank you,” he added, accepting the tumbler. “No, I won’t smoke another cigar. I will join you in a pipe.”

Matresser brought across the tobacco jar and seated himself once more in his easy chair.

“You have not taken me so far into your confidence, Sir Francis, I am sure,” he said, “without some definite reason. You know that I am not a diplomat.”

“Really?”

“Really. I am more of an adventurer with the knack of keeping my wits about me and facing danger when it is there. But does all this mean that you have another job for me?”

“I cannot talk to you of rewards, Matresser,” Tring went on gravely. “There is very little that even a grateful country could offer you unless you took a fancy to politics. You have done a splendid two years’ work for the country, which probably not a soul will ever know about. Would you undertake another mission, even more dangerous, even more brimful of responsibility?”

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“I cannot fancy myself refusing,” was the brief reply.

“This one would be a matter of a few weeks only. It is rather a desperate throw but I have thought it over for months and it seems to me to give us the best chance out. I have just received a rather grudging permission and I shall bring my scheme up at the Cabinet to-morrow. They may not listen to me. Very well, that will be the end of it and I don’t mind telling you, Matresser, because I personally have had a great many years’ experience of your discretion, that if I cannot persuade the others to it my health will break down and I shall resign.”

“But how far should I have to travel?” Matresser asked.

“Just to a certain shooting lodge on the eastern frontier of Germany, the same expedition I have spoken of before. There will be negotiations there in which you will take part.”

“Couldn’t that be better done from the Berlin Embassy?”

Sir Francis smiled deprecatingly.

“My dear fellow,” he remonstrated, “the German espionage system is getting to be one of the finest in the world. It is to-day very nearly as good as our own. I forget what our staff is at the Embassy but there is not a single member, down to the typists employed by the various secretaries, who is not watched. The head of the police there could tell you where our second and third secretaries, for instance, dined and supped every night for the last three months.”

“Should I have to carry any papers?”

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“Not a line. The whole affair would be entirely *viva voce*.”

“I imagine my mission would be connected in some way with my last two years’ work.”

“With a portion of it—yes,” Sir Francis replied.

“Well, I’m your man,” Matresser agreed. “I shall at least have the advantage of knowing what I am talking about, although I think myself you are trying me a little too high.”

“And I am quite sure that we are not,” was the emphatic reply. “The very fact that you are right outside the diplomatic world is a huge advantage. You are an English nobleman with a great reputation as a sportsman and you could visit Germany just as Lord Lonsdale used to in the old days. I cannot think of a single soul whom I dare send on this business except you, Matresser.”

“I hope I will deserve your confidence, sir. You would not like to give me a hint, I suppose?”

“I would rather not,” Sir Francis confessed. “It may come to nothing and if it does I would rather possess the knowledge that no human being had ever heard of the suggestion as having come from me.”

“That’s quite enough, sir,” Matresser assured him.

“In any case,” Sir Francis went on, “the less you know about the matter until the last moment the better; when that last moment arrives, you will act.”

“I have given my word, sir,” Matresser reminded him.

The Foreign Secretary drew a sigh of immense relief and knocked out the ashes from his pipe.

“Now for my two hours’ sleep,” he declared.

CHAPTER XVI

Matresser, a few mornings later, looked up with a frown from his task of examining the breech of one of his guns. There was no mistaking the booming voice, the heavy tread of the approaching guest.

“Who the devil let that fellow in, Humphreys?” he muttered.

“He never waits to be let in anywhere, that Dutchman don’t, milord,” Humphreys complained. “He is always ahead of the guns when we are walking in line and he just pushes his way wherever he wants to go. I’m rare glad there aren’t many like him in these parts.”

The door was flung open. Mijnheer Van Westrheene stepped across the threshold—a huge grotesque figure in his short shooting coat, his long legs tightly encased in breeches and gaiters.

“Good morning, Lord Matresser,” he boomed out with spurious heartiness. “What a day! A clear sky, too! But how the pheasants would tumble!”

“Are you shooting to-day?” Matresser asked politely.

“I haf no invitation,” Van Westrheene confessed. “I think to myself I will walk so far as the Great House and see if my friend is inclined for the *chasse*.”

“I am not shooting this morning,” Matresser announced. “I am, in fact, preparing for a brief absence.”

“You leave here?” Van Westrheene exclaimed, with an air of somewhat exaggerated surprise.

“For a few days only.”

“It is bad news,” Van Westrheene grunted. “I look at your beautiful woods, your rolling root fields with so much cover for the little brown partridges, every morning as I dress. To think that they are to lie idle is terrible. Your pheasants will get fat. They will not mount well.”

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“Well, I’m not thinking of staying at home to give them exercise,” Matresser observed. “I’m afraid I can’t offer you a chair out here. We only use this room as a workshop.”

“I sit anywhere,” the Dutchman replied, sweeping aside a pile of cartridge boxes and ensconcing himself on the window sill. “What time you leave? Where you go?”

“As yet,” was the dry rejoinder, “I have not completed my plans.”

“You go to shoot?”

“Or catch butterflies, as the fancy takes me.”

“In South America,” Van Westrheene confided, “I have shot butterflies as big as your hand with an air gun. They fly like snipe, like your painted lady butterflies, to left—to right—down—up. Very difficult.”

“I see you are carrying your gun,” Matresser remarked. “You didn’t expect to use it in the lane coming up, did you?”

“I did not. I say to myself when I leave the boat—perhaps Lord Matresser will like a walk of an hour or two before lunch. If so, there am I for company—and behold, dinner is in the pot!”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” Matresser regretted. “All my outlying land is on the other side and I never go near my covers on off days.”

There was a timid knock at the door. Humphreys threw it open and Elisabeth entered. She stopped short when she saw Van Westrheene.

“I am so sorry,” she apologised. “I understood you were alone.”

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“Come in, please, Mademoiselle Stamier,” Matresser invited. “I am just looking through my kit before I push off—not that Humphreys ever forgets anything, but it amuses me.”

“I come and I try to tell Lord Matresser that it is too beautiful a day to spend thinking of anything but sport,” Van Westrheene put in with a bow of welcome. “It is a day to roam the country with a gun on one’s shoulder and to kill. The light is wonderful.”

“I was going to the village,” Elisabeth remarked, turning to Matresser. “I wondered if I could do anything for you.”

“Or me,” Van Westrheene proposed. “If there is no shooting I go to the village, too. I post your letters, I send your telegrams—what you wish.”

Matresser smiled. He was beginning to find the Dutchman's persistence amusing.

"My telegrams are always telephoned to Norwich," he confided, "and Yates sees to all the letters. Perhaps, after all, I had better accept your invitation and take out a gun for an hour."

"Excellent," Van Westrheene exclaimed, rising to his feet.

"May I come?" Elisabeth asked.

"You can beat for us with that shooting stick," Matresser suggested. "Give me a twenty-bore and a handful of cartridges, Humphreys. You can get on with the readjusting of the heavy rifle."

"Let me telephone for one of the lads to hurry up on his bicycle, your lordship," Humphreys begged, "or let me come myself. I can easily finish the rifle before you start." 147

"If you wish I will carry the game," Van Westrheene proposed. "I will make myself a mountain of pheasants, hares—whatever we shoot. I learned the knack when I was a boy."

"Humphreys might just as well come along," Matresser decided. "We will take the lower strip of Cotton's Spinney. That's easy walking and I saw a woodcock go in there this morning."

"I like to carry the game," Van Westrheene persisted.

"Have it your own way," Matresser agreed.

They strolled across the park and reached the lower gate

leading into the wood.

“You take the fourth ride,” his host told Van Westrheene. “We will take the third here. You had better keep about fifteen yards ahead of us and if you were not such a devilishly precise shot I would ask you to be careful because it is rather thin here and there and the drives are not cut straight.”

Van Westrheene went off as directed. He had scarcely reached the corner of the ride when he stopped short, looking upwards. His gun flashed into position and a pigeon came tumbling down. He thrust the bird into his pocket, reloaded and turned down the fourth ride according to directions. Matresser gave him a short start and then strolled on. They had barely gone a dozen paces when a cocker spaniel ranging ahead put up a woodcock which Matresser shot neatly between two trees. A minute or two later a cock pheasant came flying over and fell to Matresser’s first barrel into a holly bush.

“We shall begin to wish we had brought Humphreys,” he said softly as the spaniel brought him the bird.

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“Please do not worry,” Elisabeth insisted. “I have carried game hundreds of times at home. I like it.”

“Well, it looks as though you were going to have all you could do this morning,” he remarked, as he disposed of another woodcock.

After that there was a few moments’ lull.

“The Dutchman doesn’t seem to be getting much,” Matresser muttered. “I haven’t heard his gun since he shot that pigeon.”

“I wonder where he is,” Elisabeth speculated. “You told him to keep twenty or thirty yards ahead but I cannot see him.”

“Neither can I,” her companion exclaimed with some irritation. “I’m not surprised. Humphreys was complaining about him only this morning. He is always about twenty or thirty yards ahead of the line. I expect he is almost at the other end of the wood by now. That’s what comes of not doing what you are told.”

He pointed into the wood. Half a dozen cock pheasants had risen from a holly bush which should have been within a few yards of Van Westreene’s beat, and a moment later a woodcock came lobbing up which Matresser, with a long shot, secured.

“His bird, but he wasn’t there.”

Then, for the first time, Matresser turned his head and looked behind him down the parallel ride. Almost at the same instant a little gleam of sunshine broke through the scanty foliage of a tall ash tree and flashed upon something brilliant. Matresser had no time to shout. He caught Elisabeth by the wrist and flung her to the ground, sprawling down himself by her side. They heard the sound of a shot within an inch or two of them exactly where Matresser’s head had been—a shot which cut the air with a peculiar whistling sound, followed by the report of a gun which seemed barely a dozen yards away. Matresser sprang upright as the echoes of the report died away. Halfway between the next ride and his own, well behind him instead of in front, the Dutchman was cowering behind a tree.

“My God!” Matresser exclaimed. “He tried to shoot me! Stay where you are, Elisabeth.”

With his gun charged, watching every movement of the Dutchman, Matresser plunged into the undergrowth. Van Westrheene seemed to hesitate for a moment but his half-raised gun came down under his arm. He gave a little shout of horror.

“Ach, but I am sorry!” he cried. “The shot did not reach you—no? There was a low woodcock. I would not have shot but I thought you were behind.”

Matresser made no reply. He strode through the bushes recklessly. In a few moments he had reached the Dutchman.

“Didn’t I tell you to keep twenty yards ahead of us?” he asked fiercely.

“So I started to walk,” Van Westrheene explained. “I paused to light a cigarette—so—and you must have passed on quicker than I thought. I regret deeply.”

Matresser leaned his gun against a tree. His eyes were watching the Dutchman with a steely concentration. He strode up to him and laid his hand upon his gun.

“What is it that you wish?” Van Westrheene demanded. “I am sorry. You would take my gun away?”

“Break it,” Matresser ordered. “Good.”

He drew out the second cartridge, glanced at it and thrust it into his pocket.

“Number threes,” he exclaimed. “You would try to shoot woodcock and pheasants with number threes, Van

Westrheene! Why not a rifle and have done with it?”

“I fill my bag from an old box,” the other declared angrily. “I did not look at every cartridge. There are sixes and sevens here.”

“I see,” Matresser observed. “The threes were there just in case, I suppose!”

“You cannot suppose,” the Dutchman shouted, “that I wish to commit murder!”

“If I had not turned round at that precise moment and the sun had not flashed on the barrel of your gun, that is precisely what you would have done.”

“Am I a lunatic then that I should try to shoot a stranger in his own woods?” Van Westrheene demanded. “What have I to gain by such folly? I beg you will permit me to pass. I wish to make my apologies to Mademoiselle.”

Matresser seized the Dutchman’s gun by the barrels and threw it twenty or thirty yards away into the undergrowth, then he picked up his own weapon.

“Do you see that gate?” he pointed out. “That’s the way home—the way you came. Take it and get on your boat as quickly as you can.”

“Lord Matresser, I do beg you to listen to my reasonable explanation,” Van Westrheene begged. “I meant you no ill—I swear it. Let us talk this out like men and sportsmen together.”

Matresser's finger was still pointing towards the gate. He lowered his voice a trifle but his tone was compelling.

“The gate, Van Westrheene!”

“But my gun!”

“You shall have it back to-morrow if it pleases me to send it back. I may deposit it at the police station instead. Do as I tell you. The gate!”

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Van Westrheene's features were convulsed with fury. For a moment it seemed as though he were about to spring at his antagonist. The veins on his forehead were swollen and his fists were clenched. Matresser, however, handling his gun with perfect calmness, watched him with an almost tigerish gleam in his eyes. The Dutchman swung round and flung himself through the undergrowth in a straight line for the gate.

“You do not think,” Elisabeth asked him breathlessly, as he rejoined her, “that he shot at us on purpose?”

“He shot at me and he meant killing,” Matresser replied gravely. “The blackguard had number three cartridges in each barrel of his gun.”

“But why? What have you done to him?”

Matresser smiled slightly—his nostrils were dilated, he was still breathing a little faster than usual. All the time his eyes never left the Dutchman's retreating figure. It was just at that moment that he realised the truth. He whistled to himself.

“Not half what I should like to,” he answered under his breath.

She passed her arm through his.

“Well, it was all very thrilling,” she said. “I could not make it out at first. I thought you were angry because he had been careless, then I saw his face and I knew there was more in it. When you strode up to him and took the gun away I was terrified.”

“These oversized men,” he told her smiling, “always crumple up easily.”

CHAPTER XVII

That afternoon Matresser entered his study somewhat precipitately and shook his fist at the faithful Yates.

“Look here,” he expostulated, “I wish you would leave off waving that wretched old shirt of yours out of the window. Surely you have got through your message by now.”

Yates returned the handkerchief to his pocket and retired into the shadows of the room.

“It was not a shirt, sir. However, I have finished. Rosa has invited me to tea with her on board the yacht, to say good-by.”

“I thought they would be leaving soon,” his master observed. “You be careful, Henry. I’ve lost my confidence in that little outfit. I don’t want to have you whisked off to the German Archipelago or some such inaccessible place. You would be much safer pursuing your amorous adventures and your deep-laid schemes in the parlour of the Matresser Arms. As a matter of fact I am going to give the harbour master notice that the *Daphne* is to go out on to-morrow evening’s tide at the latest.”

Henry Yates blinked behind his spectacles. His attitude indicated a desire for further information.

“Carelessness with a gun,” Matresser continued, “is a thing I never pardon. The Dutchman was more than careless this morning, so out he goes. You still have time to make your

adieux, Henry, but if you do venture on that yacht take my advice—be careful.”

“Carelessness with a gun is always reprehensible,” Yates murmured, “but are you sure you are wise in letting them depart?”

“Why not?”

“Have you met Inspector Marlow yet, sir?”

“He presented his credentials when he arrived but I just missed him.”

“He arrived here a few minutes after you and Mademoiselle had gone down to the wood,” Yates confided.

“What did he want?”

“Information about Van Westrheene. He wanted it very badly and plenty of it.”

Matresser tapped a cigarette gravely upon his blotter and lit it.

“This is rather a new idea, Henry.”

“Not with me. Mademoiselle Rosa may be clumsy to look at but she has seen life from the cafés of many cities of Europe besides Amsterdam. She is also by way of being a professional nurse.”

“Henry,” his master said reprovingly, “you distress me. Do you mean to say that all the time you spent in gentle dalliance with that sweet friend of the Dutchman’s you had this in your mind?”

“From the very first,” Yates assented.

“Perhaps,” Matresser reflected, “as I shall be leaving the country at any moment it would be as well if we had a few words with regard to that murder. Inspector Marlow will have to be dealt with before I go.”

“The murder,” Henry Yates confided, “was probably committed by Mademoiselle Rosa. Mr. Van Westrheene could have brought her to the door, picked the lock and waited for her. The letter Fergus was carrying was, of course, meant for you. Van Westrheene has come to this part of the world simply to spy on your movements.”

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“Vastly interesting,” Matresser murmured. “If only I had known this before Sir Francis’ visit I need not have broken my nail changing that tyre on Mademoiselle Stamier’s car.”

“Quite unnecessary,” Yates agreed.

There was a knock at the door. Burrows presented himself.

“Inspector Marlow is here and if convenient he would like a few words with your lordship,” the man announced.

“Show him up. And Burrows—when you come, wait for a note Mr. Yates will have ready for you and see that it is delivered to John Large at the harbour master’s office at once.”

“Very good, milord.”

Inspector Marlow turned out to be a pleasant, very much bespectacled young man of the new type in which Scotland Yard

had recently become interested. He was in mufti and only his eyes, which were shrewd and penetrating, indicated any special measure of intelligence. Matresser welcomed him with a friendly nod.

“This is my secretary,” he said, indicating Yates. “He knows a great deal more about this affair than I do and in any case you can speak quite freely before him. Any progress?”

The young man smiled.

“Plenty,” he replied. “The only trouble is to know quite how much we are to use. That’s why I came down with Finch from the Yard. You see, it’s rather an unusual case.”

“The facts are simple enough,” Matresser observed.

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“Yes, the facts are very simple,” the young man repeated. “The only trouble is the complications with MI7B. I am the liaison officer between MI7B and Scotland Yard. Finch naturally wants to make a clean job of it, which is, on the face of it, impossible.”

“Where do I come in, so far as you are concerned?” Matresser asked bluntly.

“Your appearance in the matter is only a negative one. I am instructed not to allow any arrest without your permission.”

“That,” Matresser said firmly, “is of the utmost importance. Do I understand that you are in a position to put your hand upon the guilty person?”

“Not quite, sir. We need a little more circumstantial evidence.”

“Do you expect any help from me?”

“Not at all, sir. On the contrary, my general instructions were not to trouble you until the case was completed. Finch, however, is making matters difficult.”

“In what respect?”

“He particularly wishes to ask a question or two of a member of your household. I told him that I must consult you first.”

“Very considerate. Who is the person?”

“Mademoiselle Stamier, the young Austrian lady. I believe she holds the position of companion to your sister, Lady Ann.”

“Quite right. Your collaborator seems to have wandered into a strange line of country.”

“It is always the foreigner that these Scotland Yard men suspect,” Marlow observed. “Half a criminal already, according to them.”

“Well, you won’t find much of the criminal about Mademoiselle Stamier,” Matresser assured his companion. “Shall I try and arrange for you to speak to her now? You know what those questions are, I suppose, and I should prefer your dealing yourself with the matter so far as Mademoiselle Stamier is concerned, and in my presence.”

“I should be quite content to do so, your lordship,” the young

man agreed.

Matresser nodded.

“Henry,” he said, turning to Yates, “try and see if you can unearth the young lady. I rather believe she is playing squash somewhere.”

Elisabeth came in, swinging her racquet, straight from the squash courts. The slight tinge of colour in her cheeks was exceedingly becoming. Her eyes were bright, she seemed entirely free from any apprehensions. Nevertheless, Matresser’s first few words seemed to come as a shock to her.

“I do not mind answering any questions, of course,” she said doubtfully, “but what is there I can tell anyone about the matter? I was nowhere near Dr. Andrews’ house on the day when the murder was supposed to take place.”

“We all of us who were in the house understand that, of course,” Matresser assured her, “but I thought that so long as Marlow here and Inspector Finch wished to ask you anything it would be better for them to do so before I leave. I may be going away for a few days at any moment.”

She recovered herself at once.

“That is very thoughtful of you,” she said.

“Let me see, you came out to lunch with Ann that day, didn’t you?” he reflected. “You know, after all, Inspector, although I am sure that Miss Stamier would like to answer any

questions you wish to put to her, I really don't see what information she could possibly have likely to help you.”

“It certainly seems improbable,” the young man agreed. “Still, Finch won't be content unless one of us interviews Mademoiselle Stamier.”

She accepted the chair which Matresser had wheeled round for her and lit from her briquet the cigarette he had offered. Afterwards she faced her inquisitor.

“You can consider me upon the rack, or I suppose in the witness box would be a more fitting figure,” she announced.

“You have a small car here, have you not, Miss Stamier?”

“An Austin two-seater—yes,” she acknowledged.

“Did you drive into Norwich on Monday?”

“I think it was Monday—yes.”

“Shopping?”

“I made some purchases. I also sent off some telegrams. This was the same day when the man was picked up in the turnip field and taken to the doctor's.”

“Precisely,” Marlow agreed. “It is just about the shopping I want to ask. You went to Callard, the chemist?”

“I did.”

“I am not suggesting that it had anything to do with what actually occurred,” Marlow continued smoothly, “but you did buy a hypodermic outfit there, didn’t you?”

“I think I did—also some Colgate’s Tooth Powder and some Rimmel’s Vinegar.”

“Why did you buy the hypodermic syringe?”

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“It was a commission.”

“You bought it for someone else?”

“Yes.”

“I am afraid I must ask you for whom?”

She frowned.

“I am quite sure that I am not inclined to tell you.”

Marlow shrugged his shoulders and glanced towards Matresser. His silky tone had lost its courteous note. He asked his questions now as a lawyer. His manner, too, had changed.

“I cannot quite see the significance of these questions,” Matresser remarked, “but if Marlow wishes to ask them I suppose you may as well tell him what he wants to know.”

“I am here to discover privately or publicly the person who administered that poison to Fergus and stole his papers,” the young man pointed out. “It is obvious, therefore, that the subject of a recently acquired hypodermic syringe of the same pattern as

that discovered by the side of the murdered man interests me.”

“That syringe could have had nothing whatever to do with the one I purchased,” the girl asserted.

“That is what we are here to investigate,” Marlow reminded her.

She leaned forward, selected another cigarette and lit it. A queer little silence followed. It became obvious that she did not intend to speak further.

“Very well,” Marlow went on at last. “You bought a box containing a hypodermic syringe and some needles that afternoon of the same make as the one discovered by the dead man and you are not inclined to tell us for whom you purchased it. You will forgive my reminding you that in some circumstances you may be compelled to answer so vital a question. I will pass on, however. Have you any poisons of any sort in your room such as might be injected into the veins of a human being with the aid of a syringe?”

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“I do not possess any poisons of any sort,” she declared.

“One more question I am afraid I must trouble you with,” Marlow concluded, speaking this time more in his old manner. “Have you any idea where that syringe which you bought in Norwich is at the present moment?”

“None whatever.”

“Had you any acquaintance with Major Fergus?”

“None.”

“You did not know that he was coming down here with important governmental papers for Lord Matresser?”

“I certainly did not, nor had I any idea,” Elisabeth went on emphatically, “that Lord Matresser was expecting anything of the sort or that he was a person likely to receive governmental papers.”

Marlow closed the book in which he had made a few notes and rose to his feet.

“Sorry to have been such a nuisance,” he said. “Nothing more to ask you, Miss Stamier. If I could have just a word with you, Lord Matresser?”

“I may finish my game of squash, then?” Elisabeth asked, also rising.

“By all means,” the young man answered.

Matresser opened the door and she passed out. For a moment on the threshold she paused and looked into his face. What she saw apparently satisfied her, for she waved her hand and departed with a smile.

“I hope you do not think,” Marlow said as soon as the door was closed, “that I was in any way unnecessarily insistent with those questions?”

“Perhaps not,” Matresser replied, “but at any rate you went quite far enough.”

“There was no need to go further,” Marlow remarked drily.

“Miss Stamier told me all that I, or rather Finch, wish to know.”

“You would be a great deal wiser,” Matresser said coldly, “and you would come a great deal nearer solving this mystery if you would put it out of your head that Miss Stamier could possibly have had anything to do with this affair. The purchase of a hypodermic syringe is an everyday affair.”

“Nevertheless,” Marlow persisted, “the fact that that syringe is found within a few feet of the person whose death we are here to investigate, naturally makes the affair of some interest.”

“I do not propose,” Matresser said firmly, “to discuss this matter with you, Marlow. If you persist in cherishing an absurd idea I hope you are not losing sight of this. Sir Francis Tring has been down here and he and I have talked this matter out thoroughly, knowing a great deal more about it than you do. It is the decision of Sir Francis and not mine that no charge of murder must be brought against anyone unless the evidence has first been placed before him. Find out the criminal, by all means, if you must, but your particular business, Marlow, is to see that Scotland Yard does not overstep the mark. A blunder on their part would bring about serious complications. There are greater issues at stake than the lives or deaths of a dozen men, even if they were all as good fellows as Fergus.”

Marlow’s air was distinctly crestfallen.

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“I am ranking myself on your side, of course,” he acknowledged, “but you must admit that it is a little difficult for Scotland Yard to stay their arm altogether when a brutal murder

has been committed.”

“Well, difficult or not, it has to be done,” Matresser said sternly, “and if you feel in the least doubt as to your instructions you had better telephone once more to MI7B before you make any false move, which would mean the removal of two very able officers from the service. I am sorry to speak so plainly but there you have it. There is to be no arrest until Downing Street permits it, even if you get a confession. There seems to be nothing more to say.”

Marlow, dejected and puzzled, took his leave. Yates stroked his chin for several moments thoughtfully. Once he moved towards the window and looked up at the sky, then he turned his shaggy head towards Matresser.

“Have you received word from London as to your destination, sir?” he asked.

Matresser smiled.

“For the first time in my life, or shall I say within my memory, little man,” he replied, “I am not proposing to tell you. I shall be carrying the burden of a great many secrets and that big man down in the harbour, if he is here for the purpose I believe he is, would boil you alive to find out.”

“He wouldn’t succeed.”

“Boiling alive is an unpleasant death,” Matresser observed.

“We have seen worse,” Yates reminded him.

“One thing more,” Matresser said emphatically.

The little man nodded.

“I can guess what it is.”

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“Don’t let them bully Miss Stamier.”

“It would be easier,” Yates suggested, “if you were to get her to tell you why and for whose benefit she bought that hypodermic syringe.”

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CHAPTER XVIII

Once more the lights were flaming from behind every window of the Great House. Everyone crowded to the terrace or the balcony above. Out of the clouds had come the roar of the engine of a slowly descending plane. They could see its lights now burning fiercely, they could watch the slackening of the speed as it stood for a time out over the sea and slowly circled inland. In the centre of the park every man upon the place was engaged in building up with dry timber the bonfire which had already been started. Matresser, apparently the least concerned of anyone, was standing in the gunroom doorway with Humphreys by his side.

“It be a mighty big plane, your lordship,” the latter observed. “I were just settling down to home and I heard the engines when she must have been t’other side of Fakenham. Put me in mind, it did, of that afternoon in August when we first seen one of them great Zeppelins.”

Matresser nodded.

“It is a good-sized plane, I should say,” he agreed, “but there is nothing like the roar of a Zeppelin about those engines, Humphreys. I wonder—”

He started at the soft touch upon his shoulder. It was Elisabeth who stood there, a transformed Elisabeth in a tailored suit and a small felt hat, with a row of woodcock feathers which he had himself arranged in the ribbon. She carried a fur coat upon her

arm. He looked at her in astonishment.

“My dear—”

She drew him to one side.

“Lord Matresser,” she begged, “you must do something for me.”

“Well?”

“This plane is coming for you, of course. I suppose it means another of your wild expeditions.”

“Not that I know of,” he assured her.

She pointed to the pile of gun cases, the well-filled cartridge magazines all standing neatly together.

“What about those?”

Matresser contemplated them calmly.

“Well, there has been a shooting expedition talked of,” he admitted. “I thought I had better get ready in case.”

“The shooting expedition Sir Francis, your Foreign Secretary, came down to see you about, I suppose?” she demanded.

“Does that matter?” he asked.

She was silent for a few brief moments.

“You do not wish to tell me anything,” she complained. “You have nothing to say? You were going to leave me alone here

where people are beginning to think horrible things about me.”

He threw away the cigarette he had been smoking.

“Elisabeth,” he remonstrated, “it is not like you to talk like this. I have done everything I can to make your position secure. Any small risk that is left you must run. You may be called upon to face trouble. I am called upon to do what I think is right and I must do it.”

“I do not recognise you when you speak like that,” she faltered.

“It is not my fault,” he said. “If a certain message is being brought to me from up there,” he added, as from behind the low hanging clouds the lights flashed once more, “it is a message which I must obey. You have nothing to fear, Elisabeth. No one will stir a finger against you until I return and if I do not return you will still be safe. That is one of the conditions.”

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“I want you to take me with you,” she pleaded.

“Where to?” he asked.

“How do I know where you are going?” she demanded, stamping her foot upon the stone floor. “Wherever it may be—wherever I can escape from this atmosphere of doubt and unhappiness.”

“You ask what is quite impossible,” he answered. “Where I am going I must go alone.”

“You could put me down somewhere at one of the airports. It does not matter where. I will be no trouble to you. I cannot

breathe here any longer. I think that the servants have heard that I am suspected of having murdered that man. They know that I went to Norwich that afternoon. They look at me with suspicion. I wish to leave.”

“But my dear,” he remonstrated, “a word or two from you and everything will be put right even without my help. No one could imagine for a minute that you could possibly have committed a murder. The simplest thing to do, of course, would be to tell us frankly why you bought that wretched thing.”

“That I shall not do.”

“You make it a little difficult,” he pointed out, “for those who wish to help you.”

“I cannot help it,” she replied.

“Will you stay and talk to my mother?”

“Please not, oh, please not! Be kind to me. Cannot you see that it is impossible for me to remain in the house? Everyone is looking at me with eyes of suspicion.”

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He reflected for a moment.

“Listen,” he said, “one thing is absolutely certain. If that plane is coming to take me away I must go alone. You cannot in any circumstances come with me. Put that possibility out of your mind. Now, is there any other way I can help you? I have made it impossible for the police to touch you. If that is not enough, if you still believe that you are suspected of that absurd thing, what else can I do? Shall I give you a safe conduct out of the

place?”

“What do you mean by a safe conduct?” she asked, her cold slim hands taking his and holding them with almost passionate force.

“Well, I will come down to the garage with you and see you off in the car.”

“In my car—alone? You will not let me mount with you in the plane?”

She recognised the hopelessness of her pleading from his single word.

“Impossible.”

She had drawn as closely to his side as possible in the gunroom in which all lights had been extinguished so that they might watch the descending plane. Her shivering body was close to his. For the first time that they had been together she seemed eager to creep into his arms. For some reason or other fear had overtaken her. She was terrified of the loneliness which had accompanied it. Her eyes pleaded with him. She was trembling for just a reassuring touch. Her lips would have been unlocked in a single moment if he had spoken the word. He was looking down at her perhaps with more kindness in his eyes than she had ever seen there before, yet his mouth was hopelessly set, the lines in his face were deepened and he shook his head slowly.

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“If I leave in that plane,” he said, “I must leave alone. There is no changing that. Anything else that I can do before I go you may ask me and I shall consent.”

The life seemed to die out of her.

“I accept, then, to leave in my own car,” she announced.

He passed his arm through hers and drew her away out through the great oak portals of the room and across the courtyard. The bonfire in the park was burning brightly now and the plane was sweeping around it slower and slower every time. She kept her face turned away.

“I do not wish to see it,” she cried almost passionately. “I will not look. It is a torture.”

No one noticed them as they passed towards the garage. Everyone was gazing up at the sky.

“I had hoped to find you a little more reasonable,” he complained.

“It is you who are unreasonable,” she declared coldly. “You have changed. You have suddenly an air of authority. It is admirable in a way but I do not like to have it exercised against me. I simply asked to be your fellow passenger for a portion of your journey. I should have been no trouble—no responsibility. If evil had come I should have met it eagerly—with you.”

“You are asking for an impossibility,” he replied. “Under no conditions could I accept anyone as a fellow passenger. It is one of the stipulations under which I make the voyage. I am keeping my word in letting you go just where you choose. I am doing unusual things to help you. I would do more if I could.”

She made no reply. They had reached the garage. A sergeant of police was standing in front of it. Matresser peremptorily ordered him on one side, knocked away the seal and opened the door.

“Your lordship will excuse me,” the sergeant begged. “The orders are that no car is to leave the garage.”

“Don’t be foolish, Harrison,” Matresser enjoined. “This is my garage and on my property. I take full responsibility for what I am doing.”

The man saluted and stood on one side.

“I am sure, your lordship,” he said, “I have no wish to interfere with anything you choose to do.”

“You would be very silly if you did, sergeant,” Matresser told him grimly. “Just wheel out that small Austin on the right.”

The man did as he was told. A footman from the house arrived with a dressing-case. Matresser himself turned on the switch and pressed the starting button. Elisabeth ensconced herself in the driving seat and with some reluctance held out her hand. Her eyes were very sad but she struggled with a smile.

“It was not like this,” she confided, “that I wished to leave the Great House. It is not like this that I intend to leave it.”

He would have withdrawn his hand but her fingers were clutching his feverishly.

“You must do the small things that I ask for the sake of the

greater ones that are to come. Take your place by my side. We will drive to your little inn by the harbour. There we can talk for ten minutes—ten minutes are all that I ask. Afterwards if you say the word we must part, but if we part, Ronald Matresser, remember this—it may be for always.”

He frowned on her in sombre irritation. Nevertheless, he took the place by her side. The hand which brushed away the rug to make room for him was icy cold.

“I can ill spare the time,” he assured her reluctantly. “I have not the inclination to come—I think you have the wrong ideas in your head—but here I am. I will go with you to the Matresser Arms. Remember, those ten minutes you asked for are all I can give.”

“They are all I demand,” she answered.

They drove off into the twilight, Matresser’s never very mobile features hard and set, Elisabeth somehow changed—large thoughts in her mind, a fierce desire for self-expression burning in her eyes. She pulled up at the inn door. He led her, with his usual little courteous word of greeting to Nancy’s mother, into the room beyond.

“Send us some coffee in ten minutes,” he begged. “And please fill this flask with that Three Star Brandy of yours,” he added, handing it over to the landlady, “make up a packet of sandwiches and place them in the small car outside. In the meantime, let us be undisturbed.”

“Certainly, your lordship,” the woman replied. “I will see that no one comes in.”

There was something almost of a flourish in the way in which he closed the door, a certain roughness in his voice as he turned towards Elisabeth.

“Ten minutes,” he warned her. “Get on with it.”

“I am a spy,” she confessed. “I had no idea of coming here to play Schumann to your mother or to teach your sister to speak correct Viennese. I came to find out what were your reasons for those frequent trips abroad and how far you are trusted by your Foreign Office.”

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His face slowly relaxed. There was the glimmer of a smile upon his lips.

“Capital!” he exclaimed. “I like a woman who can talk like that. What sort of job have you made of it?”

“I know something,” she admitted. “Not enough. I know, for instance, that you are off at this moment to attend a rendezvous somewhere or other but it may be a rendezvous in the skies for anything I have been able to discover.”

“Was it your wish,” he asked blandly, yet with an underlying note of sarcasm in his tone, “to accompany me to that rendezvous?”

“Of course not,” she replied eagerly. “That I know would have been impossible. The nearest flying ground to Paris is all that I ask for.”

“By the by, who are these mysterious people for whom you are working?” he asked. “Where do these orders come from?”

She hesitated for a moment, then she answered boldly.

“They come to me through my uncle.”

“Your uncle,” he murmured. “The Austrian Ambassador in London! A most charming man but—forgive me—isn’t he being just a trifle undiplomatic? What should I be doing—”

“You would be doing what I ask, what I plead for you to do—for my sake,” she interrupted.

He shook his head and nothing was ever more irrevocable than that slight gesture.

“Two minutes left,” he said bluntly.

“Call it an invitation, a command, what you will, but come with me for one half hour to Paris.”

He had the air of one who considered the matter so entirely settled that it was no longer of any particular interest.

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“My mission may or may not be of any importance,” he said, “but I am a messenger of the State. I go where I am sent—and I go alone.”

She looked at him baffled. Slowly the smile deepened upon her lips. Her eyes softened.

“You are a man,” she murmured. “I love you—but how I hate you! You will have your own way. You will not come although I fall upon my knees?”

He intercepted her movement and drew her for one long, breathless moment into his arms. Then he threw open the door, helped her adjust her coat and raised those cold fingers to his lips.

“I must send you on your journey alone,” he said, “but don’t think I am altogether heartless. You will find the brandy and some sandwiches in the pocket of the car.”

The Austin drove off into the shadows. Matresser paid his bill and exchanged a word or two with Mrs. Hewells.

“If only all foreigners were alike!”

CHAPTER XIX

Matresser crossed the north end of the park with swift footsteps and was amongst the little crowd who saw the plane finally come to a standstill. The mechanic and pilot, its sole occupants, unstrapped themselves and descended. The pilot, a tall, fair-haired and blue-eyed young man, stretched himself once, removed his helmet and came across towards the outstanding figure of the scattered group. He saluted formally.

“You have come for me, I hope?” Matresser asked.

“We have come,” the young man answered in correct but rather hesitating English, “to be on the spot when the time comes for you to join us. We do nothing until you have spoken with those who give the directions.”

“I see,” was the somewhat disappointed reply. “Nothing to do but wait, then.”

“We can be taking your kit on board, sir,” the young man proposed. “It will take some time to stow it away and my mechanic will need a half hour with the engine. I should introduce myself. We have no names in this service. I am Pilot Number Seventeen.”

“Capital! I am Lord Matresser. You will come along to the house with me. There will be time for you to have a bath and some dinner, perhaps.”

The pilot shook his head.

“My orders forbid me to leave the plane,” he regretted.

“Not even to come as far as the house now that you have arrived safely at your destination?”

“Not even that, sir. I must remain where I am.”

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“Then I shall have to send you down some dinner.”

The young man smiled.

“Anything in that way, sir, will be very welcome. My mechanic, I know, will appreciate some beer.”

Matresser gave an order to one of the servants who was standing by.

“That will be seen to at once. Have you any idea from whom these directions are coming? My friends had very little luck the last time they sent me a message.”

“The message will be arriving by a special line attached to your telephone,” the pilot told him. “If I might make the request, sir, you would do well to be now in your house awaiting it. As soon as possible after its receipt we shall hope to start.”

“Within ten minutes of receiving the message,” Matresser agreed, “I shall be ready to take my place in the plane.”

The master of the house had rather a bad time of it during the

quarter of an hour before dinner. Even his mother, in whose eyes he could do nothing wrong, was a little severe.

“I simply do not understand it, Ronald,” she said. “Miss Stamier, of whom we were all very fond, was a delightful member of this household. That she should have left us all like this with only one pathetic word of farewell to Ann, is to me utterly inexplicable. You seem to have been the only one favoured by her confidence. Surely you can help us to understand what has happened.”

“It must have been some sudden trouble,” Ann put in. “Surely you could have helped her.”

“I did what I could,” Matresser assured them both. “I wanted her to stay as badly as any of you. Of course, I have only known her since I got back this time but I think that she is quite delightful. I can assure you that any influence I might possess was exerted to keep her here.”

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“One feels that she must have been hurt or frightened in some way,” Andrews, who had been invited in to dine, declared piteously. “She gave no hope of returning?”

“Not the slightest. I don’t even know where she has gone.”

“She went in her own car,” Ann observed. “How did she manage that?”

“I was about to ask the same question,” the doctor confessed. “I saw that seal on the garage and the sergeant told me that no cars in there were to be touched.”

“Well, I can explain that,” Matresser said. “I considered that those fellows were being altogether too officious. I took the seal off myself, had Miss Stamier’s car wheeled out and started her off. I understand that to-night they are going to report me to the Home Office!”

“I am very glad indeed,” Lady Matresser approved, “that you were able to do something, Ronald, to prove our confidence in her. At the same time, the situation is most unpleasant. I was very fond of Elisabeth and the greatest pleasure I had in life outside my family was her music. I have written her to the Austrian Embassy.”

“So have I,” Ann told them.

The doctor coughed.

“I have to be in London in a few days,” he confided. “Would it be of any assistance if I went, say to-morrow, and tried to get an explanation?”

“It could do no harm,” Lady Matresser acquiesced. “You and she were very good friends.”

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“I do hope,” Ann sighed, “that those two most objectionable men who are down here from Scotland Yard have not been worrying her.”

Matresser looked across at his sister with a slight frown.

“Please do not get this matter wrong,” he said coldly. “There is only one bona fide Scotland Yard man down—Inspector Finch—and I am sure that he has not been near Mademoiselle

Stamier. The other fellow, Marlow, is a different type altogether. He had a brief interview with Mademoiselle Stamier in my presence and I can answer for it that he remained entirely civil. He is dining here to-night, so for heaven's sake let everyone be polite to him."

"Was it quite necessary that he should dine, Ronald?" his mother asked. "When you mentioned the matter I did not for the moment associate him with the police."

"Well, it's the new idea," her son explained. "Marlow is down here to do his job. He was in my regiment during the war—a very good soldier he was, too—and the Marlows are very good stock."

"You could scarcely do anything less than invite him to the house," Lady Matresser agreed.

"I think that I hear cars in the drive," Matresser said, listening for a moment. "I suggest that we all avoid the subject of poor Fergus' death during the evening, and while I think of it—at half-past nine precisely I shall have to go to the telephone. Yates took a message while I was out in the park talking to the pilot. You will carry on bravely, I know, mother, and Hamilton is coming over with those lads from Norwich, isn't he?"

"More mysteries?" his mother asked, with a slight uplifting of the eyebrows.

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"Nothing that approaches a mystery," her son assured her. "It is this little excursion that Sir Francis wants me to undertake. There is no one else on tap who can quite fill the bill. I was not so keen on it," he went on, "till he sent this plane down. Now I

must confess that I am rather looking forward to it.”

“If you were anything of a brother,” Ann said reproachfully, “you would take your little sister with you. I would love to fly, if it were only to Paris.”

“Next time,” Matresser promised. “Here come our friends.”

At precisely twenty-five minutes past nine that evening, a footman summoned Burrows and whispered in his ear. The butler at once approached his master.

“I beg your lordship’s pardon,” he announced, “but there is an important call through from London on the telephone. The exchange says that you can only speak from your study.”

Matresser excused himself to his immediate neighbours and waved his hand in apology to his mother. In the study he found Henry Yates standing a few feet away from the instrument.

“They have just rung up to warn me,” he said. “The message will be through on the private line as the clock strikes nine-thirty.”

Matresser nodded. Yates was showing some signs of excitement. His voice was quite unsteady. Matresser, on the other hand, seemed entirely unaffected by the tenseness of the moment. The idea that he was probably to be the first person in the world outside Downing Street to hear great news may have possessed some dramatic significance for him, but he showed no signs of it. With a glance at the clock he lit a cigarette and took his place before the table. Precisely at the

half hour, the expected tinkle came.

“Francis Tring speaking from London. Is that Matresser?”

“Speaking, Sir Francis,” was the clear reply.

“It is now half-past nine,” the Foreign Secretary continued. “We have been in conference for five hours. We are, I honestly believe, nearing agreement but we have not reached it yet.”

“What happens then?”

“We have adjourned for an hour. Some of us are having a scratch dinner here, others are going home for a few minutes. At a quarter past ten we reassemble. It is understood between us that we are to arrive at a decision before we separate.”

“That seems sound.”

“I have already received news that the plane has arrived.”

“Quite right. It has been here for a couple of hours.”

“Norwich will keep two operators,” Sir Francis went on, “holding the private line until we give the signal for dismissal. You are an old campaigner and I know you won’t mind an all-night sitting.”

“I shall be within a dozen yards of the phone until it rings—say from eleven o’clock,” Matresser announced.

“Capital! Things are moving in the right direction but we are all a little nervous. I have attended many of these conferences and

never known the strain to be anything like it is to-day. Later on, then, Matresser.”

“Later on,” the latter echoed.

Matresser slipped quietly back into his place and picked up the conversation with his neighbour almost where they had left it. It happened to be a dinner of young people rather than a formal banquet and very soon his mother rose from her place and was followed from the room by the other women.

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“Come along, Colonel,” Matresser invited, “and you, Miller, and Marlow. There are all sorts of orgies for you young people to-night—after-dinner table tennis, a new game. Pretty violent exercise, I must warn you. Bridge for the elders and billiards for the middle-aged. Two glasses of port and away we go. Cigars and coffee in the lounge. It is a sensible age we live in, General,” he went on, as Hamilton sank into the high-backed chair by his side. “We have got out of the armchair habit. Modern man is beginning to realise that there is nothing like movement for keeping young.”

“That’s all very well for you youngsters,” the General grunted, “but what are you going to do when you find you are seated opposite a decanter of ’70 port at my time of life?”

“Well, that’s one temptation from which we shall be removed before long,” his host reminded him. “My cellarman tells me we are on the last bin of ’70’s. Is it true that you are going north, General?”

“They are talking about it,” was the somewhat gloomy reply.

“A hard life, a soldier’s,” Major Miller, who was acting adjutant of the regiment, remarked, fingering the stem of his wine glass. “You just get used to a place and begin to feel thoroughly at home when one of those mysterious fellows behind the scenes at the War Office gives you the shove. By the by, Matresser, are you going to add flying to the long list of your accomplishments?” he asked. “That’s a magnificent plane in the corner of the park there.”

“No, I’m too old to take up flying,” Matresser replied. “That belongs to a foreign friend who wants to take me off for a few days. The thing isn’t absolutely fixed up, though. . . . Have you had many woodcock over, Travers?” he asked a man at the other end of the table.

“Not so many as usual,” the latter complained. “They have been going more your way, I think.”

There was just a quarter of an hour’s neighbourly talk, then Matresser led the way into the circular lounge where coffee was being served. Without any apparent effort he started two bridge tables and led off the new and riotous form of after-dinner table tennis. Soon the whole party were busily engaged. Matresser took one last look around and slipped away to his study.

“All serene, Henry?” he asked, closing the door behind him.

“Quite quiet, sir. The government operator from Norwich rang up to be sure that we were still in touch and to test the line. Nothing else.”

Matresser glanced at the clock. It was ten minutes to eleven.

“Shows their second session is lasting out,” he meditated.

“Getting nervy, Henry?”

“I don’t think that I am ever that, sir,” the little man replied, stroking his short beard, “but in this case I am not fully acquainted with the nature of the situation.”

“Can’t say we any of us are. We have been drifting so long, though, that any decisive action, when it comes, will seem sensational.”

“You think there will be war, sir?”

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Matresser answered like a man whose thoughts were in some faraway place.

“One’s fancies go for nothing at such a time. They spring up in the mind like weeds and pass with the ticking of the clock. Something is going to happen, Henry. That I am sure of. I could feel the shiver of excitement all over Europe last time I came back. What does happen will depend upon such a small decision—a tremor in Downing Street to-night, a mind that turns the wrong way in Berlin to-morrow. Anything might do it, Henry. And what a war!”

Matresser had walked to the broad window at the further end of the apartment looking across the park. All was darkness as he stood there absorbed.

“Tell me the time, Henry,” he asked without turning round.

“Five minutes to eleven.”

Matresser left the window and walked down the room towards the small round table on which the telephone instrument stood.

“I feel like a mountebank,” he confided, “shut up here in a locked room talking to myself, trying to keep calm, and yet believe me, Henry, I am aching to curse those bloody-minded, slobbering so-called men of letters who sit with their pens already in the inkpot ready to launch their flaming phrases and stinking rhetoric. They have got it all cut and dried. ‘Not one yard of our beloved Empire won by those who gave body and soul for their country shall be parted with. . . .’”

The clock began to strike the hour. Matresser was suddenly silent. His severe mood had left him. He stood close to Yates, whose eyes were fixed upon the telephone instrument. Before the last stroke of the clock the message came.

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“Norwich speaking. London is on the line.”

Matresser gripped the receiver which had been handed to him.

“Matresser this end,” he said calmly.

It was Sir Francis’ voice, husky with emotion.

“We have won, Matresser,” he announced.

“Magnificent!”

Sir Francis’ voice came for a moment shrill and then again hoarse.

“At a great cost. Everyone seems stupefied. The room is like a

battlefield strewn with the corpses of mangled phrases and mortally wounded hopes. Destroy your telephone connection. Your pilot will know at what time to leave.”

Then silence.

Matresser took up a huge pair of scissors from the desk and cut the green telephone cord. His voice seemed suddenly inspired. Yates stared at him in amazement.

“Official orders, Henry. Too late now for anyone to change their minds. It is only five minutes past eleven. You have sent everything over to the plane?”

“Everything.”

Matresser’s fingers were already upon the handle of the door when the crash came. The casement of the French window fell inwards, smashed through the centre, and the carpet was covered with splintered glass. A man in blue overalls, his face bleeding, staggered into the room.

“You must come to help,” he cried in German. “They will kill my pilot! I myself am shot.”

CHAPTER XX

For the fourth time in fifty years, the alarm bell from the Great House pealed out its brazen, dramatic summons. Hard sleepers though the Norfolk people proverbially are, the reply to its call was amazing. The park was studded with hastening figures in various states of *déshabille*. Messengers were running everywhere explaining the situation. Hidden marksmen from concealed places in the wood had been shooting at the plane. Volunteers were asked for to beat out the covers, carrying weapons if possible. At least a score of dogs, barking joyfully at their unexpected freedom, had been set loose. Fresh volunteers were arriving all the time. Dr. Andrews on his bicycle, racing backwards and forwards, seemed to be responsible for a certain orderliness with which the heterogeneous mob of villagers and guests alike were commencing the search.

“His lordship says to shoot if you must but try to make a capture if you can.”

Behind the plane itself, Matresser and the pilot were deep in conversation.

“I don’t think there will be any more firing,” Matresser said. “They would not dare, whoever they are, to try and rush the plane now and they know they have potted one of you. We shall have news from the house directly about your mechanic. I don’t fancy he was badly hurt.”

“It is a risky thing to mount without him,” the pilot said doubtfully.

“I could take the stick myself if necessary for a time,” Matresser urged. “I understand the general mechanism of a plane, too. It’s too late to ask for further instructions. We must stick to those you have. I tell you frankly I don’t like that silence all of a sudden in the wood. It is not ourselves that matter so much but they might easily do some damage to the plane that would stop our starting. What we want to do is to get away from here as quickly as possible.”

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“Quite true,” the pilot admitted, facing grimly the first crisis of his young life.

“You have a clear run up the path now and there’s an edge of the moon showing,” Matresser pointed out. “The mechanic’s in good hands. Remember, we shall be expected. If we fail to arrive there will be not one but a thousand devils to pay.”

A queer little figure on a bicycle came pedaling across from the house.

“Well, you are saved one decision, anyway,” Matresser declared. “Here’s the doctor.”

Andrews staggered off his machine, breathing heavily.

“Hospital case for a fortnight,” he gasped. “He has a dozen pellets inside him—one or two very near the heart. He will have to be operated on to-morrow.”

“After that,” Matresser said, turning to the pilot, “there is no

alternative.”

The latter buttoned up his coat without further demur. In a moment or two Matresser settled down in the seat by his side. The motor was already humming quietly. The pilot, who was taking his bearings, leaned forward.

“Now we are for it,” he declared. “I see you have mounted before, sir.”

“Dozens of times,” Matresser assured him. “Don’t mind me. Where are you going to cross?”

“Somewhere near Runton between Sheringham and Cromer.”

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“Look at that blessed moon,” his passenger pointed out. “I know every inch of the country to Runton. Follow the main road there and we will be over Salt House Marshes directly. The devil! They must have found one of those fellows.”

There was a little salvo of guns and perhaps the strangest medley of firearms which had ever been discharged simultaneously broke the increasing quietness of the night. Matresser leaned over in his place.

“The hounds,” he muttered. “There they go!”

An automobile, crowded with men, swung away from the southwest corner of the wood and turned up the lane towards the main road. Matresser watched them earnestly. Instead of taking the Norwich turn they raced along in the direction towards which the plane was heading. Matresser swung quickly back

into his place.

“Can you mount a little?” he asked. “Don’t follow the main road. I should keep to the seaward of it. Those fellows are trying to cut us off at the corner there. I daresay they think if they have rifles they might get a lucky shot.”

The pilot smiled.

“It is nothing on wheels,” he scoffed, “which could catch up with my wings that beat the sky. Behold!”

They added fifty miles an hour to their speed. The motor brake below was out of sight in a matter of seconds. There was nothing but the sea beneath them.

“To all appearance,” Matresser remarked, glancing downwards, “we are going to have a pleasant crossing.”

Very early on the following morning, Henry Yates graciously accorded an interview to two young men from the principal Norfolk newspapers.

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“We are terribly sorry to intrude upon you at such an inconvenient hour,” the representative of the *Eastern Daily Press* observed, “but we understand that you are Lord Matresser’s private secretary and that you saw the whole of the extraordinary affair here last night.”

“Quite right,” was the confident reply. “I was one of the first out. I had been rather suspicious because I thought I heard a gun earlier in the evening and down at the inn there were one or two

strangers about.”

“Tell us as much as you can, will you, please,” the journalist begged. “We will wait until you have had your breakfast if you like.”

“I will go on with it, if I may. Would either of you two like anything?”

“We have ordered something at the inn afterwards. We want to telephone some news for our second edition.”

“Well, I can tell you what the whole thing amounts to,” Yates began. “It was a very carefully organised poaching expedition. There were ten or a dozen at least in it. I saw four or five of them at close quarters in the last scurry, but they were all strangers. You had better let your citizens know that every one of them came from Norwich.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“They seem to have come in a motor shooting brake which they left the other side of the wood. His lordship had a plane over here for a trial flight and the mechanic seems to have been wandering about when they drove up. Whether he was doing a bit of poaching himself, too, I don’t know, but he is in hospital now and in a baddish way. He shouted at these men but they were climbing the gate and they fired point-blank at him. He managed to get up as far as the house, where his lordship was giving a dinner party, and all the guests turned out. The alarm bell of the house was rung for the fourth time in fifty years and half the village rolled up. There was quite a fusillade for about ten minutes but in the end they chased the fellows

away. One or two of them got rather nasty blows and one of the servants in the house was knocked about rather badly. They managed to secure quite a quantity of game and our keepers have not finished with the snares yet.”

The two young men scribbled along happily. One of them, however, was not altogether satisfied.

“There was a rumour going about,” he said, “that it was not entirely a poacher’s affair—that it was someone trying to steal the plane.”

“Steal the plane!” Yates repeated contemptuously. “How on earth could a carful of men from Norwich steal a plane? That was one of the new Fokkers. It would take a very experienced pilot to drive it and no one knew it was coming until last evening.”

“The thing is absurd, on the face of it,” the other journalist agreed.

“Yes, you can get that out of your readers’ heads,” Yates declared with emphasis. “Several of the crowd who were here last night have been in trouble before for poaching. Now, then, is there anything more I can tell you gentlemen?”

“The name of the head keeper, if you please.”

“John Humphreys. Been in the family forty years and his father before him.”

“How much game do you think they got away with?”

“About forty pheasants and eight or ten hares, up to the present. I will telephone the total bag to-night for your morning edition.”

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The young men were very much obliged. They shook hands with Henry Yates and took their leave. They represented the only two newspapers in Norwich and at five o'clock that evening the story of the great poaching raid at Matresser was the principal topic of conversation in the city.

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CHAPTER XXI

Henry Yates, with apt and skilful fingers, succeeded in impaling the hindquarters of an exceedingly slippery sand crab with a small but vicious-looking hook. Afterwards, with a professional cast which might almost have been the effort of a fly fisherman, he allowed float and bait together to mount in a graceful arc over his head and to subside half a dozen yards away from the pierhead. From that moment he stared steadily at his float, but he lost all interest whatsoever in his occupation. He sucked stolidly at an old briar pipe and considered the problem which had been haunting him ever since his master departed on the preceding night. Suddenly he heard a light voice a few inches behind his shoulder.

“Why do you stand there pretending to fish, Henry?” Nancy asked him curiously.

“Pretending?”

“That’s what I said. You have not even tried to find bottom and you know very well that it is too early for the pollack. Do you want to know where the German woman is? I can tell you.”

“Dutch,” he ventured.

“I don’t care what she is,” Nancy exclaimed contemptuously. “That woman’s out here after no good, and as for the creature with her—he’s loathsome! They want something out of his lordship, Henry, and you had just better be careful.”

“Upon my word,” Henry Yates murmured. “You are becoming a person of very keen perceptions, Nancy.”

“Don’t be silly, old dear,” she begged. “They’re after no good, those two, and as I expect you know, they have had their sailing orders already. What are you hanging around for—to say farewell to Rosa? You may have a chance. I see she’s getting the dinghy out.”

There were signs of movement upon the deck of the ketch. Yates drew in his line.

“You seem to be right, Nancy,” he remarked. “The young person is coming this way.”

“Young person, me eye!” Nancy scoffed. “She’s forty if she’s a day, and anyway she’s not coming to the Matresser Arms. I won’t have her there.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“I hate them both,” the girl declared. “They’re after some mischief or other. I’m sure of it. I can’t think why you have anything to do with them.”

He looked at her with one of those gentle smiles very seldom visible these days since his master’s strange fits of reticence had made life so difficult.

“You’re probably right, my dear, as to their being up to some sort of mischief,” he acknowledged. “That’s why I have to keep my eye upon them.”

“You’re not letting her make a fool of you?” Nancy asked eagerly. “I don’t want her to do that, Henry,” she went on, with a little break in her voice. “She is a horrid, deceitful creature. She’s vicious, too. I’m a little afraid of her.”

They were both silent for a moment watching the approaching visitor. She was sending the dinghy through the water with short, fierce strokes, unscientific but full of power. As she approached the pier she stood up and gripped at its side. There was something sinister yet impressive in her attitude and perfect balance. She brought the dinghy to the side of the steps and looked up at Henry Yates.

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“Get in, please,” she invited.

He hesitated. It was no timorous hesitation but a genuine indecision.

“You had better stay here,” he suggested. “We can finish our conversation at the inn—”

“No, you don’t!” Nancy interrupted. “We don’t want mademoiselle there any more—or her man friend.”

“Hear the chit!” the woman mocked. “If I wanted to come to your café, my little doll, I should come if I had to kick your doors down and smash your windows. But I do not. I am taking your little man away with me. You need not be afraid that he will come to any harm. He is not my sort.”

She gave his arm a jerk and if he had not taken a quick step downwards the dinghy would have been swamped. She pushed vigorously away. As soon as they were clear she laughed at

Nancy and the girl felt a sudden fear.

“Henry!” she called out.

He waved his arm reassuringly. Nevertheless, a queer presentiment of some unsuspected danger seemed suddenly to assail him, perhaps a wave of that same sort of apprehension which had sent Nancy hurrying back to the inn. Henry Yates was a stranger to fear—his war record had proved that—yet at that moment he was as near being afraid as ever before in his life.

“Where is Van Westrheene?” he asked abruptly.

“In Norwich by this time, buying stores,” the woman answered. “His lordship has ordered us off,” she added with a little sneer. “We do not stay where we are not wanted. The *Daphne* sails to-night.”

Henry filled his pipe with leisurely fingers.

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“How do I get back?” he enquired.

“Perhaps,” she replied smiling, “you will not go back.”

Very comfortable quarters, Yates decided, looking around him and, after having carefully smelt it, sipping his whisky and soda. All the same he would have preferred his own room at Matresser. The woman smiled across the narrow table at him, a mirthless sort of affair, but illuminating. He knew from that moment that he had taken a chance and lost. He knew, too, that she knew it. She sprawled herself out on the settee between him and the door.

“What made you come, I wonder?” she meditated.

“I hadn’t much choice,” he replied.

She shook her head.

“I was impatient,” she said, “or I should not have touched you. You had made up your mind to come and I did not wish to stay there and listen to those spiteful words from your little lady love. I carried you off to please my vanity. You are here with me, Mr. Henry Yates. You are happy—yes? You would like, perhaps, to see over the ship? Shall I show you my quarters? You would like to see the giant bunk where the master sleeps?”

“I should like what I came for,” he answered.

She laughed at him alluringly.

“Well, I am ready.”

He made a gesture as though about to rise to his feet. She was watching him intently, although she was pretending to use the powderpuff from her vanity bag.

“You are quite sure,” he asked, “that we are alone on the boat?”

“Coward!” she mocked.

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“No, I am not a coward or I should not be here.”

“Pshaw!” she scoffed. “You believed I was all alone, did you not? I am a strong woman but, after all, I am a woman, which you, little man, seem to be forgetting all this time. It is not a

compliment which you pay me.”

He laughed.

“I am forgetting nothing,” he assured her. “I know quite well that you are not alone. I know that your long-legged Dutchman is exactly as far from Norwich as I am and I know that between you you have plotted to get me on this boat. Well, here I am. What about it?”

“Why did you come?” she asked, a sudden cloud of suspicion in her eyes.

“I came because I made up my mind that this was the last chance to find out what Rosa van Kampf of Seventy-two Leidenstrasse, Berlin, also with addresses in Amsterdam and Paris, was doing down in this part of the world spying upon my master.”

“Anything else?”

“I am also curious,” he continued, “as to the exact position in life occupied by Mijnheer Van Westrheene.”

“And so,” she observed, “with your puny little wits and your insignificant little body you set yourself out to tackle the two of us and find out.”

“Quite true,” he admitted. “And I may succeed.”

She swung round on the settee where she had been half lying, half crouching, slipped to her feet and raised herself slowly upright. Her black bodice was stretched tightly over her bosoms and with the high-necked collar she was wearing it almost

seemed as if she had on the jacket of a fencing mistress. Her right hand strayed upwards towards the wall. Suddenly her progress was checked, Henry Yates had shed his spectacles. She was looking into the grave, steady eyes of a resolute man, looking, too, into the barrel of a firmly held revolver.

“If you move your finger another inch towards that bell,” he warned her, “you will never ring another with it so long as you live.”

She was staggered but by no means overcome.

“So the little man has a gun, has he?” she murmured, slowly lowering her hand.

“He has a gun,” Henry Yates acquiesced, “and several medals you shall see one day too, if you care to, for learning to shoot straight with it. You only just saved your finger. Sit down!”

She flopped down on the seat. His eyes never left her. The woman was dangerous. The narrow confines of the saloon irked him. He knew perfectly well that he had taken a risk that was not worth while. If Van Westrheene was really on board, and he felt very little doubt about it, there was going to be trouble. He was conscious of a chilling sense of humiliation. For all his courage this was the sort of situation in which Matresser would never have found himself. He wanted the truth from these people—Matresser wanted it—they wanted it for their safety. They wanted it for the success of the work so near its end. He had gone about it the wrong way, though. He had blundered in like the veriest amateur—he, Henry Yates, who had had kindly

words spoken to him by more than one of the underneath rulers of the world. If only he could escape from it with his own life! . . . He felt a sudden urge towards the open spaces, to get away from this woman with her taunting eyes and her sickening, lascivious perfume. He heard the water gurgling against the sides of the boat. If he could only reach the deck! He edged towards the narrow stairway an inch at a time. She watched him curiously. She was standing with her arms akimbo, her fingers almost upon her hips.

“You are not going to tell me, little man,” she sneered, “that you are trying to escape. You are the most timid lover I have ever known. Here I am—we have made a bargain—”

“Keep the business part of it first, then,” he interrupted. “Tell me what you are doing down here, both of you. I will be straight with you. You shall know the things you want to know. I will tell you all about my master—how often he has crossed the frontier of that country in which you are so interested. But confidence for confidence. Come now,” he went on, with one more little move towards that blessed spot of blue sky at the top of the companionway. “Let’s leave off fencing with one another. Rosa van Kampf did not come into these parts for nothing. I will tell you part of what you want to know, anyway. You can tell me part of what I want to know.”

She indulged in a dissatisfied grimace.

“It is not the sort of talk I expected,” she declared. “But come, there is some sense in it. My information for yours, yes?”

“Here’s mine,” he said. “Your suspicions are correct. It is true,

as I have told you before, that my master has visited that country we have called Territory Number Seven only a few months ago. Now I will tell you what you are really here to find out if you have not guessed it already. He was there on a special mission from the British government.”

“The British government are going to act upon your master’s report, they are going to accept as truth all that he has said?” she demanded fiercely.

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“That I cannot tell you,” he answered. “Perhaps,” he went on, leaning very slightly towards her, “I might have known more about it but for an unfortunate accident which happened to a messenger who was on his way here with a letter for my master.”

“The letter—”

She broke off abruptly. He smiled.

“Yes?” he murmured. “The letter?”

His gaze never faltered. She hesitated for a moment, then she shouted at him furiously.

“I would like to pull your tongue out, you secretive dog! We got the letter all right but what use do you suppose it was? It told us nothing.”

“I cannot help you further,” he remonstrated. “I cannot go behind that letter. It may have meant more to my master than to me. There are limits to the confidence which he vouchsafes. I have at any rate been the first to make disclosures.”

“You have told me something,” she admitted. “That is true. What shall I tell you in return, little man? What is it you most want to know?”

“Who is Van Westrheene, the Dutchman, and what is he doing in these parts?” Henry Yates asked.

Then that little area of blessed daylight was suddenly blocked out. Heavy, undisguised footsteps were descending the companionway. Van Westrheene, stooping low like a gigantic, ill-formed animal of abnormal length, thrust head and shoulders into the saloon. He looked at his visitor with a mocking leer but Henry Yates during that moment was gazing through the opposite porthole.

“What is this I see?” Van Westrheene demanded. “You appear distressed, Rosa.”

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“You arrive in time,” she assured him. “The little man—oh, he is a bad one that! He is a bad one, and he has a gun. Look at it. I am to be his or he will shoot. *Oh la, la!*”

Van Westrheene stretched himself but he was still obliged to keep his neck bent in the saloon.

“Mademoiselle is unkind to me,” Henry Yates declared, and his voice, especially since that glance through the porthole, was pleasantly cool and deliberate. “I came with a message from my master to explain the regret which he felt at being forced to ask you to leave these parts. You understand, however, there was a word from London—the telephone—an order. My master owns the port and he had no option. Behold!”

There was a shout from outside.

“*Daphne* ahoy! Harbour Master and Commander Allen of H.M. Sloop *Neptune* speaking.”

Van Westrheene turned round. He reascended the steps. Henry Yates, whose revolver had long since disappeared into his hip pocket, followed him. The woman mounted last. They stood out in the bracing stillness of the winter afternoon, a faint tang of coming snow in the murmuring east wind. A long, rakish-looking grey boat had moved noiselessly into the harbour scarcely a dozen yards away. Between it and the *Daphne* a small naval pinnace containing a young man in uniform and the harbour master was rocking below.

“Mr. Van Westrheene?” the officer asked, saluting politely.

“My name, sir,” was the curt reply. “What can I do for you?”

The Commander mounted the gangway, saluted and handed over the very official-looking paper which he was carrying.

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“Sorry, sir,” he said, “but we have already sent instructions to Lord Matresser that we wish this harbour cleared in connection with some naval manoeuvres which commence to-night. The papers there require that you set out upon this tide. There are three ports given where you may call for supplies. That is so, is it not, Large?”

“That is so, sir,” the harbour master acquiesced.

“It seems a little inhospitable,” Van Westrheene expostulated, as

he read the few lines typed upon the thick blue official paper. “However, I am a man who understands discipline. I will go out on this tide and call at Lowestoft for anything I need in the way of stores.”

“You have all the charts you need, sir?” the Commander enquired. “The entrance here is a little cramped. No way in which I can help you?”

“None whatever, thank you,” was the icily civil reply. “My ship’s papers are below, if you care to examine them.”

“I have no instructions to do so.”

Van Westrheene, standing out upon the deck, drawn to his full height, in his neat well-fitting clothes, with his shining monocle, presented a harmless, almost a distinguished appearance. He turned towards Henry Yates.

“On second thoughts,” he said, “you can save me a few minutes if you will land this gentleman for me. Present my compliments to his lordship, Mr. Yates, and say that I feel certain—yes, I feel quite certain—that we shall meet again before long. I hope to have an opportunity of returning his hospitality.”

The deliberately spoken words seemed to bite into the still air with all the chill of the coming snowstorm threatened by the dark bank of clouds landwards. Henry Yates had suddenly the idea that he had become an actor in some only half-understood comedy—or was it a drama? He bowed to the woman who was standing like an insolent Boadicea leaning against the hatch, then he stepped into the boat which had been drawn in closer to the side by two seamen. Van Westrheene

raised his hand in nautical salute. The Commander of the sloop returned the courtesy. The pinnacle slipped away as the rattling of chains announced the raising of the *Daphne's* anchor.

Nancy was waiting at the end of the quay. The Commander and the harbour master had boarded the sloop and she and Henry were alone.

“Are you angry with me, Henry?” she asked.

“Why?” he enquired.

She hesitated.

“I thought you might have guessed,” she said. “I got Mr. Large, the harbour master, to signal the *Neptune* to come at once.”

“Do you mean to say, Nancy,” Yates demanded, “that it was you who were responsible for that little incident just now?”

“I only hurried it along,” she explained eagerly. “Mr. Large had told me that he had the warrant to hand over to Commander Allen when they came in later on. I just got him to hurry. That was all.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t like you there with those two,” the girl declared. “It was not that I was jealous, Henry,—besides, I knew that the Dutchman was on board,—I simply felt that between them they were dangerous and I wanted you safely back again.”

Henry Yates thrust his arm through the girl's.

“So you were looking after me?”

“I suppose so,” she admitted.

He led her across the threshold of the inn and into the parlour, then he made use of his serviceable arm to draw her into his embrace.

“What about taking the job on as a permanency?” he asked.

“You have been a long time making up your mind,” she whispered, as her hands went round his neck.

CHAPTER XXII

The stars were beginning to pale when the stony figure by Matresser's side suddenly broke the long silence. He lifted the front of his helmet and a shout of triumph broke from his lips.

“We have won!” he cried. “We succeed. Sit tight, my noble passenger. Look downwards. We begin to descend.”

Matresser gazed below. In the midst of a black gulf, which he now for the first time realised was a rolling forest of pine trees, a space had been cleared and from each corner a flaming electric torch blazed into the dim light of dawn. From the height they were, however, the space itself seemed about the size of a pocket handkerchief, the lamps little more than pinpricks of fire and the building, along the front of which more illuminations were springing into being, something like a cow shed. Grey specks of mist were rolling upwards now and then blotting out the whole vista. The pilot studied his instruments.

“We have fallen already a thousand feet,” he mumbled half to himself. “That is the morning mist which we all fear but I show you—I shall show you. We slip in underneath it. *Gnädiger Herr*, have no fear. We shall make the landing.”

“Fear!” Matresser laughed, though his throat was parched and his tongue moved with difficulty. “You amuse yourself!”

The pilot was a little light-headed.

“With you for my passenger,” he declared, “and this machine beneath me, I would land upon the floor of hell.”

“If you don’t mind,” Matresser choked, “the landing ground below is good enough for me.”

The pilot continued to talk mostly to himself, though his eyes never ceased their fixed stare. The needle of his dial was travelling fast.

“You shall land in an easy chair in the grounds of His Highness’ hunting lodge,” he promised. “You see what we have done with the mists—there they are above us. I cannot see them but I know they are there. Look.”

“They are there,” Matresser told him.

“Now we make our first sweep,” the pilot exclaimed. “You fancy now that the earth comes towards us. See it rushing up. Once more round. That little brown space in the right-hand corner there. I glide over it. Soon you will see me.”

Again their speed was reduced. They seemed to be only floating in the air. A crowd of men below were shouting now and waving their arms. The cow shed had revealed itself as a hangar.

“I keep my word,” the pilot sang out. “Nearer—and now for the touch.”

He kept his word. Suddenly, with the most curious of sensations, they were on the ground taxiing along the level surface towards the yawning doors of the aerodrome. Slower and slower.

Standstill. Safety. Matresser tore off his glove. The pilot and he solemnly shook hands.

“Cut loose my noble passenger,” the pilot cried out. “His limbs are stiff.”

Matresser laughed at him. Although he was conscious of a spin as his feet touched the earth, he still stepped lightly down. He was in the centre of the strangest-looking group he had ever seen. There were twenty or thirty fine brawny-looking men all dressed in a sort of dark green uniform.

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“These are the *garde-chasse* of my uncle’s forests and estates here,” the pilot explained. “They also work at the aerodrome when planes are expected. I do not know who has arrived but there will be much stir here during the next few days. Ah, but this is a welcome sight—to you also I hope.”

One of the men came hurrying across from the aerodrome carrying two tall glasses upon a tray. He filled them to the brim, from a jug, with a pale amber-coloured fluid.

“This is the beer of Dresden,” the young man announced.

“*Prosit*, my wonderful pilot!” Matresser replied.

“It was of all flights,” the pilot acknowledged as he began to light a pipe, “the most wonderful I have ever made. You see, sir,” he went on, pointing to the pine-clad mountains eastwards, “it is literally dawn.”

Even as he spoke the colour was stealing into the sky. A breath of pine-scented breeze crept down from the heights. Matresser

drew a long breath.

“Glorious country, this,” he exclaimed.

“We are fortunate to have kept it,” Pilot Number Seventeen replied, “through all these wild and troublous times. My uncle is never so happy as when he can shut himself up here perhaps with a few old friends, sometimes almost alone. What has made him most happy is that the people here have remained loyal. It is very seldom indeed that they touch the game or interfere in any way. There is a beater’s wagon here I see,” the young man continued. “That is intended for your guns and baggage. There should be a car in a few moments.”

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He had scarcely finished speaking before from some unseen place in the hills came the sound of a hunter’s horn—a single bar beautifully played and fading away with a hundred echoes.

“The car is on its way,” the pilot observed.

Half a dozen of the men were transferring the gun cases and cartridge magazines to the wagon. Matresser and his companion walked slowly backwards and forwards to restore the circulation in their legs. At each turn they watched the flashing of the morning sunlight upon the rapidly approaching car. It rounded the snake bends one after the other, travelling at a great pace but almost noiselessly, and drew up at last within a few yards of where they were standing. A tall, finely built man descended and came smilingly towards them. The pilot stood to attention and saluted stiffly. The newcomer waved his hand in friendly fashion.

“My congratulations, Maurice,” he exclaimed. “Lord Matresser,

I bid you welcome. I shall ask you on this occasion, during your stay here, to know me and address me simply as Count von Helm. It is an incognito which I choose to assume for various reasons.”

“I shall, of course, respect it, sir,” Matresser assured him.

The Count held out his hand, which his visitor grasped.

“I am delighted that my young relative has brought you safely here,” he said. “But tell me—where is your mechanic, Maurice?”

“He met with an accident whilst the plane was in my park,” Matresser explained. “I know just a little of flying so I offered my services sooner than be delayed.”

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“Lord Matresser knows a great deal,” the pilot declared. “I was sorry to have to risk it without Carl but really it made no difference.”

A servant dressed in the same green uniform as the *gardes* was opening the door of the car. Matresser was ushered in. His host took the place by his side.

“This is a pleasure,” the latter remarked, as they drove off, “to which I have looked forward for a long time. Now that it has come to pass I am very happy.”

“I feel somehow or other that my place here,” Matresser acknowledged frankly, “is scarcely warranted.”

“In that idea you are completely mistaken,” was the courteous

rejoinder. "I have read copies of many of your reports and I appreciate immensely their candour and fair-mindedness. The difficulty which has arisen must not wreck so marvellous a scheme as we have before us for discussion. The very clarity and firmness with which you have made your points supply inspiration. We have the name of being a very stubborn people, I know, Lord Matresser, but we have learnt wisdom and I have no fear of what may happen during the next ten days. You see, I have the faith of the prophets—'some way will be found.'"

The car turned presently into the courtyard of a fantastically huge edifice with a medley of gables and towers all in the same Tyrolean style of architecture. Servants came trooping out of the wide-opened door. His host laid his hand for a moment on Matresser's arm.

"Jasper, my seneschal there," he said, pointing out an obvious major domo of smiling and dignified appearance, "will conduct you to your room. There is a servant there in waiting who will prepare your bath and put out your shooting clothes. I should have suggested an hour or two of sleep before you changed but something has happened during the last few hours and I feel that you will wish to consult Sir Esmond Curtels, your ambassador. He is waiting for you now in your apartments." 205

"Nothing, I trust, to interfere with our schemes?" Matresser asked.

His host hesitated.

"I most sincerely hope not," he said. "That will depend to some extent upon you and Curtels. There need be no mystery about it

for you will know the truth in a few moments. We have received a message from the Quai d'Orsay, from Monsieur de la Motte, in fact, who was to have been the French representative, that he is unable to join us."

Matresser was suddenly grave.

"Do you mean that he is delayed or that he is withdrawing from the Conference?" he asked.

"As the matter stands at present," Count von Helm admitted, "it looks as though France were withdrawing from the Conference. I hope when you have discussed the matter with the good Sir Esmond that you will come to the same conclusion, Lord Matresser, as I have done. There is nothing in this sudden decision of France to prevent our proceeding with the business on hand. . . . Meanwhile, we breakfast in two hours' time. I hope that our mountain air will inspire an appetite. *Auf wiedersehen!*"

Matresser, dismissed with a cheery wave of the hand, followed his guide along the broad wood-panelled corridor.

"The apartment of the most noble milord," the latter announced, throwing open a ponderous door.

CHAPTER XXIII

Sir Esmond Curtels, who was at that time the doyen of international diplomats, was lounging in an easy chair in front of a huge log fire. He was wearing a silk dressing-gown over his pyjamas and a muffler of the same material around his neck. He opened his eyes with a start which turned into a smile of welcome as Matresser was ushered into the room.

“Forgive me for taking up my quarters here,” he begged, as they shook hands. “I wanted to be sure of catching you the moment you arrived.”

“I haven’t been here five minutes,” Matresser assured him, handing his overcoat to a smiling and bowing valet.

“Cold ride?”

“Damnably.”

Curtels pointed towards the table on which stood various decanters. Matresser poured out a little brandy and drank it off. He turned to the valet.

“Get me a bath ready in half an hour,” he directed, giving the man a bunch of keys. “Come to me then and I’ll tell you what clothes to put out.”

“Good stuff, your German,” Curtels commented as the valet disappeared. “I always feel that I am speaking mine out of a

copybook. What do you think this latest move from the Quai d'Orsay means, Matresser? I suppose Von Helm has told you?"

Matresser nodded and threw himself into an easy chair. His fingers toyed with his cigarette case.

"It doesn't much matter what I think, does it?" he remarked, with a deprecating shrug of the shoulders. "It is for you and the Cabinet to say whether you can continue negotiations without a French representative. I am only here in case anyone wants to ask me questions about my report."

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"Two heads are better than one," Curtels observed, lighting a cigarette. "I am glad you are here anyway. The thing is, what is your opinion as a private individual who happens to know something of what is going on? Do you think that we can carry on without France?"

"Since you put it like that," Matresser replied, "speaking entirely as a looker-on, I should say that was just what she wants. She will hear the proposals of the Council in a concrete form then without having been obliged to commit herself to them in advance."

"You think then that we should be justified in going on as though nothing had happened?" Curtels persisted.

"I don't see why not," his companion agreed. "If France wanted to back out—well, she was too late. You can't bring a dozen distinguished statesmen to an out-of-the-way spot like this for nothing."

"Exactly at what time did you leave England?" Curtels asked.

“Somewhere around eleven-thirty last night.”

“Any trouble brewing then that you knew of or could guess at?”

Matresser lit his cigarette at last and he leaned back in his chair. He went through a mental calculation. Say Elisabeth had changed her Austin for a plane at Mildenhall, had reached Heston at dusk, had landed in Paris at say eight or nine o'clock. Well, it was possible.

“There might have been some trouble brewing in a certain quarter,” he admitted. “I fancy that a certain young lady who was in a sense a member of my own household was doing a little secret service work for either the French or the Austrian governments, but I could not be sure whether it was of any real importance. There was a sort of half suggestion that I should call in Paris. Naturally I took no notice of it. Officially I do not exist. I am the man underneath.”

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“Perhaps if you had stopped for an hour or so and seen De la Motte—” Curtels reflected.

“My dear fellow,” Matresser interrupted, “who am I to act without orders, to push myself further into a business my share in which is practically completed? If France wants to back out she will. The only thing to do is to tell her that if it is really war she wants she can have it by herself. It is not my job to say so.”

“Or mine either,” Curtels exclaimed, rising reluctantly to his feet. “I am an ambassador in a foreign capital—not a member of the Cabinet.”

From outside in the kennels and from where the forests reached

almost to the shooting lodge came many sounds of awakening life, the passing of a light wind through the snow-laden boughs of the trees, the call of birds and in the far distance the more sinister baying of the wolves. The ambassador indulged in a final yawn as he wrapped his dressing-gown around him.

“I quite realise your position, Matresser,” he conceded. “I scarcely expected you to say more than you have done.”

“I don’t know any more,” Matresser declared with a touch almost of irritation. “I have not the right to say anything. I am only a hanger-on at the show by virtue of one enterprise. The thing is altogether beyond my range. I do not pretend to be even a politician. At the bottom of my heart I sometimes wonder, as an honest man, whether I believe in any artificial form of setting up the Goddess of Peace and bending our knee to it.”

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“It has to be done,” Curtels said gravely. “It is only by repeated failures that we can ever hope to succeed. This present scheme, at any rate, is the nearest we have ever come to a foolproof achievement, and I tell you, Matresser—you have not had the opportunity of talking it over so much as we others, of course—we are all desperately anxious to bring this off. You will understand why better later on, but in plain words it is the first time we have ever prevailed upon the United States to occupy even a benevolent place in our Councils. If we sit and wrangle this time like a lot of children at a tea party she will have had enough of it. Besserley is a good fellow. I should say that he has the soundest grasp of the whole subject from a philosophical point of view of any man breathing, but he is not a man to be fooled. If this Conference turns out to be a success, its results

may last for twenty or twenty-five years. If so, it may become a part of the constitution of the world, but failure here now will mean that we shall lose the United States, and without America we might as well try to build a castle of toy bricks. . . . Now, go along. I'm for my bath. I should recommend you to follow my example."

Matresser glanced at the table which was spread with brandy and all manner of strange liqueurs.

"To tell you the truth," he observed, "I am Englishman enough to hope that something a little more like breakfast is coming along before we start out!"

Curtels laughed softly.

"My dear fellow," he said, "all I can say to you is—wait! I know now why Germany has the finest spas in the world. We are to meet in an hour's time in the hall. Afterwards, in whatever school of eating you have been brought up, you will have to change your standards!"

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CHAPTER XXIV

Matresser looked curiously around him when, some short time later, he entered the great raftered hall where log fires were burning at either end and where the whole of the little company whom he was to meet were assembled. The host of the gathering, to all of whom he had announced his desire to be known simply as Count Heinrich von Helm, came forward to introduce him, which he did in a few brief words and without formality. There was the famous Italian scientist and recently established politician, Corletti, dressed like the others in shooting kit but wearing it without the ease and air of habitude which Curtels, for instance, displayed. Next, to Matresser's astonishment, he found himself shaking hands with the Archduke Johann von Arnsburg, the popular young representative of a great monarchical house. Then there was an old acquaintance, the world-renowned General Besserley, a brilliant soldier at the commencement of the war, afterwards Chief of the Secret Service at Washington, and subsequently a representative of his country in Europe on various economic and social missions. He was presented next to a man who seemed somehow out of his place in such an assembly, who wore the rough shooting clothes almost of a peasant and in whose fine dark eyes there lurked something of that fatigue with life which none of the others displayed. Von Helm, as he effected this last introduction, addressed a general remark to the rest of his guests.

“Let me tell you all, my friends,” he said, “that the present ruler of our country is here by his own special

request. He has convinced me that his gesture is a fine and benevolent one. You have all, I am happy to say, welcomed him in the right spirit. Now, Lord Matresser—you should need refreshment more than any of us—will you please take your place at the table. I have several chefs here and their united efforts have been combined to give you a genuine English-American breakfast.”

They drew out their chairs and seated themselves, Matresser between Besserley and Curtels. The meal may have started on Anglo-Saxon lines but it was certainly a fact that before they had finished the bacon and eggs there was a beautifully polished cask of beer on the sideboard next the coffee equipage and many bottles of Rhine wine upon the table. A brief suggestion made by their host was rigorously carried out. Not one single word was spoken during the progress of the day's sport that touched in any way upon vital things. They ate and they drank, they lit pipes and cigars, interviewed the various *garde-chasse* outside, one of whom had been told off to wait upon each guest, and talked eagerly over the forthcoming sport like any ordinary company of men gathered together for the purpose of *la chasse*.

“For the morning,” their host announced, “it is an affair of rifles. There are some fine stags on the lower crests of the mountain and a few adventurous bears up in the denser part of the woods. Each of the guides who are looking after you has his number which indicates the place you will take and each will, I hope, lead you to where we may find some sport. We commence with a five-mile very rough drive in the automobiles which are now waiting.”

There was the sound of the horn. They clambered into the

cars and drove off.

A *Mittagsessen*—it would have been absurd to have called it a luncheon—was served precisely at midday, from which Matresser escaped at the earliest possible opportunity. His chair was near the door, the room was obscured with tobacco smoke and the inroads of a drifting mist before the meal was half finished, and he slipped out unnoticed. He threw over his shoulders his mackintosh, lit his pipe and sat on a grey stone wall looking over the rolling panorama of woods which seemed to reach to the skies. A brown dog of the cocker-spaniel type, which had stuck to him throughout the morning as though it had found a long-lost master, came and rested its chin against his hand, looking up at him. He patted its head. The dog licked him gratefully.

“Little brown dog,” he murmured, “I wish I could see through that fog inside and know what it all means.”

The dog wagged its tail vigorously. Its paws now were on Matresser’s leather breeches. Count von Helm appeared in the door of the lodge and called out:

“Lord Matresser, you must not miss our national dish—hot boar’s head.”

Matresser slipped from the wall and crossed over to the door of the lodge.

“I will come and look at it,” he said. “I can promise no more. Your hospitality is too overpowering.”

“At least,” his host insisted, “you must drink one glass of my Berncastler Doctor which is served with it. It has lain in my cellars since the lodge itself was built.”

The two men resumed their places at the table. Matresser sipped his wine and broke off a rusk. His host watched his appreciation with obvious pleasure.

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“Forty bottles only I have left,” he sighed. “Each one is the same—mellow, soft, with no touch of acidity or sweetness. It would give me great pleasure if we finished them all before you, my guests, left me.”

Besserley looked round the table.

“I would not be rash, Count,” he warned him. “We people in the States were cut off from all this for many miserable years and I am not sure that some of us are not just a trifle thirsty still!”

Count von Helm extended his hands.

“It is my challenge, General,” he said. “Every bottle you drink will make me a prouder man. This afternoon we have slighter work before us. You will kill my pheasants easily, I know that, but my wild swan from Frozen Lake, they have necks nearly a yard long and you need to close their eyes with your shot to pick them up dead.”

“Whilst I drink this wine,” Besserley remarked, “I envy them their necks.”

Once more from some hidden place the horn was blowing and there were certainly several hours during that afternoon when

Matresser forgot the real drama of the day, completely absorbed as he was in its less momentous incidents. He spoke the truth that night when after a hot bath followed by a cold shower and a massage—there was a staff of six masseurs in attendance—he took his place at the dinner table.

“You find our sport enjoyable, Lord Matresser?” was one of the Count’s first questions.

“I have never had a more sporting day in my life,” his visitor replied. “I think I may say that I have shot every variety of game and beast but never under such conditions.”

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Count von Helm showed his gratification.

“It is a happy augury,” he declared, “that we have all mingled together pleasantly and happily throughout the day. I hope and pray that before this evening is over we who have appreciated the principle that fellowship in sport is the prelude to fellowship in life may have drawn even closer together. My friend Hellstern, there will be no formal toasts to-night but I ask for the pleasure of drinking a glass of wine with you.”

Hellstern, a pale shrunken image of the man of a few years ago, rose and bowed. Afterwards there was a momentary silence. The butler seneschal of the household, followed by three other servants, entered and placed at intervals along the table three huge bottles of wine. Other servants who had entered were distributing richly chased glasses of many colours from a tray which appeared to be of solid gold.

“I am offering you the tribute of priceless wines, my friends,” their host confided. “These three bottles are trimagnums, or

Rehoboams I think they are sometimes called, of Johannisberg of the famous vintage of 1904. With my glass in my hand and a burning wish in my heart I ask you all to rise to your feet and drink with me to the hope that during this hour we may turn over many pages of history and with the aid of that fine gesture, offered to us from Downing Street, we may at last find the way to establish the thing we all desire—the peace of Europe. I nominate our friend Herr Hellstern, to whom Germany owes a gigantic debt, which will be repaid in the memories and affections of the coming generation, to offer you a few words of explanation as to his present attitude.”

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Count von Helm resumed his seat. Hellstern drank deeply from his glass before he rose. It was curious how the man seemed to have shrunk physically during the last twelve months of overwhelming anxieties.

“Count von Helm,” he said, “and delegates of this small conference, I shall claim frankly and without modesty the tribute that is mine. It is I who am responsible for the rearming of the German nation. I was the first to see that the way to peace could never lie through disarmament. Disarmament is a logical impossibility. The only nation in Europe which has endeavoured faithfully and honestly to carry out the conditions laid down is now suffering for that honesty by being compelled to build planes and ships with feverish haste and when all the best materials in the world have been absorbed. The German army is to-day invincible. I found, though, as others have found before me, that when I created it I created a Frankenstein. The German army is indeed invincible but it would never stomach fighting for a Hellstern. It would fight for three things only—God, Germany and an Imperial master. I saw this years ago and I saw

the truth. I saw it in the days when England first commenced her consideration of this most acceptable gesture which is the only thing which might have kept the German army from the field and made of the German people a joyous and a peaceful nation. I now, my friends, put that gesture into plain words. England, under certain conditions, if we are able to give guarantees of peace, has offered to restore our colonies.”

There was a queer, guttural undernote of voices, of voices surcharged with emotion, of suppressed drama forcing its way into some sort of expression. Then once more the deepest silence.

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“Germany asks no more. There may be a shade of bitterness in what I say when I tell you that that offer would never be made to me. It would only be made to a Germany which England considered in a position to hold its own in dignity and honour amongst the nations. That is one reason why my resignation as Dictator of Germany is to-day in the hands of Count von Helm. . . I look not so far away from home and I see the misfortunes which have befallen the man whose career has so often been likened to my own. A dubious war will bring any idol in the world tottering from his place in the people’s hearts. A dubious war is a thing with which I will have nothing more to do. I have struck my blow for Germany. What I have done I have done. It is for Count von Helm, if the people trust him, and I know they will, to carry on.”

Notwithstanding their host’s expressed wish that approval or disapproval of what was said should be veiled in a discreet silence, there were little murmurs of sympathy and excitement as Germany’s ex-ruler resumed his seat. Count von Helm’s long

fingers stole into the silver cup by his side into which he had dropped several screwed-up pieces of paper. He drew out one of them.

“Gentlemen,” he announced, “the fates decree that we shall listen to Signor Corletti.”

Corletti rose promptly to his feet. His words were at once suave, convincing and fluently spoken.

“Sir,” he began with a bow to his host, “I have this much to say to you on behalf of my country. We have derived incalculable benefits from the bold and astute rule of our Dictator but once more the pages of Roman history have to record the story of the man of genius who, after years of success, moved into the slippery places and, unused to failure, in a spirit of fierce obstinacy, incurred the sad displeasure of a still grateful people. Italy, scorning to supplant a great patriot, calls instead for Imperial rule. It pins its faith to the youth of our present Royal Family, whose voice is already being heard in fierce dissent to a continuation of our imprudent colonial policy. I have to announce at this gathering, that King Victor Emmanuel has already signed his abdication to be made use of at the proper moment, and that the Crown Prince will, when that moment comes, and I pray that it may not be long, be proclaimed King of Italy and will rule with discretion, with moderation and according to the will, not of himself, but of his people.”

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There was a genial, entirely favourable silence. Count von Helm’s fingers once more searched the inside of the cup. This time he read out the name of General Besserley, the American representative. Besserley rose at once to his feet, shrewd,

kindly and debonair. He was sufficiently an idealist to be very keenly impressed by this amazing gathering. He bowed to Count von Helm. The few words he spoke pleased everybody.

“I feel that I am here by courtesy,” he said, “for as you know my country has long ago given up the idea of taking any active part in European politics. We love you just as much—we are fond of you all, and where we can help without imperilling the interests of our own people we want to help. Peace is the greatest blessing in the world. People have no longer any sympathy in their hearts for the aggressive nations. The only message I have to give you is this. If you bring your magnificent scheme to a successful conclusion, if this splendid offer on the part of Great Britain is accepted in the right spirit and carried out, if it is clear that everyone is working for the cause of peace, and that only, I am perfectly certain that neither our President to-day nor any future President will refuse to accept the task which you have hinted at, and that is to adjudicate upon any minor differences that might arise in the formation of the pact. The scheme which Count von Helm, I happen to know, has in his mind seems to me at once logical, excellent and easily worked. I shall touch upon it but lightly. One sentence seems almost to explain it. It is this—that Germany, Austria, Great Britain, Italy and France should have attached to their embassies what we should call perhaps an ‘observer’—a delegate carefully chosen from amongst the best the United States has to offer, a man of culture, intelligence and character, whose duties will in no way clash with those of our ambassador but who will be able to offer valuable evidence upon any disputable subject which might arise. With these safeguards, which will guarantee to the head of our government even at so great a distance an impartial mass of considered evidence, there should never be any

difficulty in shining the lantern of truth upon any problems that might present themselves.”

Besserley resumed his seat. Count von Helm leaned over, glanced at the three remaining fragments of paper and with a smile nodded to Johann von Arnsburg. The young man rose at once to his feet. He bowed to the President.

“I have little to say, sir,” he began, “because my position carries with it no complications. There is a strong Royalist party in my country who demand the restoration of the monarchy. They look to me as their head. I have accepted that position. At any time I am called upon I am ready to take up the responsibilities of mounting the throne and taking my place amongst the long line of Arnsburgs who have given all they had to give to their beloved people.”

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Count von Helm bowed his approval of the young man’s brief declaration. He then rose, himself, to his feet.

“So far,” he announced, “we have left to chance the order in which the representatives who are gathered here should express the sentiments of their respective countries. I think that the time has come now when on behalf of Germany I should speak of this great offer which was the foundation of our will to strengthen the sinews of Europe and establish amongst her nations unbreakable, unassailable peace. You all know what that offer means. Only a few months ago England expressed her willingness, if a firm and stable government existed in Germany which had absolute control over the war machines which she had built up, to return to her as a free gift the colonies lost during the war of 1914. England, however, quite rightly

stipulated that we should be in a position to give binding and unbreakable pledges to keep the peace. It was then that our friend, and also I must call him the friend of our country, Hellstern, to use his own words to me, discovered that he had created a Frankenstein. The chiefs of the army which he had brought into being refused to give him the pledges which he, on behalf of Great Britain, sought. To be frank, they demanded a return in some form or other of the monarchy, to the representative of which they were perfectly willing to give the desired undertaking. Our friend here took the brave course—he announced himself willing to retire from his position, provided this offer of Great Britain’s was substantiated. The position, my friends, was very nearly established, but the slight difficulty which still remains you are now to hear. You will hear it from the lips of Sir Esmond Curtels, the British Ambassador to Berlin, and one who has no official position here but whom we are very glad to welcome—the Earl of Matresser.”

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Count von Helm resumed his seat. Curtels at once rose. He indulged in the customary bow to the President and plunged immediately into the heart of the subject.

“This offer of my country’s to restore to Germany her colonies,” he said, “was made upon two conditions. One was that she maintained the Treaty of Locarno and undertook not to enter demilitarised towns and lands of Germany as therein laid down. That condition Germany accepted. The second was that the natives of those colonies showed no violent antipathy to the change, in other words did not consider themselves betrayed by Great Britain by reason of this act of restoration. To ensure themselves against this, the government appointed, therefore,

our friend Lord Matresser, who has been of great service to them at various times in his missions abroad, who is entirely free from any official obligations and has been looked upon simply as a great international sportsman, to investigate thoroughly this particular point. Lord Matresser's reports from all the colonies except one justify us in confirming our offer, but there is one colony in East Africa, to which we will allude, if you please, as Number Seven, where difficulties were encountered. I have a suggestion to make which will do away with these difficulties, but before I make it I would propose that Lord Matresser explain the trouble."

The President bowed to Matresser, who rose at once to his feet. He spoke easily and naturally and all the time in a purely conversational tone.

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"This particular colony to which reference has been made and to which my forthcoming remarks apply," he said, "is marked Number Seven upon the map which the President has before him and which I think you have all inspected. Arrived there, I found trouble. Deputation after deputation from the native chiefs sought me out even before I had commenced my informal court of enquiry. They all prayed—Count von Helm will excuse my being perfectly frank—that the present régime might continue, that the colony be not returned to its former owners. Naturally I made the closest enquiries as to the reasons for this petition and I convinced myself and I also convinced the authorities to whom I was responsible, that the reports I sent them were true and well founded. Ugly truths have sometimes to be faced and here is one which with the deepest regret I have to place before you. That fact is that the German governor of those provinces—a man of very high position connected, I fear, with some of you—had

conducted the duties of his high office in a cruel and almost barbaric fashion. He had reintroduced flogging amongst the natives and the small pamphlet which I had typed by my private secretary, the facts of which I think your President has confided to you, are instances the truth of which I have ascertained and for which I pledge my word. Native women were frequently taken from their rightful owners and given to others. Men were subjected to barbaric forms of capital punishment on, to say the least of it, insufficient grounds. Large fines were continually imposed upon the chiefs in different territories and severe punishments meted out for even a day's delay in payment.

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I have proved beyond the shadow of a doubt the existence of all these abuses which you will find described at length in my pamphlet, and my strong advice to the powers who sent me out on my tour of investigation is that Colony Number Seven should not be restored unless a guarantee be received that the same governor is not reappointed. It was the only hitch I discovered," Matresser wound up. "I came to the conclusion on the whole that German rule was quite as beneficial and as wisely demonstrated as British rule. The return to Germany will give no trouble whatever except in the case of Colony Number Seven and my recommendation to the government has been that Colony Number Seven must remain British unless an undertaking is given that the same governor does not resume office. I think that is all I have to tell you, gentlemen."

Matresser resumed his seat.

"I will only add," Count von Helm said, leaning forward, "that the position is slightly complicated by the fact that the late German governor of Colony Number Seven was His Serene Highness Prince Otto von Behrling. Those of us who know him

understand quite well that the one desire of his life is to find himself reinstated as governor of that colony.”

General Besserley begged leave to say a word. The President bowed assent.

“I would ask you, Count,” he said, “whether you accept the description of these punishments and many acts of cruelty and extortion duly set out by Lord Matresser and the signed statements of the various chiefs which are appended thereto.”

“The question is naturally the crux of the whole affair, General,” the President replied. “I cannot see how we can fail, even though no more patriotic German lives than Prince Otto von Behrling, to accept unreservedly the truth of Lord Matresser’s report.”

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“I would suggest,” Sir Esmond Curtels said, “if I may be allowed, that the first list of governors over the various colonies be submitted to the outgoing British governors and approved of by them before the appointments be made. That might save some bitter feeling and of course a suggestion to the Prince von Behrling of what would happen if he allowed his name to be put forward might end the matter. I may add that it is a disappointment to the British government that our gesture should be encumbered by any condition of any sort, but it was due to rumours which reached us that we invited Lord Matresser to visit the colonies and make his report and that report having arrived, having been confirmed, being firmly believed in by all of us, we are bound to make some such condition as I have suggested.”

This time Count von Helm rose and first bowed to the British Ambassador and next to Matresser.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “you are within your rights and you are not only within your rights but you are acting as statesmen and men of honour. I shall take the liberty of accepting for those whom I already represent, Sir Esmond’s proposition. The vetoing of the Prince von Behrling from any office in connection with Colony Number Seven will be thereby established.”

The day’s conference was practically over. Count von Helm leaned towards Matresser.

“A perhaps rather pathetic, certainly curious, thing in connection with Prince von Behrling,” he confided, “is that the Prince is practically the owner of the whole of this country down to the frontier. My great-grandfather secured a five-hundred-year lease of these forests, and the Schloss itself, upon the ruins of which this hunting lodge was built, is Crown property. The woods, however, although leased to us, are really the property of the Von Behrlings.”

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“And what has become of Von Behrling?”

At that moment came an utterly unexpected sound. The shooting lodge was absolutely unapproachable from the rear owing to the towering wall of thick forest six or seven hundred feet high. Both roads to the aerodrome were strictly guarded. It was therefore a little oasis of solitude, for even the forest guard, the underkeepers and beaters dwelt in a settlement nearly a half a mile away. No vehicle was allowed to pass along the private road, no plane to descend at the aerodrome, yet the stillness of

the night was suddenly broken by the sound of a powerful car tearing up the mountain track, its open exhaust beating up a great cloud of dust. Count von Helm rose to his feet in astonishment. He struck the gong which stood by his side. Jasper, the ancient butler, was already in the room. His face was agitated, his manner distraught.

“Your Highness,” he reported, “a car has driven through the cordon. Two men are either killed or injured. I have rung the alarm bell for the guard.”

“My profound apologies,” Count von Helm exclaimed in consternation. “These intruders are not of our party, for we are all here.”

“They are not of mine,” Hellstern said grimly, “or they would have been shot.”

“American newsboys, I should say,” General Besserley suggested in a concerned tone. “Those lads will do anything for a scoop.”

“I fear if that is so,” Von Helm pronounced, an angry gleam in his eyes, “that they will pay dearly for their intrusion.”

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The car drew up with a scrunch of the wheels, a cloud of dust and pebbles flying in all directions. There was a momentary commotion in the hall, then the door of the adjoining room was thrown open. It was no adventurous journalist who, with apologies upon his lips, confronted the distinguished gathering. It was the angriest man in Christendom who faced them there with blazing eyes and thunder in his voice.

CHAPTER XXV

Prince Otto von Behrling, who, amongst a score of various other titles, had also the right to call himself the Baron Jan van Westrheene, stood for a moment shivering, his lips parted, his expression full of the savagery of the wild beast. Then, as though forced into the action by the bondage of custom, he raised his right hand and saluted Von Helm.

“Your Highness,” he muttered.

Von Helm said nothing. He simply turned and looked steadily at the gigantic man by the side of whom his two burly guards seemed like striplings.

“You will observe,” he said, “that I do not return your salute, Von Behrling.”

The latter shook with emotion. His furious anger seemed to be contending with the inherited discipline of centuries.

“Your Highness—”

“Silence!”

The newcomer obeyed, but it was obvious that he was putting enormous restraint upon himself. The senior of the two guards who stood one on either side, a grey-bearded veteran, saluted his master.

“I have to report, Excellency, that we were only able to partially close the road to the Prince von Behrling by barricades. The Prince has shot two of our guards and broken the arm of another. We are his men, as were our fathers and grandfathers before us, and it was against possibility that we should lay a hand upon his person. We could do no more than escort him where he chose to come.”

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“You are not to be blamed, Fritz,” Count von Helm said. “I await some explanation, Prince von Behrling, of this extraordinary behaviour.”

Von Behrling, who had singled out Matresser at the table, was swelling again with passion.

“Explanation!” he repeated. “Is this not a conference of vast importance to the interests of Europe, being held here upon my land—a conference of which I have been kept in ignorance?”

“You are incorrect,” was the cold reply. “It is true that we are upon the lands owned by your family but these have been granted by deed of charter to the house of which my uncle is the head and I the representative for countless years. You have no more right here without an invitation than a beggar.”

“Answer me this then,” Von Behrling demanded. “Have I no right to sit at the table when the future of my country is being determined?”

“This is a conference,” Count von Helm announced, “of sane men drawn together from the various countries of Europe having in mind one object—the preservation of peace and the glory of the German nation. You are not a politician and the matter which

we have to discuss is one at which your presence would have been unwelcome. For that reason you were not invited. For that reason we consider your intrusion here an affront.”

“*Himmel!*” Von Behrling almost shouted. “My intrusion on to my own property!”

“There are powers that reign above and govern yours, Von Behrling,” was the scornful rejoinder.

“But these are my lands,” Von Behrling declared passionately. “Why must I remain dumb—why must I be excluded from this gathering when it is the future of my country, my conduct as one of her representatives which is under discussion?”

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Matresser scrawled a line hastily upon a piece of paper and passed it to the President. The latter glanced at it and nodded gravely.

“How did you know, Von Behrling,” he asked, “that your conduct was to come under discussion at this assembly?”

“I knew,” was the sullen acknowledgment.

Von Helm glanced at Matresser, who rose at once to his feet.

“With your permission, sir,” he said, “I will answer that question. The Prince von Behrling knew that his conduct as governor of a certain East African Colony was to come under discussion by securing a private despatch written to me by our foreign secretary in reply to a report for which I was responsible. All the information he has was secured by

murdering or causing to be murdered the messenger whose body still lies awaiting the final inquest in the neighbourhood of my home. Prince von Behrling arrived under a false name in a small boat, with a possible accomplice, in the harbour attached to my property on the day when I myself returned.”

“You lie,” Von Behrling broke in. “I announced myself as Mijnheer Van Westrheene. I am the twelfth Baron Van Westrheene and my estates in Holland have been in my family for eleven generations.”

“Very well then,” Matresser corrected himself. “You arrived there bearing a name other than that by which you are generally known. Having satisfied yourself, by either murdering or assisting at the murder of the messenger, that as an envoy of the British government I had made my report upon your conduct, you then made a deliberate attempt to kill me in my own woods and also a young lady member of my household whom I know to be connected with a great Austrian family. I escaped death at your hands, Prince, by a miracle.”

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“You are in a position to deny these statements, Von Behrling?” Count von Helm demanded.

“I would kill any man,” was the harsh reply, “whom I even suspected of standing between me and my resumption of the great work I commenced for my country.”

Count von Helm pointed towards the door.

“You are, as you have reminded us, Von Behrling, upon your own lands and I shall not ask the foresters to break their allegiance of centuries even at my command. I order you to go

back the way you came and not to reappear.”

Von Behrling sneered—an ugly curl of the lips, a half-uttered exclamation.

“You go too fast, my noble overlord,” he said. “I see familiar faces around this table. There is one that I miss. Where is your representative from France?”

There was a brief, momentous silence. Von Helm was taken aback. Von Behrling gained in confidence.

“You come to these lonely places,” he said, “and you would launch your marvellous peace plans, ignoring those who count for much in your country. It is because I have been an absentee from Germany, perhaps, that I have been pushed into the background. Yet I have worked for her in far countries as none of those other milksops have done. I asked you a moment ago where was the representative from France amongst your gathering. I will answer that question myself. I will tell you why he is not here. It is because he knows the truth. He knows that this bombastic gesture of a perfidious country is hedged around with conditions and restrictions. I am not to be allowed in Africa because I know too much. Bah! You listen to strangers like that man,” he went on, pointing at Matresser, “and you ignore those who have made your country feared. France is not like that. Her word is passed. All that you do up here goes for nothing without France’s co-operation. No agreement which you can pass is of the slightest avail. And listen—I was in the Quai d’Orsay only a few hours ago.”

Once more there was silence in the little gathering. Von Behrling

towered over them like an overgrown satyr with an evil smile upon his lips. Von Helm turned slightly in his place. He had the air of a bored schoolmaster treating with a fractious child.

“You will leave this room, Von Behrling,” he directed, “and you will await a further summons. Within an hour you shall hear from us, but nothing that you can do or say will alter our fixed will.”

Von Behrling hesitated.

“To leave this neighbourhood I flatly refuse,” he replied at last. “I will retire to my castle and await your message. Send word that that man is on his way home,” he went on, pointing to Matresser, “and that his report is where it should be—burning amongst the pine logs there—and I will return, and I promise you that a representative from France will, within forty-eight hours, be seated at your table. The choice is yours.”

Von Behrling raised his hand once more to the salute. He swung around and, escorted by his two guards, left the room. Von Helm waited until the door was closed, then he drew out a cigar from one of the boxes upon the table, carefully clipped off the end and lit it.

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“So our friend has been making mischief in Paris,” he grunted.

Matresser rose to his feet.

“This is a matter, sir,” he observed, bowing to Von Helm, “which you would probably prefer to discuss in my absence. In any case, as you know, I am not here to represent England in any way and Sir Esmond Curtels remains.”

Von Helm stroked his little imperial.

“If you can absolve us in your mind, Lord Matresser, of any suggestion of discourtesy,” he said, “I am bound to say that I think your idea excellent. You will occupy yourself in any way you may prefer for say half an hour. At the end of that time we shall be ready to welcome you back, if not to our councils, at least to a place at our table.”

Matresser smiled courteously.

“I shall remain at your disposition, of course, sir,” he agreed, “but so far as regards my continued presence here my mission is already accomplished. My signed statement is in your hands and further discussion of the matter naturally rests only between you and Sir Esmond.”

Von Helm shook his head as he rose to his feet and walked with Matresser to the door.

“There are still questions,” he confided, “which we might like to ask. In any case we could not part with our honoured guest so abruptly.”

Matresser threw his shooting cape over his shoulders, a warm muffler round his neck, and opened the huge front door. With her nose a few inches from the threshold the little brown dog was lying flat. She leapt to her feet with a bark of delight when her new friend appeared and, licking his hand all the time, followed him to the low parapet. Slowly he filled his pipe, lit it and gazed across the great yawning gulf of ravine up to the towering hillsides with their mantle of stark black firs. The wind had dropped and there was enough moonlight to

transform the scene into a marvellous fairylike panorama. It seemed, somehow or other, a fitting background for the march of great events, a seemly theatre for this mighty business of kingdom-building. Matresser, however, was seized in the throes of an unusual and acute depression, a significant but not unnatural reaction to the strain of the last few days. His own future seemed suddenly twisted out of all proportion. . . .

Supposing this great game of king-making and empire-building went on smoothly to the end, just what might it mean for Elisabeth? She would become the cousin of the ruler of Austria. Would she ever be likely to satisfy herself with the life of an English country gentlewoman? It would be easy to prove to her, in fact she must have already realised, that he had not been the careless, sport-engrossed philanderer through life she had imagined. Even then, however, a life at Court would have so much more to offer her—the blazing up of the old glories, her beloved capital emerging into its old splendours, the men of her own type and rank all her eager suitors. He felt his hold upon her, already so precariously established, slipping away. . . .

The white mists were creeping down from the mountain tops. A further wave of depression chilled him. It was seldom that he indulged in this morbid habit of brooding introspection. Now that he had once given way to it he felt escape difficult. His sense of the dramatic, keenly aroused, seemed linked with a sort of self-pity. He looked into the nebulous spaces and he saw the drawing up of the great curtain, the re-established courts of Europe, the gaiety, the majesty, the birth perhaps of a new chivalry. All the ugly logic of utilitarian days would surely perish. Life would once more become free and vigorous and graceful. He searched in vain for his own

place in it. There was nothing for him there. Even a grateful country had so little to offer. A colonial governorship, even a place in the Cabinet or the Household, might be his for the asking. The thought of the mechanical work of an epoch of bureaucracy was loathsome. Women could lend grace and happiness to life without a doubt but, alas, for him there was only one woman. . . .

He rose to his feet chilled by the rolling mists. The brown dog kept her nose within an inch or two of his legs. Arrived at the entrance to the lodge, he paused and then picked her up in his arms. Her little body squirmed with delight. She tried her best to cover his face with kisses. He made his way to the great servants' lounge where a huge wood fire was burning and the foresters were seated around a table at one end of which was a barrel of beer. With one accord they rose to their feet at his entrance. He waved them back to their places.

“A word with you, Fritz,” he begged.

The forester came forward. The little dog settled herself more closely still in Matresser's arms.

“Fritz, I want this dog,” he said.

The man hesitated, but only for a moment.

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“She is a favourite,” he acknowledged, “but she belongs from now on to the *gnädiger Herr*.”

Matresser hesitated.

“You are too kind, Fritz,” he began.

“Is it not the English milord who has been kind?” the man answered, “to come here and help us back into our place once more amongst the nations?”

“I shall accept your gift with thanks,” Matresser declared, holding out his hand. “I thank you, Fritz. How do you call her?”

“Magda,” the man replied.

“Magda will be my constant companion,” Matresser told him, “and I have an idea, Fritz—we spoke of the highly trained Labradors for the shooting lower down—the real retrievers. My people have bred them in Norfolk for years. I shall send you a youngster of Blue Peter’s, broken already—a perfect dog for you. His father is the finest retriever I ever saw at work and I think the pup will be as good.”

The man’s eyes glistened.

“It will be a joy, my noble sir,” he exclaimed. “Magda shall have her supper now. Afterwards she will lie outside your door. It is evident that she has a great affection for you.”

He produced a bowl and whistled the dog to her corner. She took one sniff at it and dashed away. She was back at her new master’s heels almost at once. Matresser picked up the bowl.

“I will give it to her outside,” he suggested.

“It is very clear,” Fritz declared respectfully, “that it is not only over men that the *gnädiger Herr* was born to rule. Magda has never been like this before.”

Matresser took her outside and laid the bowl upon the ground. She ate hungrily but every moment she lifted her head to be sure that her companion had not moved. When she had finished she walked with him round the plateau on which the shooting lodge had been built. He watched her with a sigh.

“At least,” he murmured half to himself, “you will be a wonderful assurance against loneliness.”

Then he glanced up and saw two people hurrying towards him through the misty darkness. One of them was the pilot. The other was Elisabeth.

CHAPTER XXVI

Matresser himself was, after the first few seconds of breathless greeting, bereft of words. He stood grasping her hands, listening.

“You should have accepted me as an ally, my friend,” she said softly. “No matter. It is not too late. You would not take me to Paris so I went alone, or rather I went with my uncle, the uncle too of Johann who is here—the Baron von Stamier. It was well that we went, believe me. There was De la Motte, the French Colonial Secretary. Otto von Behrling seems to have done what he pleased with him. How he did it I cannot tell. They all believed in him until I got there. Then it was different.”

“Von Behrling is here now,” Matresser told her. “He arrived an hour ago.”

She nodded. If possible she was a little paler. There was fear in her eyes.

“Where is he?” she asked.

Matresser pointed to the topmost peaks of the pine-covered mountains.

“Somewhere up there in a half-ruined Schloss,” he confided. “He is waiting. He has stated his case. They are talking about it. It had ceased to be my affair so I came out. Tell me how you got here, Elisabeth.”

“I flew with my uncle to Vienna,” she recounted, “directly we found that Von Behrling was on his way here. We meant to speak to the hunting lodge but found all communications cut for the reception of outside messages. That is just like His Highness. He is so thorough in those ways. There was nothing else to be done. I hired another plane. Of course, my reception here is not to be spoken of.”

The pilot smiled.

“The Baroness,” he explained, “was received as anyone else would be who attempted to land here. An armed guard was waiting and she was placed under arrest. They sent for me to identify her and we came up in my car to the lodge entrance. Whilst the Imperial Guard were being summoned we slipped out into the darkness and walked, or rather ran. It seemed the quicker way.”

“You have had an amazing time,” Matresser exclaimed, turning to Elisabeth. “And now?”

“I shall confess something,” she said lowering her voice as she crept close to him. “Through all these mad hours I have been happy because it was exciting and because I knew that what I was doing was for the best. Now, for the first time, now that I am here, I am afraid.”

“That is not complimentary,” the pilot reproached her. “Here we are—two brave men—willing and able to protect you.”

She shivered slightly and drew the leather coat she was wearing closer around her.

“You have not seen what I have seen,” she confided. “I have told no one. I shall tell the Prince if he will see me.”

The pilot was suddenly grave.

“I had forgotten that,” he muttered. “Baroness, the position is difficult. You will not mind,” he begged, “if I report you as being under arrest?”

“What on earth—” Matresser began.

“No woman is allowed within the boundary of these estates,” the young man replied doggedly. “His Highness has made the most meticulous preparations for the holding of this Conference in absolute secrecy.”

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“I will submit to be turned away,” Elisabeth said, “but I must speak first with His Royal Highness.”

“Baroness,” the pilot pleaded, “if I grant your request I shall be disgraced for life. I shall have broken a solemn covenant and the Count von Helm—you are to call him that, please—never forgives.”

“The young man is right,” Matresser declared. “Yet, so long as you are here, Elisabeth, it does seem only reasonable that you should speak with him. Couldn’t you,” he added, turning to the pilot, “leave the Baroness in my charge and report what has happened to the Count?”

The pilot shook his head.

“I am sorry,” he regretted, “but the Baroness has landed here

and from the moment she set foot upon the ground she is a prisoner. I regret it very much but the Baroness must remain in my custody until I have orders to release her.”

“Aren’t you taking this a little too seriously?” Matresser asked, laying his hand upon the young man’s shoulder.

“It is not possible to take it otherwise, sir,” was the stiff reply.

“No one can land upon this flying ground without becoming a prisoner. I am only a Lieutenant in the Flying Force, it is true, but I am an officer and I have to carry out the regulations. I will conduct the Baroness to where she can request an audience with the Count von Helm if she insists, but if I do so I shall at the same time resign my commission.”

“That is unthinkable,” Matresser decided. “What do you yourself suggest, pilot.”

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“What I think would be best, sir, is that you who have the entrée to the lodge should return there and inform Count von Helm of what has happened, leaving the Baroness here in my custody.”

“Do you mind?” Elisabeth pleaded, looking up at Matresser. “I am so sorry. I came here foolishly, perhaps, but because I thought it was the best thing to do. I know what discipline is under—the Count von Helm. Your pilot has been very gallant but he must not suffer for it.”

“Even to discuss the matter is absurd,” Matresser declared. “I have the right of re-entry. I shall go at once.”

“And remember, dear friend,” she murmured as she patted his arm in a gesture of farewell, “that out here I freeze.”

He crossed the terrace with swift movements. The guard at the door saluted and stood on one side. At the inner door, however, Jasper himself with two others was on duty. He watched Matresser's approach with some concern.

"My lord excuses," he said, stepping forward. "The Conference still proceeds."

"It is possible for you to give a written line to the Count von Helm?"

"Only if it is of the utmost importance," the man conceded grudgingly.

"Judge for yourself, Jasper. A well-known lady of Austrian birth, a connection of the Count von Helm's, has landed on the flying ground. She has been brought here under arrest."

"My lord will write it upon his card," the major domo begged.

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Matresser did as he was requested and wandered to the other side of the hall. He heard the summons upon the inner door. There was a brief delay. Then it was opened. The aide-de-camp who had attended Count von Helm stood there. Once more the door was closed while he disappeared with the card. There was another delay. Then it was reopened and Count von Helm crossed the threshold. He made his way at once to where Matresser was standing. His eyes were grave but enquiring.

"How does this situation arise, Lord Matresser?" he asked.

"I can tell you nothing, sir, except that the Baroness is outside in

the custody of the pilot who brought me over,” Matresser replied. “She implores the briefest of interviews with you on a matter of great importance.”

Von Helm frowned.

“It was an indiscreet affair, but it has arrived,” he observed philosophically. “Add to your previous kindness, Lord Matresser, by presenting this card to her escort and accompanying them to the small salon adjoining the billiard-room. Say that I will see her there in a few minutes.”

The Count handed over the few lines he had scribbled upon a card and re-entered the Conference room. Matresser departed upon his mission.

Matresser had scarcely carried out the first part of Von Helm’s injunction and escorted Elisabeth to the salon before he realised that she was on the verge of unconsciousness. She was leaning with all her weight upon his arm, at which she had clutched, and her face was deathly white. He placed her in one of the huge chairs in front of the log fire, hurriedly poured out some brandy from a decanter upon a sideboard and forced the glass between her lips. In a minute or two she showed signs of recovery. The colour came back to her cheeks.

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“I am sorry,” she faltered. “I was tired and cold. We lost our way in the mists.”

She shivered at the memory. He let her rest for a moment without speech, broke up a biscuit and gave her more brandy. She smiled weakly.

“I expect you are right,” she admitted. “I have had nothing to eat for ten hours.”

She was sitting up in the chair when the door opened and Count von Helm entered. She would have struggled to her feet but he waved her back.

“This is a very unexpected visit, Baroness,” he said sternly.

“Your Highness must excuse me,” she faltered. “I left Paris on an impulse. I made no preparations. We landed once for petrol but there was no food.”

“It was a rash journey,” the Count continued. “I do not wish to seem severe but you know that you have descended on forbidden territory. This little corner of the world has been consecrated. We have had one intruder here already to-day although I regret to say that he had some shadow of right in his coming. You, Baroness—forgive me—have none.”

“You will excuse me, sir?” Matresser begged, turning towards the door.

“You are to stay, if you please, Lord Matresser,” Elisabeth cried. “Your Highness will permit?” she added, turning towards him eagerly.

“I am Count von Helm here,” he told her frowning.

“Count Helm pleases me better. I have no idea what you wish to say to me of sufficient importance to condone your intrusion, or what reason you could have for desiring the presence of Lord Matresser. If you wish it, however, proceed. Remain where you are, Matresser. The Baroness is here and she

must explain herself.”

Matresser turned to her in some embarrassment.

“You will pardon me,” he ventured, “but don’t you think that anything you might have to say—to Count von Helm—should be said in private? I am not really concerned in the political side of this matter. I am here only as a messenger.”

She answered him with an imperious little gesture of the hand.

“Remain, if you please. Count von Helm permits. Be so kind as to pass me that tumbler.”

He handed her the glass into which he had poured the brandy and waited until she had finished it. Then she threw open her heavy leather coat, unfastened her cap and flung it on the table. She addressed herself to Von Helm.

“I have been living in Norfolk under his roof—companion to his sister—a spy. I had a confederate there—his mother’s maid. He was too clever for us, though, he and that strange little secretary who worships him like a dog. I did discover one thing, though. I found out that he was coming to this Conference.”

“For whom are you working?” Von Helm demanded.

“For my country.”

“For Austria?”

“I have no other.”

“What about France?”

“I do not think,” she answered, “that I need to tell my own mother’s cousin that I am Austrian heart and soul. Next to her in my affections, but a long way behind, comes France.”

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“Go on. Remember, the minutes are scanty.”

“Your nephew arrived in Norfolk to conduct Lord Matresser here. Almost at the same time I had news from Paris. The French Colonial Minister had vetoed the departure of the delegate whom the French government had nominated to attend the discussions here on their behalf. It seemed to me impossible that the peace plans could have continued without the conjunction of France. I was afraid that Austria would lose the greatest chance she has had since the war of an Arnsburg restoration and of becoming once more a free and glorious empire. It was Lord Matresser, the man on whom I had been spying, whose information was going to destroy the whole scheme. My uncle, who knew even more than I did, was convinced that Germany would never modify her conditions or accept dictation from England as to the government of her colonies. It was I who had failed. I left Norfolk broken-hearted. In Paris there seemed to be hope. The truth was being whispered about. A large sum of money had been paid to a certain person to stay away from the Conference. Where I failed in Norfolk I succeeded in Paris. I found the proof of this. I came here at all costs—at all risks—to bring you those proofs.”

Von Helm shook his head a little sadly.

“You need not trouble to produce them, Baroness,” he said. “If only you women would remember that the days when your sex could take a hand in the world’s affairs are over! They went out with the Russian school of diplomacy, they perished in the days when every embassy in Europe was haunted by courtesans, great ladies and servant wenches all ready to sell their country for a price. You meant well, Baroness, but proofs of the De la Motte business are already in our hands and fresh negotiations with France will be commenced almost at once.”

She rose a little unsteadily to her feet.

“My journey then has been a vain effort,” she said wearily. “Can I be sent back to the flying ground, please?”

“We will not admit that your effort has been altogether in vain,” Von Helm said kindly. “Your confirmation of De la Motte’s treachery is at any rate useful, nor should I think of allowing you to depart in your present condition.”

“I am afraid that I am only a nuisance here,” she sighed. “If I can get to the plane—”

He held up his hand.

“I cannot offer you the hospitality of this shooting lodge,” he regretted, “because I believe I am correct in saying that you are the first woman of our own station who has ever crossed its portals. You need not fear, however, that we shall turn you out in your present state of fatigue. Jasper,” he went on, turning to the major domo who had answered the bell which he had been pressing, “you will escort the Baroness to your chalet and hand

her over to your wife. See that she receives all the attention possible and that she is served with food and wine. Give orders on the flying field that the plane which brought her here is to leave within an hour. Let the pilot be well treated and supplied with anything he requires. The Baroness will return to-morrow either to Paris or Vienna in one of my own planes.”

Jasper saluted. Elisabeth curtsied and held out her hand.

“After all, dear relative of mine,” she said, “there is a heart that beats somewhere under that terrifying exterior.”

He raised her fingers to his lips.

“And you, my dear Elisabeth,” he assured her, “have always been very near to it—but these are moments of crisis.”

The door stood wide open. Elisabeth understood, and seized Matresser’s hands for a moment as she passed, but she lingered only for a single word of adieu. The door closed. The pilot remained in the background with folded arms. Von Helm walked the whole length of the room twice in silence. Matresser waited patiently. Presently his host paused by his side and laid his hand upon his shoulder.

“Lord Matresser,” he said, “the last thing I would have you think is that I wish to be in any way inhospitable.”

“No one could ever charge you with that, sir,” Matresser assured him. “I was about to suggest, if I might, that my work here is finished.”

Von Helm sighed but there was a gleam of relief in his clear blue eyes.

“That is true,” he admitted. “Your country owes you a debt which I am sure she will repay for the splendid accomplishment of your mission. We, too, owe you our thanks. That madman, Von Behrling, complicates the situation. To be frank, I think that your departure would be advisable in all our interests.”

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“I agree with you, sir,” Matresser said promptly.

The pilot, in obedience to a gesture, came hurrying up. Von Helm gave him a few brief instructions. He saluted and withdrew.

“And now, Lord Matresser,” his host said, “I shall pray you to give me the last few minutes of your stay here. It would be a great disappointment to the members of the Conference if you should depart without taking your leave of them. Will you come with me and shake hands and possibly you would like a word with Sir Esmond before you and I drink our stirrup cup together and I wish you *bon voyage*.”

Matresser obeyed without hesitation and accompanied his companion into the conference room. In an hour’s time he was once more in the clouds.

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CHAPTER XXVII

Nicolas Angelesco, most famous of all the maîtres d'hôtel in Europe, established now for the past twenty years in the one remaining restaurant which still entitles Paris to consider herself the Mecca of the gourmet, came swift-footed and eager along the thickly carpeted way from the violet shadows which hung round the lower end of the *Café de France*. His manner towards the two clients who had just entered was perfection. There was surprise in his strong but pallid face, there was joy in his eyes, there was welcome in his broad smile. A few feet away he paused to bow, almost as though to Royalty. Then he came forward and the few words he spoke seemed to come from his heart. Any other form of salute—a proffered hand, for instance—would have been a *gaucherie*.

“*Monsieur le Général!*” he exclaimed. “This is a joyful occasion. It is months since I had the honour—many months during which the table of monsieur has been at times unworthily occupied.”

“Life treats one like that, you know, Nicolas,” Besserley replied, as he glanced in the mirror to be sure that the removal of his scarf had not affected the perfect set of his tie. “Anyhow, to-night it treats me well. It brings me back to my idea of a gastronomic paradise and it gives me the opportunity of bringing a friend to make its acquaintance. Nicolas, this is Lord Matresser, an Englishman, a plain liver, as he describes himself. A little inclined to scoff at the man who looks too eagerly at his menu and treats his wine card like a Bible. We may

teach him other things.”

“We shall endeavour to do so,” the restaurateur agreed. “We shall at any rate offer his lordship of our best.”

The two men established themselves at a table which Besserley, when he had once held an official post in Paris, had occupied three or four times a week for years. It was easy to see that he was still *persona grata* there. The lady at the desk had thrown him one of those haunting smiles which still remained an enigma to her admirers. The sommelier, with that beautifully bound volume of purple calf, was already hastening from the lower end of the place. The maître d’hôtel was hovering at Angelesco’s elbow. Several other waiters were fighting with one another to capture a smile of recognition from one of their old patrons.

“We are possessed of one of those peculiar lingering appetites which I call an air appetite, Nicolas,” Besserley explained. “Less than a week ago we flew here through snow and hail, through hours of brilliant sunshine and disgusting periods of unpleasant proximity to drifting masses of clouds. Such a journey produces an appetite which remains. In English we should call it robust. It is fortunate for us that oysters should be at their best.”

“*Monsieur le Général* will realise immediately the truth of his words,” Nicolas declared enthusiastically.

“I see you preserve your old tricks,” Besserley continued. “You present no menu.”

“To such clients as monsieur never,” was the prompt reply.

“Anything the world can offer of delicacies is here. We know your tastes. We do not fear a demand for food that belongs to the cafés of the Boulevards. We commence with oysters and with the oysters there is but one wine—the *Vandésir* 1908. Queen of all the *Chablis*. That pleases also his lordship?”

“Excellent,” Matresser assented smiling. “You go ahead with this, Besserley,” he added to his companion. “I will do my share later on.”

“I should have suggested your blue trout,” Besserley proceeded thoughtfully, “if it had been caviar instead of oysters. There is an assimilation, however, between oysters and boiled fish which wipes them from amongst the possibilities. To speak of *sole Colbert* in the ordinary way would be vandalism, sheer vandalism, but a *sole Colbert Angelesco*! Not so long ago, Nicolas, since we used to think that one of the triumphs of the *Maison*.”

“It still is, monsieur,” was the enthusiastic response. “And there is a later trick I have learnt. Some small thing in the sauce. Never mind. Leave it to me.”

“He writes nothing down of all these delicacies, I see,” Matresser remarked.

Nicolas smiled.

“It is one of my queer habits, milord,” he explained. “When I take an order from a client like *Monsieur le Général* there is no possibility of anything being forgotten. I like to take it viva voce. I go myself into the kitchen. I talk with my chef.”

“This is going to be a revelation for me,” Matresser observed. “The only thing I am afraid of is that we shall lose our appetites whilst we wait for such a Lucullan repast.”

“No fear of that,” Besserley assured him. “Nicolas waves the wand of the magician over his kitchens! No one, of course,” he went on, “would ever think of visiting Angelesco’s without tasting the *poussin flambé de la Maison*. Then there is the *Pauillac*—that goes without saying.”

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“The *soufflé Nicolas* is a necessity,” its inventor insisted.

“With a dash of the old *Grand Marnier* in the sauce,” Besserley approved. “I should order your Cabinet hocks but we have just come from the very home of the finest wines in Germany. You observe I do not even consult my guest. He has placed himself in my hands. He will drink a light and fragrant *Piesporter* with the *sole Colbert* and he will pass from that to a *Romanée Conté* 1908, and even though it be your last, Nicolas, a pint of the *Veuve Clicquot Rosée* with the *soufflé*. The brandy is for you to choose.”

Nicolas drew a sigh of deep satisfaction.

“It is a long time since I felt this happiness,” he confessed. “I order food for my famous client—food which I am proud to serve. Of *apéritifs* I have not spoken. They are the drug of those who do not understand the art of eating. Jules was listening to me, you behold. *Chablis* for service with the oysters arrives—the oysters, too. That first sip of the *Chablis, Monsieur le Général*, will put out of your mind all ideas of such crude beginnings.”

The men seemed to melt away and dinner to be served soon afterwards as though by magic.

“We are at least, I trust, cementing an exceedingly pleasant friendship,” Matresser observed, “with one of the most wonderful meals to which I have ever sat down.”

“It is Nicolas Angelesco’s life,” Besserley replied. “To serve a meal like this is a real joy to him. I honestly believe he will enjoy serving it as much as we shall enjoy eating it. And we have earned it!”

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“*You* have,” Matresser corrected. “I seem to have done very little.”

“You delivered an admirable summing up of the whole affair to *Monsieur le Ministre*,” Besserley said. “It is going through, you know, Matresser. It is a lucky thing for Germany that they had a handful of the old régime toned down—one might almost use the word purified—by sacrifice and adversity, who are ready to accept the new order.”

“Hellstern’s threatened breakdown in health, I should think, is in our favour,” Matresser reflected.

“Life,” Besserley declared, as he sipped his wine, “is more fortuitous, more accidental than we are ever willing to admit. Half the great schemes of life have been helped into fruition by coincidences. Why shouldn’t they happen? Take a true roulette board. There are thirty-six numbers. One of them must turn up when the ball spins. The result is a triumph of pure chance. Chance must be taken into account in everything that happens. The man who trusts his all to it is a fool. The man who denies

its existence is a bigger one. Everything has been in our favour. The pieces in this enterprise such as Hellstern's threatened ill health and Matorni's Abyssinian imbroglio have fallen into their places marvellously."

"You are quite right," Matresser remarked thoughtfully. "In my honest opinion the problem of a fifty-year peace which, after all, is our great aim was never so nearly being solved."

Besserley leaned back in his place and polished his eyeglass meditatively. It was during one of those brief pauses which occur sometimes between the courses of the most perfectly served dinner.

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"I am to continue to speak frankly?" he asked.

"For heaven's sake do," Matresser begged. "Men who are up against life as seriously as you and I are just now cannot afford to do anything else."

"Well, I will go on to say, then, and I have always been a great admirer of the English, that I never thought them capable of making an offer of this sort. I have always looked upon them as being a trifle inclined to be sanctimonious and to ape the superphilanthropic. There is a dash of that, of course, in this gesture of theirs but, *au fond*, it is a good sound commercial gesture. Truth lies, as they say, at the bottom of the well. No nation in the world ever needed peace to badly as Great Britain, simply because it is the greatest trading country that exists and she has all those colonies scattered about in different parts of the world relying upon her. They are damned useful in peace but they are nothing but a menace in war. Therefore, why should not

she be the country to sacrifice most in order to secure it?"

"It is sound reasoning," Matresser acknowledged.

"Yet, take your statesmen one by one," Besserley went on. "I should not have thought there would have been one of them with the courage to propose this thing and the obstinacy to push it through."

"They could not have done unless someone had thought of this scheme of planting observers from your country in every capital," Matresser observed.

"That may have finished off the trick," Besserley admitted.

"Anyway, we have left behind us this afternoon an absolutely united French Cabinet and in Germany a people who are getting ready as fast as possible to settle down to a new era.

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They will make it hot for the whole world, as they did thirty years ago, so far as regards commercial competition. Let them get along with it. The world that gets the best from every nation is going to prosper. . . . Matresser, we did, I think, leave a couple of glasses of the *Piesporter*, I don't know why, but we surely cannot do that with this Burgundy."

Matresser made no move to stop the sommelier who was refilling his glass from the dusty, cradled bottle. Besserley watched the clear wine with its flash of purple, twirled his glass for a moment, sniffed it and drew a long breath.

"Well, Matresser, here's to fifty years of peace! You will see a little more of it than I shall but we are both philosophers enough to leave that in the background. May it breed men like you and me to enjoy what the Nicolas Angelescos of the next generation

may provide.”

They drank their wine. They were enjoying their cigars when Angelesco came up to receive their compliments.

“I can assure you,” Matresser told him, “that I have dined off yams seated on the creaking bough of a tree with my rifle under my left arm and not quite certain of any spot in the jungle underneath, and I have seen my bearers skin a rhinoceros and cut small pieces out of the back into steaks, and I narrowly escaped in the old days being made an involuntary cannibal from a stew which was being dealt out by a black gentleman in the wilds of Australia—but I have never dined like this.”

“It is my hope,” Angelesco said, in his soft courtier-like voice, “that your lordship will do so often again. Tell me, *Monsieur le Général*,” he asked, turning to Besserley, “how do you find Paris?”

“I have seen little of it,” Besserley admitted. “There is a depression that one cannot fail to apprehend. Something of the old spirit has gone, and there is also nervousness. Perhaps now that may pass.”

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“I have clients like yourselves,” Nicolas confided, “men of the world, great gentlemen from every rank of life to whom Paris meant light-hearted pleasure. They visit the old spots and they are full of laments. You have been to the *Trois Étoiles*?”

“We are only transitory visitors,” Besserley explained, “and we have affairs.”

“Go there,” Nicolas begged. “Spend one hour and tell me what

you think. I have not the heart to go myself, and my few clients —if I were not here it would be bad for me. But if someone like yourself who understood the gaiety, the joy of living in those days, could go there and find anything of the old spirit which they tell me has altogether gone, then I should feel less sad and I should ask myself less often what is the use of it all.”

“We will spend an hour there to-night,” Besserley promised. “No remonstrances, my dear companion. You will tell me next that you have never visited the *Trois Étoiles*.”

“I shall tell you nothing of the sort,” Matresser laughed. “In the old days when I was continually wandering about I had a small flat here so as to re-establish myself in civilisation when I came back from some of my travels.”

“Then to-night,” Besserley said as they took their departure, “we will set back the clock a few years.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

It was with a certain amount of reluctance that Besserley and his companion even handed their coats and hats to the waiting *vestiaire* when they reached the *Café des Trois Étoiles*. To Besserley, who in his younger days had known the place when it had been the rendezvous of all the famous Bohemians from every country, there was a certain sadness in the air of gloom which no efforts on the part of the performers—the cabaret show was, after all, an importation from the latest Broadway success—or the crowds who danced and supped seemed to be able to dissipate. It was a spurious gaiety, a lightheartedness which was never convincing. Even Matresser looked around him with regret. The manager, aware of his distinguished guests, came hurrying up. Besserley did his best with a few ordinary compliments. Matresser, without enthusiasm, ordered food which he knew they should never touch and wine which they would not drink.

“It is the Parisian himself and his little companion, and the Americans who have deserted us,” Louis, the proprietor of the place, confessed glancing round. “*Monsieur le Général* observes—Germans, Dutch, Czechs, even from Russia. We are crowded, after a fashion, it is true, but it is with people who have never learnt to dance to the music of the times. We make rules—no one keeps them. We do our best to discourage the unwanted—they still come. *Monsieur* observes.”

The two men glanced at the table which Louis’ expressive eyebrows had indicated and a queer little

flash of memory came to Matresser. The woman who was staring across at him—a heavy, uncouth-looking personage dressed in a Zouave jacket and a man's trousers, ablaze with diamonds, lolling back in her chair and drinking wine with abandon, smiled at him joyfully. Matresser looked beyond her into the distant places.

“You have strange visitors,” he remarked.

“It is true,” Louis confessed. “The woman who tried just now to attract the attention of milord, she in Paris during the latter years of the war was the woman before whom everyone quaked. Everyone knew she was a spy and no one knew for whom she was working. She came here—it was a different place then, *Monsieur le Général*—with great men. What attraction she could have had for them one fails to understand, except that she has coarsened and grown older with the years, but there was no man who seemed above her reach. A few visits and then she came alone. The man, whoever he might have been, had gone. No one knows where. Rumours, gossip, wild statements, wild stories—all those circled about the head of Rosa van Kampf in those days. There have been a hundred pictures of her—none very convincing. There she sits at the table where twenty years before her Otero ruled over a court.”

“This is very interesting,” Matresser said quietly. “Do you know,” he asked the proprietor, “in what direction her activities are now directed?”

Louis shook his head.

“One heard that she had been married to a Dutchman,” he

admitted. “She brought him here one night—a tall, smooth-faced man with an eyeglass and a face which seemed as though it were fashioned of wood. Never a smile, never a pleasant word. He was a Dutch Baron, I think. He came here once and never again. You will excuse, Messieurs?”

The woman had risen to her feet. Louis hastened up to her and began to talk earnestly. She looked down at him, a scornful smile upon her lips.

“It is my conviction,” Matresser warned his companion, “that the lady is coming to talk to us and that Louis is trying to dissuade her.”

“What—the famous Rosa?” Besserley exclaimed. “You see the little man by her side? That is Paul Lafarge, the editor of the *Onlooker*—member of a publishing house, too. He is all the time, they say, trying to get her to write her memoirs. A curious table. One of the other guests is an ex-Cabinet minister—a Frenchman, of course. He has sworn that the day she sets pen to paper she will find herself in prison. Look at those diamonds. They are reputed to be real. Think what they represent in blackmail. . . . Poor Louis—in his own restaurant, too!”

The woman had pushed him aside with a laughing gesture of contempt. She crossed the floor to the corner table where Matresser and General Besserley were ensconced. Both men watched her curiously. She was smoking a cigarette from a holder half a foot long. Her walk was indescribable. It was arrogant, ponderous and yet it possessed a sort of savage grace. She paused before the table where the two men were seated. Matresser rose unwillingly to his feet. Besserley remained in

his place. He showed no signs of recognition, yet it was in front of him that the woman had paused.

“My old friend, he does not wish to remember,” she remarked in her thick, guttural voice.

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Besserley knocked the ash from his cigar.

“I have nothing to remember,” he said. “I have never had the pleasure of exchanging a word with madame before. I imagine that her visit here was paid to my companion.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Am I compromising you?” she asked mockingly. “Have no fear. I play the game and those days that are past have no concern for me. My lord Matresser, I come to thank you for your inhospitality. I have blessed the day since you gave us sailing orders from your muddy little harbour.”

Matresser glanced at the table which she had left.

“Your companion?” he asked.

She threw out her arms in a wide-flung gesture.

“Finished,” she declared. “A very bad man, my lord Matresser. A wicked man. I preferred your secretary, the little man with the faithful eyes. I tried so hard to buy from him what my friend, the Dutchman, would have murdered you to get. He played with me. Always I hoped that he would yield. I believe now that he cared more for that little rustic Nancy, the belle of the inn. It was a bad business that, our visit to Norfolk. We gained nothing.”

“Well, your companion knows now all that he came to find out,” Matresser observed.

She leaned forward, her hands on the table. Louis, who had been hovering in the background, with an apologetic gesture placed a chair. She looked up at Matresser with a bantering smile.

“My lord permits?”

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“We were on the point of departure,” Matresser said calmly, “but pray finish what you wish to say sitting down.”

She crossed her legs, glanced at the wine in their glasses which remained untouched but Matresser made no offer of hospitality. Besserley had cut himself entirely aloof.

“Yes, he knows,” she admitted. “And I think, my English country gentleman with the severe but stately manners, that if you were well advised you would start on another of those long journeys of yours and not return too soon. I could tell you a secret about Van Westheene.”

“I am not interested in the man,” Matresser said, “and if you have broken off your connection with him that is no reason why you should disclose his secrets. You will permit my adding, madame,” he went on, “that I can appreciate nothing in the deportment of my friend or myself which might have encouraged this visit. It would seem to me more agreeable if you return to your own table.”

“It is new English to me,” she scoffed, “these stiff and stately phrases. Do not be afraid. I am not amusing myself here and

where I do not amuse myself I do not remain. The great American diplomat who is your companion, he plays the game. When he wanted information he sought it, he paid for it generously and he wiped out all memory of the donor. That is the only way spies continue to live. As for you, my Norfolk lordling,” she concluded rising to her feet, “I will tell you the secret I spoke of. Everyone knows it who has been near him for years but the man himself. Some day he will realise it, and then—ah, then—he will drag down the pillars of the world! Van Westrheene I speak of. And this is the secret. He is mad! He is as mad as the worst lunatic that was ever caged in an asylum. He has the gift of playing the sane man and he plays it at odd times to perfection, but he was mad for half of his reign in Africa, and the madness is back again. Be careful!”

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She nodded insolently and swaggered off. Matresser gazed after her curiously. Besserley came back once more to life.

“If ever she really does write her memoirs, that woman—” he began.

Matresser laid his hand upon his friend’s arm.

“This is a strange evening we are passing, General, and it is not yet finished,” he said, looking towards the door. “There stands the man of whom she has just been speaking!”

Besserley’s half-smothered exclamation was profane but illuminating. The newcomer had already discovered their whereabouts and was eyeing them with a fixed, emotionless stare.

“Trouble, I am afraid,” Matresser sighed.

CHAPTER XXIX

Yet Von Behrling carried himself quietly enough during those first few minutes after his entrance into the restaurant. He handed his hat and coat to the *vestiaire*, he straightened his tie before the mirror and although he made his way directly to the table where the two men were seated he did so without undue haste, even with a certain amount of dignity. Matresser, tense and nerved for immediate action, watched in vain for any suspicious movement upon his part. Besserley's right hand had stolen swiftly into his hip pocket, as the hand of any good American would when the life of his friend was threatened. Drama, however, seemed likely to be at least postponed. Von Behrling came to a standstill in front of their table and his words were simple and direct.

“Lord Matresser,” he said, “I have come to offer you a certain explanation. Your friend, General Besserley, permits me, I hope, to introduce myself formally. I am that unfortunate Prince von Behrling who presented himself uninvited at the Conference some days ago.”

Besserley acknowledged the newcomer's words with a little nod but his right hand remained where it was. This man's type was new to him but he was taking no risks. Matresser, too, had made his plans.

“When we seek in life a thing that is dear to us,” Von Behrling continued, “we are apt to think so hard that we sometimes make mistakes. I wanted to rule once more over that territory of mine

in Africa. I cannot explain to you the joy it gave me—I attempt nothing of the sort. From the moment I learnt there was a chance that these colonies might come back to us I thought of nothing else. Then I heard rumours. I learnt dimly of your mission through various correspondents in Africa and elsewhere with whom I had kept in touch since the war. I learnt of your mission. I heard of your report. I was faced with the possibility that the thing for which I had lived was to be snatched from me.”

“Is this worth while, Prince?” Matresser asked. “It seems to me that we are digging into a very unprofitable past. You can justify nothing that you have done—certainly not your attempt to shoot me in cold blood at the risk of shooting also a defenceless woman.”

Von Behrling waved his hand.

“I was wrong,” he admitted. “I adopted the wrong means. I should have sought you out, Lord Matresser. I should have acknowledged the justice of the report you were about to present and I should have endeavoured to win your sympathies in a different fashion.”

“It is hard for me to imagine,” Matresser said coldly, “what arguments you could have used to induce me to suppress a single word of what I knew to be the truth.”

Von Behrling was silent for a moment. Matresser found himself, for some curious reason, studying intently that one exposed eye. There was a curious glint of greed in it which lent a puzzling expression to the whole face.

“You knew of me only as a Dutchman of presumably humble stock,” Von Behrling said.

Matresser shrugged his shoulders.

“That is uninteresting. I received you as a stranger with the courtesy one offers to foreigners. You repaid me in a disgraceful fashion and that you can sit here and expect me to carry on a conversation with you at all under the circumstances is, I think, presumption.”

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“Ask your friend about me,” Von Behrling suggested. “He knows.”

Besserley raised his eyebrows.

“It seems to me that Lord Matresser already knows all he might wish to know about you. What is it you want me to tell him?”

“Who I am.”

“I don’t know whether Von Behrling expects you to be impressed by the fact,” Besserley remarked, turning to his neighbour, “but obviously he wishes me to tell you that he is by repute a multi-millionaire, that he owns mines in Saxony, forests all over North Germany, towns in Bavaria, and that altogether he is a man of great possessions.”

Von Behrling inclined his head slowly.

“It is the truth,” he acknowledged. “Now, Lord Matresser, we will speak together as serious men. I have wealth which is useless to me. You have it in your power, by using your

influence with your government, to admit that here and there you may have made mistakes, that you have here and there exaggerated. You have it in your power to give me the only thing I covet in life. In English pounds sterling I offer you the sum of one million pounds to be transferred to your credit at any bank you like to name. It is enough—yes?”

Matresser stared across the table fixedly. There was a glint of fury, however, in the cold gleam of his eyes.

“It is enough indeed,” he replied. “If it were not against every principle that I have in life to avoid a brawl in a public place, I should not hesitate to indulge in your favourite German insult and strike you upon the cheek. Consider it done, if you will,” he added rising, “and that I am ready to take the consequences. If that is what you sought me for you came indeed on a fool’s errand.”

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Besserley’s right hand tightened upon that hidden treasure in his pocket. He need have had no fear, however. His companion’s instinct had shown him what was about to happen. Just as Von Behrling’s long arm was drawn back Matresser had sprung to his feet and snatched away the chair upon which his would-be assailant had been seated. Von Behrling collapsed upon the floor. The two men stood and looked at him and this time Besserley drew out his hand from his pocket and the glint of dull metal was there in plain sight. Louis came rushing from the background. He pushed the two before him.

“I beg of you, gentlemen,” he pleaded, “leave—leave now or I am a ruined man! He has lost his senses for the moment but he is a tiger, a madman, that!”

They reached the door without undue haste. Matresser searched in his pocket for the *pourboire* and accepted his overcoat and hat. Besserley followed his example. They glanced back. Von Behrling was still crouching by the side of the table leaning on one hand and gazing after them. From the farther end of the room Rosa van Kampf, attracted by the commotion, was pushing her way through the little crowd.

“He will not touch me, gentlemen,” Louis called out, “but go—please go! If the police arrive and there is trouble I am ruined.”

“This scene is not for us,” Besserley decided, passing his arm firmly through Matresser’s. “We obey Louis. We leave.”

The *commissionnaire* had already called their car. They crossed the pavement and drove away almost at once.

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“And so farewell to Von Behrling,” Matresser observed as he lit a cigarette. “I think if it is all the same to you, Besserley, we will call it a night. I will grant you that there is still adventure to be found in Paris but it is not the sort of adventure for which I have a taste.”

Besserley was looking grimly out of the window.

“I hope it may be farewell to that lunatic,” he said. “I am more than half inclined to believe that what the big lady told us was the truth. The man is mad. He would never have made you such an offer if he had been sane.”

“Does it matter much?” Matresser asked.

“Just this much. You can always count upon what a sane man

may do and be prepared. With a madman it is different. You can never tell what he may be up to. Lucky that our stay here is finished and that we have to be at the dinner in London to-morrow night. Are you going to take me across, my friend?"

"Delighted," was the cordial answer. "That fine young fellow, my pilot, is sick of kicking his heels about Paris and he loves company."

They drove into the courtyard of the hotel where they were both staying. In the lift Matresser glanced at the batch of letters which the clerk had thrust into his hand. On the top was a card on which was engraved:

Baron Hermann von Stamier.
Austrian Legation.
London.

Underneath, in a woman's handwriting, was scribbled:

Bon voyage! I hope we may meet soon. E.

The weariness of the day was suddenly dissipated. There was a new energy in Matresser's tone as he shook hands with his companion.

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"A wonderful day and thanks for your help, General," he said heartily. "See you at nine o'clock to-morrow morning. We will cross in good time if that suits you."

"Down to the ground," was the cordial reply. "And as for thanks—well, we will let that go. You seem in a hurry, young fellow," he remarked suspiciously. "What are you hiding behind that

door?”

“You will see,” Matresser told him, pushing it back cautiously and turning on the light.

Magda, who was sitting up in her basket in a state of tremulous excitement, leaped into his arms. Her little body rocked with emotion. She was nearly crazy with joy.

“My little present from the snows,” her master explained.

CHAPTER XXX

Matresser, seated in the chair reserved for distinguished visitors and with the Official cigarettes at his elbow, remained— notwithstanding his cordial reception—in a dubious frame of mind.

“I am delighted to hear that the French delegates have arrived at the Conference and that matters are moving along smoothly,” he said. “So far as I personally am concerned, however, I cannot accept any portion of the credit. I just had the good luck to know certain facts which I was in a position to prove.”

Sir Francis smiled patiently.

“You are an unusual type, Matresser,” he remarked. “Since I went into politics I had really come to the conclusion that the absolutely modest man had vanished from the face of the earth. However, we will leave all that alone for the present and return to my request. His Majesty is doing me the honour of attending my wife’s reception to-night and he has expressed his wish to meet you here. A wish expressed in such language, my dear fellow, can only be dealt with in one way. It is a command and it must be obeyed.”

Matresser looked gloomily out of the window and watched the waving elm boughs from the leaves of which a little spatter of rain was falling. He seemed suddenly to see the wistful eyes and the eager contortions of the body of a little brown dog. Despite himself he smiled.

“That looks better,” Sir Francis observed cheerfully.

“I really ought to explain the thought that crossed my mind at that moment,” Matresser confided. “My first idea was to ask my pilot to take me direct to Norfolk without calling in London and there I should have been at the present moment but for one trifling circumstance.”

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“Go ahead, my dear fellow. Explain the fortunate circumstance.”

“Up at that wonderful shooting lodge last week I was given a dog—a brown spaniel. It was only when I was on my way home that I remembered the position. If I descended at any of the aerodromes in Norfolk there was no earthly way of explaining the presence of my little companion. My only chance was to stop in London and have a word with the Home Secretary or the Secretary for Agriculture. That is why we came down at Heston.”

“You had no difficulty, of course?”

“None whatever. Little Magda has been made an extraordinary exception. She does not realise it, naturally, but there she is guarding my things in my room—a free dog. If it had not been for her I should have postponed paying my respects to you and the question of my presence at this party to-night would not have occurred.”

“Perhaps,” the elder man said gravely, “you will live long enough to bless the chance for which your little dog was responsible. I shall not argue with you, Matresser, because the subject does not permit of it. A man who has done a great work must pay the penalty of having it acknowledged. There are

certain things in life which demand recognition. This is one of them.”

“You are very convincing, Sir Francis,” his visitor sighed. “I shall be your guest, then, at nine o’clock this evening.”

“At half-past eight, if you please. We dine early because the reception is at ten o’clock and His Majesty announced his intention of arriving early. To-morrow morning you will probably be free to leave for home. Believe me, I am grateful to you,” he added, as he rose and held out his hand, “although I knew,” he concluded, “that no other decision was possible.”

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Matresser took his leave and was driven to his town house. In one of the bachelor suites which was always kept ready for guests, Pilot Number Seventeen was lolling in an easy chair with a pile of newspapers and a half-empty tankard by his side. He rose smartly to his feet at his host’s entrance.

“No luck, my young friend,” the latter announced. “It’s London for another twelve hours for me at any rate.”

There was a violent scratching at the door. Immediately it was opened, Magda tore into the room, leaping madly up at her master. The footman apologised from the threshold.

“I am very sorry, your lordship,” he regretted, “but I could not keep the little dog. She has been standing with her paws on the window sill nearly every moment since you went away and she saw you get out of the car.”

“That’s all right,” his master replied. “You ragamuffin,” he went

on, twisting the dog's ear. "You don't know what you have let me in for."

"Your beer is very good," the young man in the chair announced. "I am in great comfort. I shall stay over with much pleasure. To-morrow—yes?"

"To-morrow we shall go to Norfolk," Matresser promised. . . . "By the by, don't you want to have a word or two with some of your own people here?"

Pilot Number Seventeen shook his head.

"I do not wish to have intercourse with Kraft at all at the present moment," he explained. "Kraft is not a man for whom either my family or I myself have much respect. He was one of those who would have pushed Hellstern to extremes if Hellstern had had the courage and the folly to respond. I myself," the young man went on, "am no politician. I do not interfere. Nevertheless, I do not wish to be asked questions by Herr Kraft."

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"Haven't met him, myself," Matresser observed, stroking Magda's head.

"He is like your English caricatures of the fire-eating Teuton," Pilot Number Seventeen confided. "He likes to feel the brimstone in his mouth every time he opens it. He would like war with anyone anyhow. He would have made mischief here already but your politicians are too clever. What is coming is the great solution. He will not see that. It is a pity for his sake."

"I see you have thought things out for yourself to some extent,

young fellow.”

“That is how the youth of Germany are being brought up now,” he said. “We are no longer drilled into blind obedience. We think for ourselves. It has made trouble—the trouble is passing. Soon our country will reap the benefit.”

“I shall have to leave you altogether to yourself, to-night,” Matresser told him as he sank into an easy chair and lit a cigarette.

Pilot Number Seventeen grinned.

“I have been in London before,” he confided. “I amuse myself.”

“Just how?” his host enquired.

“I tell you,” the young man replied. “Why not? Soon I change my clothes. Your servants here are all wonderful. Everything is already prepared for me. I go to a small club, the 272 existence of which Herr Kraft would deny and the portals of which I will guarantee he has never crossed. We are all Germans. We are not necessarily high-born but we are of those who take our country seriously. Many of the friends of my student days are there. We shall eat together and drink wine. Afterwards there are some cafés. We shall amuse ourselves without a doubt. On my dressing-table before I retire I shall look for a message from you. I shall be at Heston an hour before you wish to start and you will find our beautiful butterfly plane polished and shining, ready for that one little hop to Norfolk. And you—you move to-night in the high places?”

“Not of my own will,” Matresser sighed, “but it must be done.”

“I wish they would send you to Berlin,” Pilot Number Seventeen exclaimed fervently.

Matresser laughed.

“My dear fellow,” he said, “I know no more of the routine of diplomacy than you do and I am a great deal too old a bird to learn. I have had my little bout of excitement, or shall have, when this is over.”

The pilot looked wiser than his years.

“I wonder,” he murmured.

Matresser looked up in surprise at the sound of the suddenly opened door. Ann swept across the room to him with outstretched arms, her cheeks and eyes aglow with the exhilaration of the hundred-mile drive in her racing car. She threw aside her thick coat and embraced her brother.

“Ronnie, my angel!” she exclaimed. “How wonderful! No one knew where you were. I just took a chance of finding you.”

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“Anything wrong?” he asked quickly.

“Not a thing, you old dear. Mother is not as well as she ought to be—nothing else. Life at the Great House has gone as flat as ditch water.”

The pilot rose from his place and stood at attention. Ann looked at him in surprise.

“Do forgive me,” she apologised. “It’s that high-backed couch, and I really thought my brother was alone.”

“This is my sister,” Matresser explained. “You had better shake hands with him, Ann. I daresay you caught a glimpse of one another down at home but we have had the most amazing flight I have ever experienced since then, and here we are safely back again.”

Ann shook hands with the tall, blue-eyed young man whose bow was a model of military deportment. His eyes were full of admiration.

“It has been a great pleasure to me to be trusted with your brother, *gnädiges Fräulein*,” he said.

“I am very glad you brought him home safely,” she answered smiling.

“Did you come up alone, Ann?”

She nodded.

“I shall go back to-morrow.”

Matresser turned to the pilot.

“You will excuse a moment of family conversation?” he begged.

“I go to my room with pleasure,” the pilot said, with more regret than pleasure in his tone.

“You will stay just where you are,” Matresser insisted. “Tell

me, Ann, is mother really quite well?"

Ann shook her head.

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"I would not say that, Ronnie," she confessed, taking his arm. "First of all, she misses Elisabeth tremendously. Her music was such a joy and she was the sweetest person to have about, and then—well, something else seems to be worrying her. I don't know what it is. I came up to see if I could get Dr. Lacon to return with me for the week-end. It will do her more good than anything to know that you are back."

"We shall fly down to-morrow some time," Matresser promised her.

She threw off her hat and suddenly saw Magda at her brother's feet.

"Ronnie!" she exclaimed. "What a little beauty! Where did you get her?"

"In a hunting lodge somewhere on the southeastern frontier of Germany," he replied. "I promised to send the head keeper one of my Labradors in exchange."

"Did you smuggle her?" Ann asked eagerly.

Matresser nodded.

"In a sense I did but only for an hour or so. I have a safe conduct now from the Ministry of Agriculture. Magda is naturalised."

Magda looked at the girl with fond approval in her brown eyes,

turned and licked her master's hand and settled down once more.

"I think yours is a very wonderful plane," Ann told him, turning to the pilot.

"You like to ride in it—yes?" the young man asked eagerly. "I take your brother to Norfolk to-morrow. If you are there and your brother permits it would give me great pleasure to ride with you amongst the clouds."

She laughed.

"Nothing I should like better. I am certainly going back to-day or to-morrow."

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"Have you ever flown before?" he asked.

"Only in a Moth," she answered. "We didn't mount very high. It was not real flying at all."

"You shall rise if you will, four—five thousand feet," he promised. "And speed—you like speed?"

"I adore it. I drive nothing but a racing car."

"A hundred and fifty miles an hour, if you choose. We travel round your island."

"Here, steady," Matresser put in. "I have only one unmarried sister and I can't have you doing stunts."

"Have I not guarded you well and yet used speed?" the young

man demanded.

“Indeed you have,” Matresser acknowledged. “We’ll see about it when we get down to Norfolk.”

“I cannot make up my mind,” Ann said, throwing herself in an easy chair and holding out her hands towards the blaze from the burning logs, “whether to return to-night or not. I have done what I came for. Dr. Lacon is going down by the three o’clock train to-morrow. I have rung up the Eardley Craigs but Nina and Jack are both out of town. What about you, Ronnie? Would you like to frisk your little sister around this evening?”

“Nothing I would like better,” he assured her gloomily. “I have a very different program to face—a heavy dinner and a heavier reception afterwards.”

She looked at him curiously.

“It seems odd to think of your being mixed up in these affairs, Ronnie,” she observed. “I sometimes wonder whether you have quite that sweet, candid disposition we always gave you credit for. You are not a Lawrence in disguise, or anything of that sort, are you?”

“Never mind what I am, young lady. I cannot take you out this evening. If I were free at all I should have to look after my friend, the pilot.”

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Ann smiled across at the young man, a very dazzling and intriguing sort of smile.

“Poor fellow,” she murmured. “Is he, too, a waif in London?”

“Unfortunately yes, *gnädiges Fräulein*,” he sighed. “I suggest myself as a fitting object for the charity of anyone in the same position. Do not be afraid of me as I am. I have clothes here. I am a member of some of your clubs. If my most honoured and noble passenger would permit, nothing would make me happier than to offer myself for the theatre—yes? a dinner and the dance. I dance, perhaps, in the German fashion but I am adaptable.”

“This seems a very nice pilot of yours, Ronnie,” Ann observed thoughtfully.

“Able to turn his hand to anything.”

“Why do you not introduce him? I could scarcely spend the evening with a person whose name I did not know.”

The two men exchanged glances. The pilot inclined his blond head gravely.

“It has been more convenient up till now,” he confided, “to forget that such a thing as ceremony exists. Now that we are breathing a different atmosphere it would give me great pleasure to be formally made known to you.”

“This then,” Matresser announced, “is my young friend—Major I believe in his military rank—Prince Maurice von Reisensach. My sister, Lady Ann Matresser.”

The pilot saluted, then he advanced a little and bowed.

“With your brother’s permission, Lady Ann,” he said, “it would give me the greatest pleasure to offer myself as your escort for this evening.”

“I shall be delighted,” she assented. “Will you teach me how to waltz like those German girls?”

“I should prefer to take lessons from you in the English methods.”

Matresser smiled his acquiescence and strolled towards the door with the little brown dog at his heels.

“While you two make your plans,” he confided, “I am going to take Magda round the square.”

CHAPTER XXXI

Ronald St. Jermyn, Earl of Matresser, made his unwilling bow that night to a phase of life entirely strange to him and which he had up till now sedulously avoided. His first shock came at the dinner party at Tring House before the official reception. In obedience to the card which had been thrust into his hand at the last moment, Matresser was wearing his war medals, but though they made a brave show, their simplicity seemed almost ironic when contrasted with the number of orders and decorations of every country worn by the foreigners and even by two of the English Cabinet ministers. His hostess, who had been thoroughly warned as to Matresser's peculiarities and who had placed him upon her left hand, attempted only general conversation, but his neighbour on the other side, the Marchioness of Tewkesbury, a society beauty with the reputation of being a brilliant conversationalist, a little piqued by this dark, handsome man with the somewhat saturnine expression, whose speech seemed to be conceived rather with the idea of stifling than inciting conversation, indulged in no such reticence.

“They tell me, Lord Matresser,” she began, “that although you so seldom speak in the House of Lords and you seem somehow to keep out of print in the most miraculous manner, you are really a very great traveller with many adventures concerning which you never open your mouth.”

“Where did you hear such strange things about me?” he asked, without the glimmer of a smile.

“From my husband amongst others,” she replied. “There seems to be an idea amongst some people that you have been playing the part of a civilised Lawrence, only your happy hunting grounds have been more the capitals of Europe than the wild countries, although,” she went on a moment later, “you seem to have explored those pretty thoroughly.”

“Lawrence,” Matresser said thoughtfully, “was one of the genuine explorers of the world. He had that extraordinary facility with languages which seems to come only to men who have lived on the borders of civilisation. The best linguist I ever came across,” he reflected after a momentary pause, “was a Polish baker who had a small establishment in Warsaw. Not much romance to be squeezed out of him—or me either for that matter.”

“Of course, I don’t mean that sort of thing at all,” the lady declared a little pettishly. “I can see that you are going to be unkind to me. Perhaps you are publishing a book soon and don’t want to give yourself away.”

He shivered.

“I can assure you that I am proposing to do nothing of the sort,” he said. “I shall never publish a book as long as I live.”

“Why not?”

“Well, for one thing I can’t spell. For another, the few occasions when my travels have led me into strange places they have involved me in adventures which are not suitable for publication.”

“But admirably suited for conversation,” the Marchioness suggested. “For instance, I heard a rumour—only a rumour, mind—that you were one of the handful of men out of all Europe who were consulted about this new peace scheme, if ever it comes to anything.”

“Rumours are so unreliable,” Matresser sighed. “I thought Geneva had decided that controlled warfare with voluntary sanctions was the only logical method of settling quarrels.”

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She looked at him doubtfully.

“You are being sarcastic,” she told him. “I can see that I am going to be disappointed. I thought I was going to like you so much.”

“And I am so anxious to be liked,” he sighed.

“I am not at all sure about you,” she confessed. “You seem to me to be trying to wear the mantle of a most unsuitable humility.”

“I cannot agree that it is unsuitable,” he protested, trying hard to achieve a larger amount of geniality.

“If you count for nothing in the world,” she went on, “tell me then why you are here? To-night’s reception is to a certain extent historic. To be at the private dinner which goes before it is the greatest honour which Sir Francis could offer anyone. I happen to know of several Cabinet ministers who are bitterly disappointed at not being asked.”

With a half-apologetic bow he turned to his hostess whose

attention was for the moment disengaged. His remark upon some general subject of conversation provoked a ready response. It was not until the end of dinner that the Marchioness found opportunity to reproach him.

“You know,” she complained, “I was looking forward so much to talking with you and I think you are a most disappointing man.”

“I am so sorry,” he apologised, “but I can assure you that I am quite out of my element. This is the second dinner party of its sort I have ever attended in my life.”

“I find you all the more intriguing for your reticence,” she confided amiably. “Perhaps some day, when things have calmed down in the world, you will feel more conversational. By the by, you know very well, I believe, a dear friend of my daughter’s—one of the most attractive young women I have ever met—the Baroness von Stamier?”

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Even Matresser failed to conceal his quick interest.

“The Baroness is a young lady of great charm,” he admitted. “She stayed with us for some time at Norfolk and my mother and sister were very grieved when she left us.”

“She is in London now. I saw her only this morning. Really,” the Marchioness continued with a smile, “I feel that I owe her a new debt of gratitude. For the first time I believe I have succeeded in awakening your interest!”

“Not at all,” he objected. “You talk of myself and I may be excused as a reasonably modest man for finding the subject soon

exhausted, but with the Baroness it is different.”

“I always hoped,” his neighbour went on, “that she would settle down in England but I fear if things really turn out as seems likely now she will never do that. I heard only this morning that she was likely to marry her cousin the Archduke Johann von Arnsburg. He is the only one of the family who seems to have preserved his lands and money.”

“It would seem to be a fitting match,” Matresser observed. “The Baroness—she dropped the title whilst she was with us—is intensely patriotic.”

“So much so,” his companion laughed, “that I believe it is perfectly true that she was once arrested and very nearly sent to a fortress as a spy.”

“By the Russians?” he asked.

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“No—by the Germans. She was desperately against one of those mad schemes for the annexation of Austria by Germany. You must get her to tell you about it one day. She always declared that politics were now too sad to discuss, but to-day things are all so different. She herself seems to have taken a new spell of life. I always thought her one of the most beautiful women in Europe. To-day she seems to have added happiness to all her other charms. Perhaps,” she concluded, leaning a little towards him and dropping her voice, “she may have heard whispers from that amazing hunting party up in the Metzger Mountains.”

Their hostess was on her feet.

“So sorry, my dear Louise,” she said, addressing Matresser’s

neighbour, “but His Majesty arrives early.”

Sir Francis beckoned to Matresser who, glass in hand, obeyed the summons. He found himself next to the Premier with whom he had already exchanged a few sentences upon his arrival. The latter was in somewhat pensive mood.

“I hope to have an opportunity, Lord Matresser, for a conversation with you before long,” he observed.

“I shall be always at your service, sir,” was the quiet reply.

“Even here one cannot, of course, discuss a certain subject freely but I should like you to understand that your part in the proceedings at a certain rendezvous in Germany has been already reported to me and meets with my very warm approval. I must confess,” he went on, “I had fears that the whole scheme might collapse on the one point with which you seem to have dealt so skilfully. Von Behrling himself helped to pull down the pillars of the temple. From a very firm refusal, our friends now, in conversation with Curtels before his departure, have absolutely accepted our conditions. I think you should know that I received in audience to-day the two great rulers of the press and came to an arrangement with them. By this time next week, to use a well-worn colloquialism, the fat will be in the fire. As you have done so much, however secretly, of the underground work, I felt that it was right you should know.”

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“My share in the work has been trifling, sir,” Matresser insisted. “I must confess, though, I have always wondered whether you will not find your greatest opponents and your bitterest enemies

in the press.”

“We realise that absolutely,” the Premier assented. “To start with the lowest consideration, and no men who have made millions through selling newspapers can be human enough to disregard it, war means fortune to the press. Without it their circulation is fitful and their energies are apt to stagnate. However, press or no press, we have to take risks, Lord Matresser. I think I can truthfully say that we are taking this time one of the biggest risks that any government within the records of history has ever taken.”

“I was at the lodge,” Matresser said quietly, “not as a statesman, not even as a politician. I heard the man who presided over that gathering speak. So far as human judgment can go I should be content to pin my faith to him. I have watched this thing grow, these feelings amongst the German people, for years. I am not overconfident but I felt I could spell out the time when the present régime must collapse with a mighty crash, or end in war. A better thing has happened. A man whom we have 284 looked upon as a fanatic for years has turned out to be a human being. I believe in the German future, sir. I believe that Hellstern has made a genuine and a fine sacrifice, although he has made it knowing that the alternative was black ruin.”

“Those are just the words I hoped to hear from you, Lord Matresser,” the Premier remarked, abandoning his cigar and rising to his feet. “I can see our host wants us to prepare for this evening’s function. We shall meet again later on, I hope. This is a conversation I should like to carry further.”

“Sorry to hurry you off, my friends,” Sir Francis observed. “It is

three minutes to ten and at ten o'clock the riot commences. You are all habitués here, I am glad to say. Matresser, stick to me, please. I have special instructions concerning you."

Matresser breathed a sigh of resignation.

"I am at your disposition, Sir Francis," he acquiesced.

CHAPTER XXXII

Very much to his own surprise, Matresser himself caught some of that infectious spirit of exhilaration which seemed to be animating the great crowds who mounted the magnificent staircase of Tring House, made their bow to Sir Francis and Lady Tring and passed on into the suites of rapidly filling rooms. He paid his respects for the second time that evening to his hostess only to find himself detained by a whisper from Sir Francis.

“Do you mind standing by for a minute or two?” the latter begged. “Anywhere behind us. You must know some of these people. There’s your pal, Besserley. Talk to him for a time. It won’t be for more than a few minutes.”

“No hardship to talk to Besserley,” Matresser remarked as the two men, who had parted a few hours before at Heston, shook hands. “In fact, it’s rather a relief to see a familiar face.”

“What a sight!” Besserley exclaimed, inclining his head towards the staircase. “Seems sad, doesn’t it, to think that for the moment this is the only country in the world where such a display is possible. Nothing like a tiara for showing off a woman. Look at them! It’s a perfect blaze of glory. The men run them pretty close, too.”

Matresser nodded a little absently, for all his attention was concentrated upon watching for one particular face.

“Seems to me, sometimes, from what I have heard lately,” Besserley went on, “that you and I, Matresser, have somewhat similar jobs in life. The only difference is that I play my pranks in *coram populo*, worse even than that—almost in the shop window. You work along very different lines.”

“Yes, I suppose I do,” Matresser assented.

“We both work for our countries,” Besserley continued. “I only dabble occasionally in the world’s affairs, however, and you seem to have given the best part of your life lately to the sort of work no one ever hears about. ‘The man underneath’ our people at Washington call you. Funny that we never seem to have come across one another much before the other day.”

Matresser smiled.

“I would not say that exactly,” he meditated. “There was a day in a café at Alexandria and a night in a *brasserie* at Frankfurt when I was not very far from you. I saw you once too at the Hotel des Anglais in Athens and I always wondered what you were doing in that little steamer on the Black Sea.”

Besserley whistled softly to himself under his breath.

“So it is true what they sometimes whisper about you,” he observed.

“Well, after all,” Matresser said, “how much of anything that is interesting can one discover as a rather blatantly English tourist? It is necessary to get under the skin sometimes. I have pretty well finished with it all now, though. Very likely, unless

this last gesture of the present government fails to come off, they will have finished with me.”

Besserley looked at the speaker curiously.

“One never knows,” he reflected. “When you have once played amongst the thunderbolts it is a little difficult to turn to skittles.”

All the time Matresser’s eyes were wandering to and fro amidst the crowd beyond and taking careful note of everyone ascending the stairs. It was all a part of that quivering vein of madness which those few words from his neighbour at dinner had once more ignited. . . .

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There was a sudden stir, almost a thrill, amongst the slowly mounting crowd and even amongst the immediate entourage of host and hostess. Those who were on their way up paused and, drawing on one side, left a clear way up the carpeted stairs between the banisters and the wall. A youthful but very distinguished looking personage passed through their midst with alert, graceful movements, a faint smile upon his lips but looking neither to the right nor to the left, only towards the man and woman who stood prepared to receive him. Even after his hostess’ perfectly executed curtsy and the ceremonial shake of the hand with Sir Francis their Royal guest lingered. The crowd behind, momentarily arrested, waited his pleasure.

“I have never seen your beautiful house to greater advantage, Lady Tring,” he said. “Your hydrangeas and lilies are marvellous. I think that some other brain beside a florist’s was at work there!”

“Your Majesty is very kind,” she replied. “An occasion like this

demands one's very best efforts.”

“I am happy to be here,” her visitor confided, “and to see so many familiar faces around me. I wonder, Sir Francis,” he added with a slight twinkle in his eyes, “whether you have been so kind as to remember my request.”

Tring turned and beckoned to Matresser, who at once stepped forward. The Royal visitor extended his hand.

“Lord Matresser needs no presentation,” he said smiling. “We have not often met, it is true, but I still remember his wonderful shooting at Sandringham.”

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“If Your Majesty will step in this direction,” Tring suggested. “I have made the arrangements you desired.”

It was all very easily and informally accomplished. Lady Tring received alone for a few minutes, whispering a word of apology to the thinning stream of guests. Her husband, with Matresser on the other side of the Royal personage, led the way to a small anteroom immediately inside the first reception room. It was carefully guarded by a major domo of the household and two aides-de-camp from the Palace.

“The few minutes' conversation which it was your pleasure to have with Lord Matresser, Your Majesty,” he said, “can safely be held here.”

“Capital,” was the cheerful reply. “If you will follow me, Matresser, I should be glad.”

Sir Francis returned to his duties. The two aides-de-camp who

had followed close in their master's wake joined the others by the side of the door. The Royal personage turned with a smile to Matresser.

“Seems rather complicated, doesn't it,” he said, “but I have learnt one lesson already and that is that there is no privacy about Buckingham Palace or the reception of visitors there. The press is omnipotent and it was my fancy to have a word with you without having it announced in the papers on the following morning in formal language that you had been ‘granted an audience.’”

“I am very deeply honoured, Sire,” Matresser acknowledged.

“You have done a great deal of very useful work for your country, Lord Matresser, without reward or recognition—the latter, I understand, at your expressed wish. You have crowned your achievements in a fashion to which I shall not, however, allude as our time is short, but I may say that I consider your handling of an exceedingly difficult position to have been most masterly.”

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Matresser bowed but remained silent. His companion, after a few moments, continued.

“I have been given to understand that you wish now to abandon your successful series of foreign missions and to settle down upon your estates. Is that true?”

“It was in my mind, Sire,” Matresser confessed.

“I shall beg you to reconsider that determination,” his august vis-à-vis said earnestly. “Yours are not the type of brains to be

wasted on lesser work so long as the urge towards patriotism remains in your heart, and from what I have heard I am convinced that this interest in your country's welfare will never die.”

“I have had no diplomatic training, Your Majesty, for the more settled posts in the international world,” Matresser reminded his companion, “and I am afraid that the anonymity, which was the chief reason for my success in some of those former enterprises, is now gone.”

“That is exactly what I expected you to say,” was the smiling response. “I agree with you but I honestly believe that provided our great scheme develops into the success we anticipate, those secret missions of yours, during which you seem to have succeeded in probing the inner life and ambitions of the people amongst whom you lived, will no longer be so necessary to my government. It is the Empire which calls for the support of such men as you, Matresser. Australia, Canada and India will all three demand firm government within the next few years. I am a little young at my job, perhaps,” he continued with a faintly deprecating gesture, “but I have marked you down for India, Matresser. That is where I think you might continue to serve your country without dropping into the backwaters. . . . I shall not detain you longer. I must place myself in the hands of my hostess. I only wished to meet you for a few moments in private to express to you my thanks for what you have done and my earnest hope that you will continue to serve us. Shall we find Lady Tring?”

They walked side by side to the door which the aides-de-camp had been guarding. The august personage held out his hand.

“If we do not meet again this evening,” he said, “I hope you will think over what I have said.”

Matresser bowed and made suitable reply, and it was as he once more drew himself erect that the moment for which he had been secretly hoping arrived. He looked straight into the eyes of Elisabeth who, with her fingers upon her uncle’s arm, had come to a standstill only a yard or so away.

Matresser’s dismissal had been accomplished. He was free to follow his own impulses. He took a single step forward and bowed.

“I was hoping to find you here, Baroness,” he said, with a sigh of relief. “Will you be so kind as to introduce me to your uncle? I do not remember that we have ever met formally.”

It seemed to him during those few moments that he had never seen Elisabeth looking so beautiful, never seen so many expressions come and go in her sensitive face. She was wearing white and although there was not even a touch of colour in her cheeks she presented, with the string of pearls around her neck and the small tiara also of pearls, a curiously effective *tout ensemble*. In the depths of her soft eyes there were lights which he had never seen there before—surprise and something which was very much like a gleam of newly found happiness. Von Stamer held out his hand.

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“My niece’s introduction is scarcely necessary. It is perhaps fortunate as she seems to have lost her tongue,” he observed smiling. “I am very happy to meet you, Lord Matresser. That is not what I think you call a figure of speech. It is the truth. If I say

no more I am convinced that you understand.”

Matresser shook hands as Elisabeth, with a musical little laugh, recovered herself.

“Lord Matresser is such an uneasy comet,” she said, “that one never knows where one will find him. The last place would certainly be a fine reception like this walking side by side with Royalty.”

“An accident,” Matresser declared.

The Baron made an eager sign to a tall, very much beribboned diplomat who was looking wistfully in their direction.

“Could I presume so far as to leave my niece for a few minutes in your charge, Lord Matresser?” he begged. “You will excuse, Elisabeth? Our friend there has something, I know, to say to me.”

They neither of them felt inclined for platitudes. Their silence, however, was quite enough for Von Stamier, who hurried away to join his colleague.

“Will you dance?” Matresser asked, offering his arm. “Will you come to one of these wonderful buffets or will you sit down?”

“Not where you came from,” she laughed. “That is the private retiring room for Royalty. On the other side of those palms, if you like. No one seems to have discovered that retreat yet.”

They walked over in the direction she had pointed out and

seated themselves upon a small settee.

“So you are willing to converse in public,” she asked, “with a reputed murderess and a spy?”

“I have met both in my life,” he assured her. “Very charming people they were. Murder, after all, is purely a matter of accident and espionage is becoming recognised as a very honourable profession.”

She looked at his medals and he laughed.

“No, there are no special decorations yet,” he admitted, “but then I am only a clumsy amateur.”

“And I am not really a spy at all,” she said boldly.

“I have never accused you.”

“Nevertheless,” she reproached him, “you refused to take me away with you from that little nest of intrigue at Matresser.”

“I knew quite well,” he replied, “that you were not in the slightest danger. I myself was under government orders. It was impossible for me to take you away or to let you know where I was going.”

She was thoughtful for a moment. Then she clutched his arm.

“What does it all matter?” she exclaimed. “Tell me—let me be quite sure—you and General Besserley, you succeeded in Paris?”

“We succeeded,” he admitted. “It was Besserley who did the work—a shrewd diplomat that, believe me. I had the facts when they were needed. De la Motte was allowed to resign. Brisson and Mathieu left for the shooting lodge the day before yesterday.”

“It seems too wonderful,” she said, half to herself. “No wonder they all do you honour here—Ronald.”

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“Nothing to make a fuss about,” he answered quietly. “Besserley did the work really. We just happened to succeed. . . . Supposing we forget the world for a few minutes. Couldn’t you, Elisabeth? I am not very good at saying such things, but I think I could forget every corner of it just now and remember only this. I wonder how long we shall be left here undisturbed.”

She raised her head, carried so proudly upon her slender neck, and listened. There was a deep hubbub of voices beyond the screen of palms. Every tongue was being spoken in that huge gathering, but the voices themselves were so well modulated that they produced a strain which was almost melodious. The most famous band in the world was playing in the far distance and nearer still the fashionable dance orchestra which had created a time and a sense of melody of their own was almost drowned by the gliding feet and the lower murmuring voices.

“I think,” he said, “that we are suitably forgotten.”

“Yet listen for a moment,” she begged. “It seems so strange to realise what is happening all around us, how the reverberations of to-night, this night of crisis, and the conversations of the last few days all streaming across Europe from that gathering where

you sat with the others—all that is going to the building of one great step upwards in history—to the re-establishment of all that we hold dear. Am I a little hysterical, Ronald? You must forgive me.”

“I shall forgive you everything that there may be to forgive because to-night I shall ask you once more—”

She put her hand in his.

“Do you need to ask, dear?” she interrupted, with a little break in her voice and a passionate gleam in her eyes. “I was very nearly casting all my principles to the wind that day and taking you because you were yourself and throwing overboard all my fonder wishes and ambitions. Now where I looked in sorrow I gaze upward with pride.”

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The two intruders who wandered in were of no account, but they were only the early arrivals of a little stream on their way from the supper-room.

“I am Austrian,” she confided, “and emotion makes me hungry. Have you to go back amongst the high places or can we find a corner together?”

“Find a corner together by all means,” he replied hastily. “To tell you the truth,” he added as they strolled out, “dinner didn’t go very well with me. I was being cross-examined all the time by a very earnest lady who had serious political views. We will continue to exchange confidences, but confidences about ourselves, just our two selves and all that is going to happen to us.”

There was a little catch in her breath, a flash of demureness in her eyes.

“I think,” she said softly, “that it might be quite an intriguing conversation.”

CHAPTER XXXIII

It was on a wonderful morning full of the promise of early spring about a week later that Matresser, with Elisabeth by his side and the little brown dog curled up between them, raced along the broad Newmarket road from London in his long grey car on his way to Matresser. As nearly as a man could, it seemed to him that he had found perfect happiness. He had paid his visits of ceremony and Elisabeth's uncle and aunt were to follow them to Norfolk in a few days' time. They had made an early start and it was only a little after half-past eleven when they drew up before the great iron gates of the House.

"You feel that you are coming home, dear?" he asked Elisabeth.

"I feel that and I feel, too, happiness that I have never known before," she whispered, holding his hand.

The lodgekeeper and his wife came hurrying out. There was a chorus of respectful greetings as they passed on into the park. Then came the first shock. There in a distant corner, amply protected by every description of improvised shelter, still stood the aluminium-sheathed Fokker in which he had made his famous cruise across Europe. He slackened up for a moment and stared at it.

"How long has the plane been there?" he asked the gamekeeper who had just emerged from one of the spinneys.

"About a week, your lordship," the man replied. "The same

pilot who took you off for foreign parts brought her ladyship back from London a week ago. The young gentleman has engaged a mechanic from Mann & Egerton at Norwich and we understand that he is waiting for your lordship's return."

Matresser nodded and drove on to the Great House. Henry Yates, his hair more dishevelled than ever and his face one broad grin, was standing on the steps to greet him and hastened to pay his respectful but astonished greetings to Elisabeth also. Magda at once decided that he was a person to be trusted and jumped up to lick his hand.

"All well, Henry?" Matresser enquired.

"Her ladyship has been very anxious to see you, sir," Yates replied. "She is in her boudoir now."

"I will come at once," Matresser said. "Elisabeth dear, will you come with me or will you wait until after I have broken the news to my mother?"

"May I wait?" she asked. "I think your mother would probably like to see you alone for a minute."

"Look after the Baroness, Henry," Matresser enjoined, "and you, Burrows," he added, turning to the butler, "order cocktails and things. We have had rather a cool drive down."

Matresser passed on to the small reception room where his mother was waiting. She was seated in her usual high-backed tapestry-covered chair, her eyes as wonderful as ever, always watching. Nevertheless, he received a shock as he drew up a

stool to her side.

“At last, my dear Ronald,” she sighed. “I cannot tell you how welcome you are. Why did you not warn me that I might wake some morning and find myself famous?”

“How did I know?” he asked. “What have you done?”

“It is not I, dear,” she answered. “It’s you.”

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“You have been reading those newspapers,” he reproached her.

“After all, I am your mother,” she reminded him.

He waved the subject away. He had scarcely removed his eyes from her wasted features.

“I want to talk about yourself,” he said. “This Norfolk winter has been too much for you.”

She smiled.

“You find me changed?” she enquired anxiously.

“You are a little thinner,” he told her, “but your eyes are as beautiful as ever and your voice is quite steady.”

“How I have wanted to see you and to confess, dear Ronald,” she sighed.

“Confess? Confess what?” he asked smiling.

She laid her fingers upon his hand and drew him a little closer.

“Now that we are here alone,” she confided, “you shall know the truth. Lately I have felt so tired at times that I have taken one or another of those fashionable medicines of the moment everyone is talking about. If I lived in France or if I were not the Countess of Matresser, they would be called drugs. Always before your arrival home I used to send to that man Lacon, whom I wish I had never met, because I hated that you should find me looking old. This time I have learnt my lesson. I have taken nothing. You see me as I am—a very tired old lady.”

Matresser recovered quickly from his first shock.

“Lacon, after all, has a large clientele,” he acknowledged. “I am sure that the drugs he would recommend might only be dangerous if you took too strong a dose or left them off too suddenly.”

“Do you know why I have left them off?” she asked.

“I hope because you felt well enough to do without them.”

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“Not at all. It is because of that terrible Scotland Yard man who upset us all so much here. I felt so ill on that fatal Monday when the storm came that I asked Elisabeth to go into Norwich and get me a syringe. The only one I had was broken. When a broken one was found near that poor fellow, Fergus, the detective began to make enquiries and he actually discovered that Elisabeth had bought one of exactly the same make at the chemist’s in Norwich. I had made her promise not to tell anyone, so she refused to answer any questions and in the end she went away. Why are you looking so strange, Ronald?”

He recovered himself with an effort. The old smile parted his lips as he leaned over.

“What an absurd coincidence,” he murmured. “Shows how much circumstantial evidence is worth, doesn’t it? I hope the fellow was not offensive. He should not have been allowed really to open his mouth.”

“So he told me,” Lady Matresser acknowledged. “I could not bear the thought of her getting into trouble so I sent for him, showed him my stock of drugs—which, of course, were quite different things—and the syringe which Elisabeth had purchased still intact. Listen!”

Her wasted but beautifully shaped forefinger had crept into the air. She was leaning forward. Matresser, too, after that first start, was listening in breathless silence. Only a few yards away, although almost completely out of sight, was the black and white grand piano, from which marvellous music was flowing.

“It is Schumann’s ‘*Papillons*,’” he whispered reverently. “You know who plays?”

She looked at him in astonishment.

“There is only one person,” she said, “who has ever made music like that in this house.”

The melody waned. Matresser almost fancied that he could see those exquisite fingers moving down the keyboard more and more slowly. The last note came so faintly that they leaned forward to catch it. There was the sound of the soft closing of

the piano, the rustle of movement. Then suddenly it was Elisabeth, glowing and triumphant, who reappeared. She came up the few yards of space towards them, her right hand extended towards Lady Matresser but her left hand outstretched towards him in a frank gesture of surrender. He drew her into his arms. Elisabeth, wholly in his embrace, laughed happily.

“Elisabeth has come back here to stay,” he told his mother.

Lady Matresser’s arms went round the girl’s neck.

“She is very, very welcome,” she said.

Ann and Pilot Number Seventeen arrived in the lounge for cocktails before lunch, both a little out of breath. They had been playing squash until the news of Matresser’s arrival had reached them. The young man was a little stiff and shy but he came straight up to the master of the house.

“I have to tender my resignation, sir,” he announced. “With your gracious permission I have accepted the post of pilot for life to Lady Ann. Subject to your approval, my uncle has already telegraphed his consent.”

“A trifle sudden, isn’t it?” Matresser, genuinely startled, demanded.

“Are you not also a trifle sudden, my dear brother, in the way you turn the world upside down?” Ann rejoined.

“It will be the first of many such alliances, I hope,” the young man said. “Our family have always been of the

opinion that it is we who are the kin of your people and not the French. My uncle, who has, sir, the most profound esteem for you, is exceedingly happy. He wishes the engagement announced at once, again with your gracious consent. My wife must naturally take a very high place at Court, sir," the pilot continued with some reluctance, "but it is not of such things that we think nowadays. It is towards the reorganisation of German social life that we shall devote our energies. In that task I know that I shall receive invaluable help from your sister."

Matresser laid his hand kindly upon the young man's shoulder.

"If you bring Ann through life," he said, "as smoothly and courageously as you brought me across Europe, she will, I am sure, be very happy. I give my consent gladly. . . ."

A great many callers streamed up to the Great House during the next half hour. Amongst others the little doctor bicycled up from the village, and Colonel Rowans, from the Dower House, walked across the park. They all demanded the latest news of the great events which were stirring the world and of which London seemed to have become the centre.

"I'll tell you all I know," Matresser assented. "There is a certain amount of censorship going on, of course, but the necessity for that is passing every hour. All the public officers are working night and day. Hellstern's abdication was received without a single voice of protest and the invitation to Count von Helm, as he is universally called, to take over the government, but with the title of Kaiser of Germany instead of President, was entirely unanimous. The monarchy is to be a strictly limited one in accordance with the statutes which have

been officially accepted and which are now being prepared. There are great rejoicings throughout the country and an immense amount of pent-up goodwill towards everyone seems to have been voiced everywhere.”

“What about Italy?” Colonel Rowans asked.

“In Italy things seem to have gone almost as smoothly, although, at the last moment, Matorni is reported to have hesitated. Prince Victor Emmanuel, however, at the head of the guards, personally entered the Chamber, announced his father’s abdication and was pronounced King by an overwhelming majority. The absolute powers which had been assumed by Matorni are cut out from the constitution and King Victor Emmanuel will reign subject to the will of the people.”

“And Austria?” the doctor asked breathlessly.

“In Austria they do not seem to have bothered about how they are governed so long as it is by an Arnsburg. The Archduke Johann is to be crowned within the next few weeks in the presence of both Houses.”

“And all this time not a word about France,” Ann remarked.

“Yes, tell us just what is the attitude of the present government,” Bemrose, who had just arrived, enquired.

“Beatific,” Matresser replied. “They are in the seventh heaven of delight. The phrase ‘perfidious Albion’ has been expunged from their vocabulary.”

“But her constitution?” Bemrose asked.

“Unchanged,” Matresser told them. “The Royalist party were taken completely by surprise and had no time even to hold a meeting. For the first time all parties in the country seem to agree upon the point that this scheme offers them perfect security. The ‘observers’ attached to the embassies of the various countries will, of course, be men of the highest repute. Besserley, in whom the French have already great confidence, will, with the consent of Washington, be appointed to Paris and some of the others have, I believe, already been nominated.”

“What will be their position exactly?” someone else of the little gathering wanted to know.

“There will be seven of them,” Matresser explained, “and they will form a complete Court of Arbitration. Their decisions will be accepted upon all matters upon which differences of opinion might occur.”

“The world of my days has certainly never known so great an upheaval,” Bemrose declared. “I am, like everybody else, dumbfounded. Germany, Italy and Austria have all three changed completely their form of government without a shot being fired or a life lost. France remains calm and, more extraordinary still, seems satisfied.”

Matresser took a cocktail from the tray that was being handed round and lit a cigarette.

“I myself,” he announced, “am in no sense of the word a politician but it seems to me that you might look at it this way. Germany has been granted her great desire. Her colonies have been restored to her. It is Great Britain who has to pay the price,

but when you sit down to consider this matter seriously I believe that everyone in the Empire will agree that no price could be too great to pay which guarantees peace. Besides, after all, we must remember that no other country in the world has so much to gain commercially, so perhaps it is only fair that she should make the sacrifice, staggering though it seems at first. France has an international guarantee of her frontiers which is what she has been craving all the time. She tried to obtain this by means of a treaty which was unfair and preposterous. She obtains it now in saner fashion. Austria has been hungering for her Arnsburg. She has him and within a month negotiations will have commenced with regard to her eastern frontiers. Italy, which was rapidly becoming a fossilised country ruled over by a tyrant, gets back her liberty of speech, liberty of the press, liberty of political action and the impulse of movement. Come to think it over," Matresser concluded with a little grimace, "the only country where a certain amount of trouble may be expected is our own. Still, someone has to pay."

"There is a blazing press against the government, as I daresay you may have noticed," Bemrose remarked. "One would think that we were on the verge of revolution."

"That will all die out quickly," Matresser declared. "The Cabinet will probably have to resign and I am told that there will be a general election at once. The affair, however, will have been accomplished. The deed itself is signed and notwithstanding all the press can say the action of the government is ratified. In my opinion the election cry of 'Fifty Years of Peace' with which the National Party will appeal to the country, will make their position invulnerable."

“The services won’t think so,” Colonel Rowans grunted.

Matresser smiled.

“There is more narrow thinking amongst the services than in any other patriotic body of Englishmen in the world,” he declared heretically. “Every day which passes, however, will help to place this whole problem in a sounder perspective. An internal crisis in the affairs of Germany put a weapon into the hands of our ministers which, if properly used at the psychological moment, gave promise of ensuring the peace of Europe for generations to come. They had the courage and the will to face a gigantic risk and use it. It was a great gamble but I think the people will decide, as our government did, that it was worth while.”

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He glanced across at the sideboard and Burrows started off at once on his second pilgrimage with a tray of cocktail glasses and a bottle of the wonderful Matresser sherry.

“I should not be surprised,” the master of the house continued with a twinkle in his eyes, “if this drawing more closely together of the bonds which unite our various countries should not result in a great many international alliances.”

“Ah, now our host speaks of interesting things!” the pilot declared, his hand reaching out for Ann’s. “Such things are good for all the countries—amongst the people themselves as well as their rulers.”

“Admirably put,” Matresser agreed. “I shall now ask you all, my friends, to drink two toasts.”

They stood around with expectant faces. One felt that the pilot's fingers were itching to grasp a goblet instead of the frail stem of his cocktail glass.

“I shall ask you first to drink the health of my sister Lady Ann Matresser and his Serene Highness Prince Maurice von Reisonsach, and as soon as Burrows has refilled your glasses I shall be honoured if you will drink also to myself and my fortunate alliance with Baroness Elisabeth von Stamier.”

There was unbounded enthusiasm, a hubbub of loud and cheerful talking in the little circle around the Countess of Matresser's chair when her son, with his arm resting lightly upon Elisabeth's shoulder, stood on one side and Ann and her fiancé, hand in hand, upon the other. It was whilst this pleasant little commotion, however, had arrived at its most uproarious state, that it seemed suddenly to become utterly and completely drowned in a thunderous salvo of sound from outside. There was a crash of falling glass in every direction and the very tables in the room began to rock. Books, ornaments and wine glasses glided from their slippery surfaces. Decanters and cocktail shakers were rolling upon the rugs in heterogeneous confusion. One of the high windows, fortunately at the farther end of the room, came crashing in and a huge chiffonier reared itself slowly on its side sending vases and entrée dishes clattering to every corner against the wine-splashed panels. Then, from further off, came a snarling, hissing sound which heralded the last furious explosion from below. Prince Maurice was already at one of the windows where he stood fearlessly gazing out.

“*Gott in Himmel!*” he exclaimed. “I thought I recognised that

sound! Look, Matresser—look, sir!”

Those who had the courage to draw near to the window gazed for a few seconds upon a sight which they never forgot. From the clouds to the blackened and charred débris in the park below, there was one furious line of roaring flame—shape and form seemed to have disappeared entirely. The only recognisable object was a long white wing which seemed to have been blown into the air, to have come down whole and embedded itself vertically in the ground. Prince Maurice stepped back into the room. Ann was struggling against fainting. Elisabeth was leaning over Lady Matresser bathing her forehead with ice-cold water from the sideboard.

“All over,” the pilot announced cheerfully. “No more danger. I will tell you what has happened. I know.”

Elisabeth turned round from her task.

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“What is it that has arrived?” she asked, her voice tense and throbbing.

“If you know, for heaven’s sake tell us,” Matresser demanded.

“It is the Prince Otto von Behrling who has paid his last call,” the young man declared solemnly.

Perhaps, however, the most sinister part of the whole affair was the telegram brought by the boy from the post office who rode his bicycle across the park to where Matresser was standing just outside the little ring of spectators gathered round the charred and barely recognisable remains of Prince Otto von Behrling.

The boy leaned his bicycle against a piece of fallen timber, touched his cap and drew the orange-coloured envelope from his satchel. His saucerlike eyes seemed to be sticking out of his head and his voice shook with excitement.

“Fayther said I was to explain about this telegram, your lordship,” he said. “It was thrown out of that there plane. ’Er come over Fakenham town so low she most scraped the church steeple and a man leaned over and dropped a message written out on a form all proper like tied to a bit o’ stick. Someone brought it in to the post office and they phoned it over straight away. The money was there along with it.”

Matresser tore open the envelope mechanically and read. The message had apparently been handed in at Fakenham a little more than an hour previously.

P. p. c. Otto von Behrling.

Matresser looked up to find the boy watching him anxiously.

“Would there be any reply, your lordship?”

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Matresser folded up the telegram with a little shiver, placed it in his pocket and handed the boy some loose silver.

“No reply.”

THE END

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BOOKS BY E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Mr. Oppenheim's published books, including the four omnibus volumes, total 141. Some of them have never been published in the United States. All those which have been issued here (by Little, Brown, and Company) are starred. Titles now in print in the United States, either in the regular editions or cheap editions, are double-starred. Some others are available in English editions. Dates refer to *first* publication in book form, whether in England or the United States.

NOVELS

Mr. Oppenheim has published in all 102 novels, of which 10 have not been published in the United States (unless in pirated editions). Five of his novels appeared under the pseudonym "Anthony Partridge"; these are marked †.

EXPIATION. 1887

A MONK OF CRUTA. 1894

THE PEER AND THE WOMAN. 1895

*A DAUGHTER OF THE MARIONIS. 1895

FALSE EVIDENCE. 1896

A MODERN PROMETHEUS. 1896

*THE MYSTERY OF MR. BERNARD BROWN. 1896

THE WOOING OF FORTUNE. 1896

THE POSTMASTER OF MARKET DEIGHTON. 1897

THE AMAZING JUDGMENT. 1897

- *MYSTERIOUS MR. SABIN. 1898
 A DAUGHTER OF ASTREA. 1898
 *AS A MAN LIVES. 1898
 *MR. MARX'S SECRET. 1899
 *THE MAN AND HIS KINGDOM. 1899
 *THE WORLD'S GREAT SNARE. 1900
 *A MILLIONAIRE OF YESTERDAY. 1900
 *THE SURVIVOR. 1901
 *ENOCH STRONE. 1901
 (English title A MASTER OF MEN.)
 *A SLEEPING MEMORY. 1902
 (English title THE GREAT AWAKENING.)
 *THE TRAITORS. 1902
 *A PRINCE OF SINNERS. 1903
 *THE YELLOW CRAYON. 1903
 *THE BETRAYAL. 1904
 *ANNA THE ADVENTURESS. 1904
 *A MAKER OF HISTORY. 1905
 *THE MASTER MUMMER. 1905
 *A LOST LEADER. 1906
 THE TRAGEDY OF ANDREA. 1906
 *THE MALEFACTOR. 1906
 (English title MR. WINGRAVE, MILLIONAIRE.)
 *BERENICE. 1907
 *THE AVENGER. 1907
 (English title THE CONSPIRATORS.)
 *THE GREAT SECRET. 1908
 (English title THE SECRET.)
 *THE GOVERNORS. 1908
 †THE DISTRIBUTORS. 1908
 (English title GHOSTS OF SOCIETY.)
 *THE MISSIONER. 1908

- *†THE KINGDOM OF EARTH. 1909
(English title THE BLACK WATCHER.)
- *JEANNE OF THE MARSHES. 1909
- *THE ILLUSTRIOUS PRINCE. 1910
- *†PASSERS BY. 1910
- *THE LOST AMBASSADOR. 1910
(English title THE MISSING DELORA.)
- *†THE GOLDEN WEB. 1911
- *THE MOVING FINGER. 1911
(English title A FALLING STAR.)
- *HAVOC. 1911
- *†THE COURT OF ST. SIMON. 1912
- *THE LIGHTED WAY. 1912
- *THE TEMPTING OF TAVERNAKE. 1912
- *THE MISCHIEF MAKER. 1913
- *THE DOUBLE LIFE OF MR. ALFRED BURTON. 1913
- *THE WAY OF THESE WOMEN. 1914
- *A PEOPLE'S MAN. 1914
- **THE VANISHED MESSENGER. 1914
- THE BLACK BOX. 1915
(Novelization of photo-play, published by Grosset & Dunlap.)
- **THE DOUBLE TRAITOR. 1915
- **MR. GREX OF MONTE CARLO. 1915
- **THE KINGDOM OF THE BLIND. 1916
- *THE HILLMAN. 1917
- *THE CINEMA MURDER. 1917
(English title THE OTHER ROMILLY.)
- **THE PAWNS COUNT. 1918
- **THE ZEPPELIN'S PASSENGER. 1918
(English title MR. LESSINGHAM GOES HOME.)
- **THE WICKED MARQUIS. 1919

- **THE BOX WITH BROKEN SEALS. 1919**
 (English title **THE STRANGE CASE OF MR. JOCELYN THEW.**)
- **THE CURIOUS QUEST. 1919**
 (English title **THE AMAZING QUEST OF MR. ERNEST BLISS.**)
- **THE GREAT IMPERSONATION. 1920**
- **THE DEVIL'S PAW. 1920**
- **THE PROFITEERS. 1921**
- *JACOB'S LADDER. 1921**
- **NOBODY'S MAN. 1921**
- **THE EVIL SHEPHERD. 1922**
- **THE GREAT PRINCE SHAN. 1922**
- **THE MYSTERY ROAD. 1923**
- **THE WRATH TO COME. 1924**
- **THE PASSIONATE QUEST. 1924**
- **STOLEN IDOLS. 1925**
- **GABRIEL SAMARA, PEACEMAKER. 1925**
- **THE GOLDEN BEAST. 1926**
- *PRODIGALS OF MONTE CARLO. 1926**
- **HARVEY GARRARD'S CRIME. 1926**
- **THE INTERLOPER. 1927**
 (English title **THE EX-DUKE.**)
- **MISS BROWN OF X. Y. O. 1927**
- **THE LIGHT BEYOND. 1928**
- **THE FORTUNATE WAYFARER. 1928**
- **MATORNI'S VINEYARD. 1928**
- **THE TREASURE HOUSE OF MARTIN HEWS. 1929**
- **THE GLENLITTEN MURDER. 1929**
- **THE MILLION POUND DEPOSIT. 1930**
- **THE LION AND THE LAMB. 1930**
- **UP THE LADDER OF GOLD. 1931**
- **SIMPLE PETER CRADD. 1931**
- **THE MAN FROM SING SING. 1932**

- (English title MORAN CHAMBERS SMILED.)
- **THE OSTREKOFF JEWELS. 1932
- **MURDER AT MONTE CARLO. 1933
- **JEREMIAH AND THE PRINCESS. 1933
- **THE GALLOWS OF CHANCE. 1934
- **THE MAN WITHOUT NERVES. 1934
- (English title THE BANK MANAGER.)
- **THE STRANGE BOARDERS OF PALACE CRESCENT. 1934
- **THE SPY PARAMOUNT. 1934
- **THE BATTLE OF BASINGHALL STREET. 1935
- **FLOATING PERIL. 1936
- (English title THE BIRD OF PARADISE.)
- **THE MAGNIFICENT HOAX. 1936
- (English title JUDY OF BUNTER'S BUILDINGS.)
- **THE DUMB GODS SPEAK. 1937
- **ENVOY EXTRAORDINARY. 1937

SHORT-STORY COLLECTIONS

Of these 34 collections of short stories, 23 of which have been issued in book form in the United States, most of the volumes are series with sustained interest in which one group of characters appear throughout the various stories.

- *THE LONG ARM OF MANNISTER. 1908
- (English title THE LONG ARM.)
- **PETER RUFF AND THE DOUBLE-FOUR. 1912
- (English title THE DOUBLE-FOUR.)
- *FOR THE QUEEN. 1912
- *THOSE OTHER DAYS. 1912

MR. LAXWORTHY'S ADVENTURES. 1913
THE AMAZING PARTNERSHIP. 1914
*AN AMIABLE CHARLATAN. 1915
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[The end of *Envoy Extraordinary* by E. Phillips Oppenheim]