

**WHAT HAPPENED
TO FORESTER**



E·PHILLIPS·OPPENHEIM

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WHAT HAPPENED
TO FORESTER

By

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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McCLELLAND AND STEWART
1930

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What Happened to Forester

CHAPTER I ANGE MARIE

I first saw Ange Marie as a friend and I were in the act of quitting one of the eleven *tavernes*, a casual acquaintance with which entitles you to the freedom of the night life of Marseilles. I made some excuse to loiter.

“What a lovely child!” I exclaimed.

My companion smiled mysteriously. He was a connection of the Chef de Sûreté, and such a smile meant something.

“She is very beautiful,” he admitted, “but a word of advice to you, my friend: if ever you should have an hour to spare here, and seek a feminine companion for these rounds—do not choose Ange Marie.”

Nevertheless, I continued to loiter for the sole purpose of watching her. Her face was oval and almost perfect in shape; her complexion transparent; her eyes the clearest, sweetest brown imaginable. She was dressed with nunlike simplicity—a plain black gown, with what seemed to be a wide collar of gauzy white material round the neck, a simple hat, elegant shoes and bag—a noticeable figure apart from her beauty amongst the more flamboyant sisters of her craft. To her companion I took an immediate dislike. He was a thin, esthetic-looking Englishman, middle-aged, clean-shaven, with an unpleasant mouth and a curious glitter in his eyes, one of which seemed to be set farther back in his head than the other, giving the impression of a squint. He was badly dressed in ill-fitting dinner clothes, and every detail of his toilet was as annoying as his personality. They danced together—he very badly and she divinely—and as they passed, Ange Marie glanced up at me. Perhaps she understood my admiration; at any rate she smiled. My companion passed his arm through mine.

“Enough for to-night, my friend, I think,” he remarked significantly. “We go.”

At my hotel, where we parted, he laid his hand upon my shoulder. He had been liaison officer to my regiment during the War, there had been some question of my having rendered him a valuable service, and for two people who saw one another seldom we were certainly friends.

“Andrew,” he said, “I want you to promise me something.”

I knew perfectly well what that something would be. The matter had been in my mind.

“Don’t leave the hotel again to-night,” he begged.

I hesitated. The allure of Ange Marie was insidious. I was approaching middle age, a somewhat dull person at times, as a soldier retired from the Army before his time is inclined to be, but still with that unsatisfied craving for adventures which should remain, perhaps, the heritage of youth alone. I was entirely alone in the world, too, without ties or responsibilities, and the idea of an hour’s flirtation and a dance with her was extraordinarily attractive.

“I do not speak without reason,” my friend continued earnestly. “Ange Marie is watched by the police. She is strongly suspected already of two—irregularities. She is not a safe companion, and, although we do our best, Marseilles is Marseilles.”

“All right,” I promised regretfully. “It is late enough, anyway. All the same, I don’t believe that the child could do any one harm.”

Whereupon we parted.

I boarded the P. & O. boat for Tilbury late on the following afternoon. The major part of the passengers, in a hurry to reach their journey’s end, had already departed by train, and the ship was handed over to the tub-and-hose activities of the lascars. I occupied myself, therefore, for half an hour, in unpacking, but just as we started I made my way on deck to find a very distressed looking steward—an old friend of mine, as a matter of fact—watching the removal of the gangway.

“What’s wrong, Brown?” I inquired.

“Gent in the next cabin to yours gone and got left behind, sir,” he confided dolefully. “He landed last night—said he’d be back before midnight. Ain’t set eyes upon him since.”

“Did he take any clothes with him?”

“Not a stitch except what he stood up in. Left his things all lying about, too, and his drawers open. I’ve just locked up his cabin.”

I saw Brown again later in the evening. He was seated on a trunk in one of the side gangways, and there was a dejection in his manner scarcely to be accounted for by the mere loss of a tip.

“Heard anything of your missing passenger?” I asked.

Brown shook his head.

“He’s come to harm, sir—that’s what he’s come to,” was the lugubrious reply. “Stands to sense he don’t go out in his dinner clothes and not come back all night unless there’s trouble.”

“What sort of a fellow was he?” I inquired. “Did he drink?”

“Drink? Lord love you, he was a missionary,” the man exclaimed—“and a miserable one at that! Always gloomy and muttering to himself, he was. When he told me that he was going to dine on shore when there was a free dinner on board, I couldn’t believe it. Name of McPherson—but there was nothing Scotch about him except his stinginess, and I don’t suppose that was his fault.”

“Had he money with him?”

“All he possessed, I believe. Anyway, there was one drawer in his cabin he always kept locked, and that was wide open and empty when I went down this morning.”

“A missionary,” I reflected. “Well, I suppose a missionary might get into trouble just the same as any ordinary human being.”

“Trouble costs money,” the steward observed succinctly. “And he hadn’t got any—a lean, swivelled-eyed sort of a card. I ain’t got much pity for him, but I ’ates Marseilles, and there’s something about his empty room gives me the shivers.”

“Lean, swivelled-eyed!” I started—perceptibly, I suppose, for Brown looked at me with curiosity.

“Describe him,” I insisted.

The steward settled down to his task with enthusiasm.

“He was long, tall, dark, and lean as a pikestaff. He’d got a kind of glitter in his eyes, and one of them turned inwards a bit. He’d fished out what he called his ‘dress suit’ last night. He’d never worn it but once all the voyage—coat down almost to his knees, baggy trousers, and a wisp of a tie. He looked a card, I can tell you!”

On the very steps of the wireless room, to which I presently made my way, I paused. Ange Marie, Ange Marie, what have you to do with missionaries? I knew perfectly well why I hesitated. I was afraid of bringing trouble on Ange Marie. Nevertheless, I did my duty, and sent a marconigram to the Chef de Sûreté at Marseilles.

It is not always that a good action brings its own reward, and in this case it certainly did not. At Tilbury, half an hour of my time was taken up by a very persistent gentleman from Scotland Yard who introduced himself by tapping my shoulder in the most official fashion, besieged me with questions about my doings in Marseilles, and was particularly curious as to why I imagined that the man whom I saw in the *Taverne des Grenouilles* was the missing passenger from the boat. It was not until he was perfectly sure that he had collected all the information I was able to impart that he condescended to answer my own questions. McPherson had been

found drowned in Marseilles Harbour, and Ange Marie was in prison. Would I go back to Marseilles and give evidence? I would not. And more than ever I regretted having sent that marconigram.

My week-end host, Gordon Pensent, apologised for the cocktails which stood upon the tray side by side with the goblets of Amontillado.

“As a wine merchant, and one of the old school,” he said, “you must know how I detest these things, but my wife insists.”

“Your wife!” I exclaimed.

Pensent was a man of some fifty years of age, and I had looked upon him as a confirmed bachelor. He nodded.

“A little adventure which happened to me when I was making the tour of my vineyards a month or so ago,” he confided—“and here is the result.”

There was the sound of light footsteps outside, the opening of the door—and Ange Marie! Pensent was never a suspicious man, and he was quite willing to believe that my momentary stupefaction was due to surprise at finding him married at all, and to his wife’s unusual beauty. She had not abandoned her simplicity of style, but the Rue de la Paix had confirmed her exquisite taste and added its finishing touches. She was still without adornment, but a single string of pearls gleamed upon her neck. She herself, although she recognised me, was wonderful. She played the hostess perfectly. She chattered of her old home in the Dauphiné, where she and Pensent had apparently met, praised the beauty of England but deplored its climate. Pensent, whose French was far from fluent, enacted the rôle of elderly and adoring spouse to the point of fatuousness. It was all very muddling, and here was I face to face with another problem connected with Ange Marie. Whether it was her cleverness or her intense confidence in my discretion, I could not tell, but she showed no signs of wanting to speak to me privately. Nevertheless, when the opportunity came—as it did in the lounge after dinner—she was swift to take advantage of it.

“Until to-morrow, no word—I insist.”

“What happened?” I demanded.

She looked around. It was a very beautiful lounge, with an encircling gallery, now, however, empty. Pensent had always been a rich man, and the house was famous.

“That crazy Englishman with whom I spent the evening—he was found drowned. He sobbed like a child for his sins. What had I to do with him or his conscience? As to money—it was the pocket money of a child he had. Nevertheless, they were

severe. They sent me to prison for a month, and banished me from Marseilles for a year.”

“And then?”

“Monsieur—my husband now—he came to the village where I lived. I told him that I was a governess taking a holiday. If you wish to speak, you must, but you will wait until to-morrow.”

“I will wait,” I promised.

So this was the second problem with which I was confronted concerning Ange Marie.

She managed well, for in the morning she was deputed to show me some improvements on the estate whilst Pensent went to church. She led me straight to a charming little cottage dower house which I remembered to have been occupied by Pensent’s sister, and here, upon the veranda, from which was a pleasant view of the gardens, house and lake, was set a small luncheon table, at which were seated two typical French peasants. The man was brown of skin with grey moustache and closely cropped beard and head. He wore his English clothes a little awkwardly, but his elastic-side brown shoes remained typically French. The woman was bent a little in figure. She wore a white, close-fitting cap and dress of stiff black silk. Her face was brown and wrinkled, and her hand, which Ange Marie was caressing affectionately, was hard and gnarled like a walnut shell.

Papa and Maman and Ange Marie!

I addressed them in French, and their faces lightened up. They spoke with pride of their wonderful home. Papa pointed to the garden—a man’s work, but such happiness—and the *outils anglais*! Marvellous! Yet, alas, no vines. Maman spoke of her linen, her stock of silver and sheets. Her voice, too, was husky with emotion. Then they spoke of Ange Marie, the best daughter God ever sent to old people—and here Ange Marie stopped them. Another Frenchwoman—a younger edition of Madame—appeared carrying the first dish of the *déjeuner*.

“*Ma tante,*” Ange Marie explained. “*Elle fait la cuisine. Tu es contente, maman?*”

“*Tout est merveilleux, chérie.*”

“*Et tu, papa?*”

He looked up from his glass.

“*Le vin est bon, ma fille.*”

Afterwards we walked back to the house. In the shrubby path she took my hands.

“Look into my eyes,” she insisted.

I obeyed without visible emotion—which shows great proof of my loyalty to my friend. There was a momentary flicker in those brown depths.

“You promise?”

“One moment,” I begged. “Your husband knows nothing about Marseilles?”

“Nothing.”

“You intend to keep—as you are now?”

She became emphatic. She gripped my hand almost fiercely.

“Listen, my friend. What should tempt me to do otherwise? I am a little animal. Have you not realised that? I love soft things next to my body, warmth, good food and wine, comfort, a full purse. Maman calls me her little kitten. Why should I risk all that I have found?”

So of course I promised, but I arranged for a telephone call that afternoon, and returned to town.

Soon after that I went round the world, and the first man I met in Piccadilly on the day after my return was Pensent. I knew at once that something had happened. He had acquired a stoop, lost his fresh colour, and he walked wearily. He greeted me, however, with all his old cordiality. There was even, I fancied, a sort of eagerness in the way he clutched at and held my hand. We exchanged the usual amenities; afterwards there was a momentarily awkward pause. I asked my question point-blank. I thought that it was best.

“What’s wrong, Pensent?”

“She has left me,” he replied. “Here, come in and sit down for a moment, if you are not in a hurry.”

I was not in the least pressed for time, and if I had been I should have gone all the same. My curiosity, I am afraid, was greater even than my sympathy. We found a corner table at a famous café, and Pensent told me his story.

“We had two wonderful years,” he said. “Marie seemed perfectly contented, and I did everything I could to please her. Of course her affection for those two old people—her father and mother—seemed to me ridiculous, but their presence made her happy, so I did what I could for them. She spent half her time fussing around them, and, as you saw for yourself, we made them pretty comfortable. Yet, after the first year, they began to pine. The old man wanted his café, his game of *boule*, and his old cronies, and Marie’s mother used to sit with her hands folded in front of her, cowering over a fire. She wanted to feel the sun, she said, to wash at the public *lavoir* with the other old women, and to hear how Jeanne’s daughter would have to stay at home next month, and how old mother Lacouste had brought no things to the

wash for two weeks, and the widower Jacques, from the hills, had been seen coming out of her cottage late at night, and an empty brandy bottle had been thrown into the street. Then she got the shivers, made up her mind that the climate was killing her, and died. Obstinate old she-cat!”

I nodded sympathetically. The whole thing was so human, and so inevitable.

“Then the old man broke up,” Pensent continued. “He died through sheer perversity. To give you an example. On one of the first days of his illness he asked for some champagne. I sent him some Cliquot ’11—I couldn’t have sent the King anything better. The old boy turned it down. Said he hoped the next time I was in France I’d taste the *vin mousseux* of his neighbour, Gustave Bérard, and I’d never want to drink my own sour stuff again. Then he died, too. I tried everything I could to comfort Marie. I ordered a tombstone as big as a mausoleum, and I had a supply of those wire wreaths they love so much sent over from France. I offered to take her to Paris, round the world—anywhere. She scarcely answered me, never once smiled. She was like a hurt animal crouching in a corner. I brought home a new Rolls-Royce, and she rode in it without noticing that it wasn’t our ordinary old Daimler. I offered to change her string of pearls for larger stones. She would not take the trouble to come as far as Bond Street to see them. She wanted Papa and Maman, and nobody nor anything else. Then, one evening, about a month ago, when I came home from the City, she was gone—gone with the old woman—her mother’s youngest sister, who had waited upon them.”

“Surely she didn’t go without leaving a word of farewell or explanation, or something?” I asked.

He opened his pocketbook and produced a worn slip of note paper. He must have read it many times. It was rather pitiful. Her handwriting was bad, her few words ill-expressed. Yet to me it meant so much:

Henri—you are generous, but I am unhappy. I go to France. It is only there I can live. Do not follow me. It might make you very, very miserable. Thank you so much for everything. Marie.

I passed him back the letter. It was clear to me where Marie had gone to forget her sorrows, and there was little that I could do or say. My expressions of sympathy were banal. I hurried them over, and we ordered another drink.

“The worst of it all is,” he confided before we started, “I was preparing a great and final surprise for Marie. I have sold out of my business—fixed it all up last month—and I was quite ready to go and live in France or anywhere else for as long as she

liked.”

“Damned hard luck!” I muttered.

He sat looking moodily at his glass, and I began seriously to consider whether the time had not arrived when it was better for me to tell him the truth. In the end I decided not to. Perhaps it was as well.

In a month’s time I met him again. He had lost more weight and had all the appearance of a broken man. I was shocked to see him.

“Any news?” I ventured.

“None,” he answered. “Not a word. I have written to her old home. No reply.”

“Had she much money with her?”

“Very little. She wouldn’t have a banking account. I begged her to, but she said she didn’t understand cheques. There may have been a hundred pounds or so housekeeping money—no more.”

“Jewellery?”

“She had jewellery, of course,” he admitted, “but not nearly so much as she might have had. She didn’t take all of that, either.”

“She’ll write you presently,” I prophesied. “Why do you hang about London? Why not come down to the Riviera with me? I am going to Cairo first, then a week in Rome on my way back, and Monte Carlo afterwards.”

The idea intrigued him; still more the manner of my going. I booked his passage that afternoon, and I left him a little more cheerful. I, on the other hand, was angry with myself and perplexed. Once more I was confronted with the problem which persistently obtruded itself upon me. I had listened to all he had to say and I had made no reply. Yet, was it likely after all, that Ange Marie had gone back to her old home in the Dauphiné? Even as I asked myself the question, I seemed to hear the inviting lilt of that Nice carnival song, and see Ange Marie standing upon the threshold of the Taverne des Grenouilles, her eyes surveying the place with a child’s wonder, her exquisitely formed, unbecarmined lips parted in that gentle yet faintly quizzical smile—a Mona Lisa smile without its conscious wickedness. Here was my problem. In a few days’ time we should be in Marseilles—perhaps spending the night there. Should I let Pensent know of the chance of finding once more his Ange Marie, or was he better left in ignorance? I asked myself that question often during the first few days of the voyage, but it was Pensent himself who answered it. He was developing a new habit. Side by side with his gloom, he was beginning to drink. I am with any man who takes his cocktail before lunch or dinner, his glass of wine with meals, and perhaps a couple of whiskies and sodas during the day, but Pensent kept

slipping away to the smoke room at all manner of hours, and after the first few days I had hard work to keep him from sitting in the bar altogether. There was no doubt but that physically and mentally the man was in a bad way. One night they sent for me to fetch him from the smoke room, and although he talked coherently enough, to all effects and purposes, he was drunk. That night I made up my mind.

We reached Marseilles at six o'clock the following evening, and owing to a strike or some local disturbance, we were not to sail until eight o'clock the next morning. It was Pensent himself who proposed a dinner and evening on shore, so very likely without my intervention the inevitable would have happened. It was towards the end of November—too late for the Réserve—so, taking care not to begin the evening until towards nine o'clock—I permitted an extra cocktail at the "Bodega"—I piloted Pensent to a place of local fame to dine, and, whilst he ordered the dinner, I went to the telephone and called up my friend. He was closeted at the moment with the Chef de Sûreté, but he came at once to the instrument. I asked for news of Ange Marie, which he gave me grudgingly. She had disappeared from Marseilles for some time after her trouble, he told me. The rumour was that she had married an Englishman and gone to that country to live. Only a week ago, however, she had returned to Marseilles; had come once more under their notice. She had brought an old housekeeper with her, and so far had kept aloof from the night life of the place. I could have her address on the morrow, if I wished—after which my friend hurried away with a word of reproach as to my not having let him know of my coming.

We dined quite well, but neither the excellent food—the *bouillabaisse* of Marseilles, though a little heavy at night, is a dish famed all the world over—nor the champagne, seemed to awaken any of the spirit of enterprise in my companion. He even suggested returning to the steamer when he had paid the bill, and it was with complete indifference that he yielded to my persuasions to do a round of the *tavernes*. I decided not to try him too high, and, as it was already late—I had lingered over dinner as long as possible—we went straight to the Taverne des Grenouilles. I chose a table opposite the door, ordered a bottle of champagne for the good of the house, and some old brandy for ourselves, and left the future on the knees of the gods. If Ange Marie should not appear, then Pensent must keep his memories. If she came, he would know the truth, would see it with his own eyes, not learn it from hearsay, and he must work out his own salvation. I danced twice with ladies whom I was careful to keep away from the table, but Pensent refused to enter into the spirit of the place. He sat back in his chair, abstracted and gloomy, toying with his glass sometimes for minutes together, and then almost savagely draining its

contents. When at last the swing doors were pushed open, and she came, I shall never forget the thrill of the moment. That she was popular, or had been in the old days, was certain, for from all corners of the crowded room there arose shouts of invitation and cries of incredulous welcome. She came a step or two forward, and I swear that even to her simple toilet she was the living replica of herself as she had stepped demurely across the threshold the first evening I had seen her. Then she recognised us. She stood quite still and faltered for a moment. I heard a gasp from Pensent as, springing to my feet, I hurried across the floor, pushed on one side a young Frenchman who was bending over her hand, and passed my arm through hers.

“Ange Marie,” I whispered, “you must come to us.”

She shivered, but with what emotion I could not tell.

“Not that name,” she begged. “He wishes?”

There was no doubt about Pensent. He had risen to his feet, drawn himself to his full height. His eyes were ablaze. He seemed suddenly a fine figure of a man as he stood there and called to her across the dancing floor. I installed her gently in my place, watched him gripping one of her hands while he poured her out some wine, saw their heads almost touching—and then I slipped away.

In the morning I was awakened by my friend Brown standing by my bedside with a cup of tea in his hand. The engines were pounding, and we were clear of the harbour.

“Ere’s a nice to-do,” he exclaimed with gloomy relish, “and me off duty and not knowing a thing about it until we was clear of the docks.”

“What’s wrong, Brown?” I demanded.

“It’s your friend,” the man replied reproachfully—“him you’re travelling with, and took out last night. You seem to have got home all right. He didn’t.”

“You mean that he missed the boat?” I asked, sitting up.

“I do indeed, sir. The bed in his stateroom has never been slept in. We know what happened to the last gentleman as missed the boat when you and me was together.”

It was a gloomy reflection, but I remained unmoved.

“When did you last see Mr. Pensent, sir, if I might inquire?” the man persisted.

“Somewhere after midnight, in a *taverne* drinking champagne with a lady,” I replied. “I left them. No place for me. Get my bath ready, Brown.”

“God bless my soul!” the man muttered.

His look of reproach unnerved me.

“The lady was his wife,” I confided.

I moved on to Egypt, spent a week at Rome on my way back, called at Alassio, and arrived at Monte Carlo towards the end of December. I settled down for a few weeks' unalloyed pleasure. The place was bathed in sunshine, day by day the Blue Train was bringing a fresh crowd of my friends and acquaintances, and every morning I read with that evil satisfaction which denotes a malicious kink in our characters, of the snowstorms in the north of England, and the fogs in London. On the second morning after my arrival I was seated at my favourite table in the garden of the Royalty Bar enjoying the sunshine, the perfume of the flowers, and the flavour of my first cocktail, when a very magnificent Rolls-Royce drew up at the top of the steps. A footman opened the door, but Monsieur himself, descending with the briskness of a young man, handed out Madame. I can see the little tableau now—Pensent, rejuvenated, smartly dressed, erect of bearing, sunburnt and smiling, and Ange Marie, the last word in Parisian elegance, laughing up into his face at some casual word as she leaned upon his hand. Francis and Guido were bowing in the background to welcome honoured patrons, as I rose from my table, half incredulous, half in a spirit of greeting. A moment later Pensent's handshake had nearly broken the little bones of my fingers, and I remember that Ange Marie frankly snatched her hand from my lips and, placing her fingers upon my shoulders, drew me down and kissed my cheeks. We all sat at my table and talked together, and somehow or other, amidst a babel of conversation, I learned that Pensent had bought a beautiful villa near the sea at Beaulieu, to which, if you please, my things were to be moved on the morrow, that he was the happiest man on earth, and that Ange Marie had found paradise. The best champagne in the bar was made into the most nectarlike cocktails, and we toasted one another for every imaginable reason—for one, that our Fête de Noël was to be spent in the warmth and sunshine. But it was only after Pensent had left us for a few moments to speak to a friend inside, that I found absolute contentment.

“There will be no more wanderings, Ange Marie?” I asked her.

She passed her arm through mine. Her eyes shone with earnestness, her tone rang true.

“*Ecoutez, mon ami,*” she said earnestly. “What did I tell you of myself? The truth! I am a little animal. I love the warmth, I love luxury, the sun on my cheeks, good food, the fine wines. I am lazy, too. I love others to work for me. I love to play the Bijou Sultana. And that has arrived! Why should I worry more? I love Henri for his goodness. I wish for no other sort of love. I shall never leave him. I shall be

faithful to him and I shall make him happy. No other sort of love shall I ever know—that was murdered when I was so very young—but there is happiness without it. That I have discovered!”

Decidedly a type!

CHAPTER II

THE MODERN MARAUDER

It was a dark and windy morning, the street was narrow and the houses on each side of many stories, so that away from the street lamp as I was when fear first assailed me, nothing was clearly distinguishable. I saw too clearly for my liking, however, the figure of the man on the opposite pavement who had slipped past me unnoticed and was about to cross the road in front of me with the palpable object of intercepting my progress. I saw, too, another shadowy figure near at hand, who had apparently been walking in the middle of the street and who was obviously preparing to accost me, and from behind I heard the soft pad of rubber-shod feet. In that moment I cursed the weakness which had led me to display myself at the Casino bar after my rather conspicuous good fortune, cursed my fondness for out-of-the-way hotels, as far removed as possible from the broad thoroughfares and the ostentatious caravanserais of the modern, shekel-bearing tourist. I had no time to curse anything else, for the man who had turned from the middle of the street addressed me, the other one loitered in my way, and the breath of the third was already upon my neck.

“Monsieur will be so kind? Fire for the cigarette, if you please.”

It was an evil face, and a rasping, mocking voice. Already I fancied I could feel the fingers of that unseen figure behind stealing towards my throat. It was three o'clock in the morning, and from end to end the street was silent and deserted. One thinks quickly in such moments, and I decided that action was my only hope. I stopped to ask no useless questions. I drove my fist into the face of the man who had addressed me, and I kicked vigorously behind at the shins of my unseen but menacing garotter. . . . For a moment this unexpected attack seemed likely to have a triumphant issue. The man whom I had struck reeled round, lost his balance, fell into the gutter, and turned over on his side. My opponent in the rear gave a yell of pain which afforded me time to spring away from his threatened embrace, and stand with my back to the shuttered window of a shop. I stood there with clenched fists, a little excited at my first success and full of hope that if these desperadoes of the street were of the ordinary type, they would take to flight in the face of such resistance. My hopes, however, were short-lived. The man in the gutter spat at me, and between his at first futile attempts to stagger to his feet, shouted encouragement to his comrades. The man whom I had kicked, literally threw himself upon me, cleverly dodging my blows so that I almost overbalanced myself. At the same instant, too, I was conscious of worse danger. I saw the ugly gleam of steel only half concealed in the hand of the third man who was drawing towards me warily but inevitably. It was

upon him that I concentrated my attention, for the danger of a blow with the fist was, after all, as nothing compared to the danger of the knife. He crept forward, stooping a little, with his hand low down instead of upraised, so that I scarcely knew how to deal with him. I am fortunately long in the arm, however, and I was able for the moment to ward him off, and with my other hand catch hold of the fingers which held the knife. Then the two closed in upon me. There were one or two short blows. I felt already a swimming in the head, and I realised that as I had to occupy myself chiefly with the man whose hand was still gripping that cruel-looking knife, I could hold out only for a few seconds against the vicious attack of my other adversary. Another blow left me still on my feet, fighting automatically but only half conscious.

A light flashed suddenly across the street, but I was engaged in my last desperate effort to keep that wrist from turning, and the point of the knife away from my body, and I was unable to look around to see if indeed succour was at hand. I was not left long in suspense, however, before I heard the screeching of a brake furiously applied, and was conscious of rapidly approaching footsteps and a voice hoarse with passion. I heard what seemed to be the open palm of a man's hand come crashing against the cheek of my right-hand assailant, and realised with immense relief the sudden weakening of every muscle in the body of the man with whom I was chiefly contending. Events that followed unfolded themselves in a misty sequence, for I was dizzy and faint with struggling. The knife disappeared, its owner crawled away, broke suddenly into a run, and headed for the end of the street, my other adversary on his heels. The man who had been raising himself from the gutter staggered after his comrades, and on the pavement before me, looking after the retreating figures as though uncertain whether to pursue them or not, stood my rescuer.

My recollections of that moment have always been cloudy in the extreme, but I believe that I tried in vain to speak, and could do nothing but smile feebly and, gripping at the shutters behind, keep myself on my feet. I carried away with me, however, a curiously distinct impression of the man who had come to my aid. He was certainly of no more than medium height, if anything a little shorter. He was not particularly broad, but in his tense, upright figure he gave one the idea of great personal strength. He was wearing the evening clothes of the Continent—a short dinner jacket and black tie. He was hatless and coatless, and he had evidently been driving himself in a powerful coupé drawn up in the middle of the street. His complexion was pale, and, even in that moment, I remember noticing the unusual combination in a man of deep blue eyes and raven black hair. His expression struck me, both at the time and when I recalled it afterwards, as being most extraordinary.

It was one of concentrated and furious anger. His thick eyebrows were drawn together, there was the fire of passion burning in his eyes. The hand which was nearest to me was clenched so that the signet ring seemed to be cutting into his flesh. He still looked down the street at the three disappearing figures, and it seemed to me that it was only with the greatest restraint that he stayed by my side instead of pursuing them.

“Are you hurt?” he asked, suddenly breaking the tension of that silence, long enough in the telling, perhaps, but a matter of seconds only.

I found words, and because I was in good training, in good health, and moderately young, I felt the strength coming back to my limbs with unexpected swiftness.

“Thanks to you, no,” I answered. “Those devils—they meant business too!”

He muttered some word—I think it was in Italian—the meaning of which I did not catch. Then he looked away at last from the end of the street, and his manner, as he turned to me, was the manner of a very polished man of the world.

“You were unwise,” he said, “if the rumours of your great winnings have any foundation, to trust yourself in this quarter. What do you do here, may I ask?”

“I am staying near here, at the Hôtel des Postes,” I told him.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Every one to his taste! You are English, are you not?”

“I am English,” I acknowledged, “but I have no fancy for the hotels which my country-people frequent.”

He laid his hand gently upon my arm, and somehow or other, as he led me across the street, I became more than ever impressed by the fact that here was a man of great physical strength.

“Step inside,” he invited, opening the door of his car. “I will drive you to the Hôtel des Postes.”

I made but a very feeble protest. He let the window down so that the air blew in upon my face as we passed through the almost deserted streets. Within five minutes he drew up opposite the tall, gloomy building where I had my apartment. The concierge was my friend, and as the car stopped a light flared out, and the door was opened.

“You’ll come in,” I begged.

“If you will excuse me, no,” my companion replied, remaining seated at the wheel.

“But I must insist. You must let me offer you a drink. You must tell me whom I have to thank for such wonderful assistance.”

He smiled, and his hand, stretching out towards the door of the car, closed it before I could prevent him.

“It is a matter of no consequence,” he said quietly. “Let it be a lesson to you, Monsieur l’Anglais, especially since you seem to have the habit of winning in such a place as our Casino, to choose a habitation in a different quarter. Permit me to restore your pocketbook which I picked up upon the pavement.”

He pressed the case into my hand, and before I could stop him, before I could say a word, the coupé was gliding down the street—a long, powerful-looking car, with a bent mascot on its bonnet. I turned to the concierge who was studying my disordered appearance a little curiously.

“Do you know who that gentleman was?” I asked.

The man shook his head.

“I did not notice him,” he confided. “Monsieur has met with some misfortune?”

“Nothing of any consequence,” I replied, remembering that a word of what had happened would mean many wasted days in the French Police Courts. “A whisky and soda is what I want, François, and I want it very badly.”

He took me up in the lift to my room, accepted the unusually generous gratuity which I offered him, and bade me a cheerful good-night. I drank a stiffer whisky and soda than was my custom, and, in consequence, dropped off to sleep in my armchair. Through the uneasy hours until the traffic in the streets awoke me, I found myself dozing and dreaming, not of my adventure itself, but of my preserver as he had stood with the fury blazing in his eyes, gazing down the street at the three crawling and hastening figures.

Nice is a large town—larger than many people realise. It possesses almost as many hotels as London, two enormous Casinos and many restaurants and night haunts. Nevertheless, as in many similar resorts, the haunts of the elect, established by the whim of the moment, are few and universally accepted, and it was a matter of the greatest surprise to me that during the next few days, although I searched assiduously, I failed to see anything of my preserver. I divided my time each night between the two Casinos. I dined at one of the famous restaurants and took my coffee at another. I frequented the better-known bars, I trod the broad ways of the fashionable world as I had never trod them before. All in vain. I moved over to Cannes for a couple of days, and searched there without result. I made many expeditions to Monte Carlo, even went to the length of examining the cars outside the Sporting Club and visiting all places where they might be parked, in the hope of discovering the coupé with its bent mascot. I met with no success whatever. I

returned to my old quarters at Nice, with my debt of gratitude unpaid even by so much as a bottle of wine, but on the third day after my return, whilst wandering round the Casino, uncertain whether or not to play, I saw him in the distance, with a packet of *mille* notes in his hand, calling “Banco” at the high table. I crossed the room impetuously and touched him on the shoulder. He turned quickly round. His hands were empty, and I gathered from the augmented heap in the centre of the table that his bold wager had failed.

“At last!” I exclaimed breathlessly.

He looked at me without the slightest response. I had put him down in my thoughts as a Frenchman, but he answered me in perfect English.

“You are not by chance mistaking me for some one else, sir?” he inquired.

“I certainly am not,” I rejoined firmly. “You saved me the other night from a horrible pummelling and the loss of a good deal of money, if not worse. I was not in a condition just then to insist, or I should never have let you depart without telling me your name.”

“My name is at your service, sir,” he replied, “but of the incident to which you refer I know nothing.”

I looked at him steadily. There could be no possibility of any mistake—the same clean-cut features, the same dark blue eyes, the same firm mouth, curved now in a little smile of mockery.

“Will you do me the favour,” I begged, “of taking a drink with me?”

“As to that,” he assented, “why not? I warn you, though, that you must pay. I have lost my money.”

I led him to a small table within sight of the bar, and ordered champagne, which I seldom drank but which seemed to me in some way appropriate. My companion offered me a cigarette from a gold case upon which I could see, very neatly and unostentatiously emblazoned, a small coronet. He sipped his wine with the air of a connoisseur.

“You choose well,” he commented. “But then, you English do understand champagne—better, as a matter of fact, than you do finance,” he added.

“Will you tell me,” I asked, “why you choose to deny the fact that it was you who rendered me that great service the other night?”

He indulged in one of those deprecating gestures so expressive in men of his race.

“Sir,” he said, “if I have rendered you any service at all, then you are in my debt, and if you are in my debt, I request that once and for all you abandon that subject. My name is at your service,” he continued, passing me a card. “Yours, I think I

already know—Major Forester, I believe. I am the Comte de Preuil. Now we are acquaintances of the Casino who have drunk a glass of wine together. Let it go at that.”

There is a manner of speech which carries conviction, and I was powerless to insist further. We finished the greater part of our bottle of wine, and separated. I played no more that night, but wandered restlessly about the Rooms, disappointed and irritated by the strange behaviour of my benefactor. An acquaintance took me by the arm. We chatted for a few minutes upon different matters, and ended up, naturally enough, at the bar. He pointed to the table where I had been seated a short time previously.

“You know De Preuil well?” he asked.

“I met him for the first time this evening,” I answered, bearing in mind my preserver’s injunction.

“A queer fellow!”

“In what way?” I asked. “He’s all right, isn’t he?”

Now I realised even at the time that I was at least on the border line of a dishonourable action in asking questions about a man who desired to remain unknown, but the temptation was too great. In any case, the gossip of the place was any one’s for the asking.

“De Preuil is all right,” my acquaintance acknowledged dubiously, “so far as his position and family go. Of the man himself there have been at times strange stories. He is certainly a great gambler when he has the money.”

“Is he rich?”

My companion shrugged his shoulders.

“In this part of the world,” he answered, “who knows? I have seen De Preuil gamble like a millionaire, and I have known him to disappear for months at a time—according to report, because he was broke. Sometimes he has money; sometimes he has not. Naturally a person like that is the subject of occasional rumours.”

“I should think that there is not the slightest doubt that he is a man of honour,” I ventured.

“He gives one that impression,” my friend admitted. “At the same time, he is a man of peculiar personality. One can imagine him rather the type of the modern marauder. There are people who avoid him here, but then he himself is very reserved and there are a great many people whom he avoids. I have heard habitués of the place warn newcomers against him, but I don’t know why.”

“Nor can I imagine any reason for such a warning,” I declared.

My friend had something to say about golf, and we spoke no more of the Comte

de Preuil.

The next time I saw my mysterious benefactor, he was seated in the easy-chair of my salon when I returned from the Casino at about two o'clock in the morning. At my entrance he laid down the newspaper which he had been reading, and briefly responded to my cordial but astonished greeting. He shook his head, however, when I pressed whisky and soda, wine or cigarettes upon him.

"This," he announced rather coldly, "is not a call in which the social amenities have any place. It is, as a matter of fact, a business visit."

"Business visit?" I repeated, somewhat dazed.

He rose to his feet, crossed the room and deliberately locked the door. Afterwards he moved his chair slightly so as to place himself between me and the bell, and resumed his seat.

"I surprise you?" he asked. "I have surprised many people in my time."

"You have earned the right to surprise me if you wish to," I replied, mixing myself a whisky and soda. "At the same time some sort of an explanation would be acceptable."

"You shall have it," he agreed. "I have come here to rob you, and I intend to carry out my purpose."

I tasted my whisky and soda, lit a cigarette and crossed over to the chair facing his. All the time he watched my every movement.

"You take the matter very calmly," he observed. "Possibly you think that if it comes to a struggle you might succeed in balking me. You are a head taller than I am, and I can well imagine that you are not a man easily robbed, and yet, Major Forester, there is one little argument here which destroys the odds, or perhaps, I should say, creates them—a form of argument which I have usually found unanswerable."

He displayed a small but very vicious-looking revolver, which he drew from the inside pocket of his dinner jacket, and which he handled without ostentation but with an obvious air of familiarity.

"I admit the force of your argument," I said. "I will confess that I haven't a weapon of any sort in the place. Under those circumstances, the odds are something like twenty to one in your favour, and you can consider me an unresisting victim. But of what, may I ask, are you proposing to rob me?"

"You have won something like a million the last few weeks. To-night you must have won at least forty *milles*. I propose to leave you a trifle and take the rest."

I smiled, and for the first time my visitor looked a little uneasy.

“You have chosen the worst night possible, Monsieur le Comte, for your visit,” I told him. “This afternoon I paid every penny I had—which I admit was something over half a million francs—into the bank, and not only that but I directed them to place it to my credit in England. Of the forty *milles* I won to-day I lent Vaniados, who called on his way back from Monte Carlo without any idea of playing, twenty *milles*, and I destroyed an I O U for ten *milles* which I borrowed last evening and forgot to repay. I took some friends to supper at Maxim’s,” I went on, drawing out my pocketbook, “and the bill there made some slight hole in the remaining ten *milles*. I seem to have here eight *milles*, three hundred—unworthy of your notice, I am afraid.”

“As you say—unworthy of my notice,” the Comte de Preuil concurred quietly.

He sat looking for a moment intently upon the ground. Suddenly he rose to his feet. He came and stood within a few paces of me. His revolver had disappeared, but I could see the shape of it gripped in his hand inside his coat pocket.

“Look at me, Major Forester,” he ordered.

I obeyed. There was something terribly magnetic about his eyes. I am perfectly certain that there are few men in the world who could have told him a lie.

“Have you spoken the truth?” he asked. “Is that all the money you have in this apartment? Remember, Major Forester, you’re on your honour.”

I met his gaze.

“That,” I assured him, “is every penny I have at my disposal. I am greatly in your debt, Monsieur le Comte. If you are in need of money, and will give me a few days, I will lend you any reasonable sum.”

“Thank you,” he declined coldly, “I do not borrow; I take. I regret the inopportuneness of my visit. It is clear that my luck is failing me.”

“Our matter of business being concluded,” I suggested, as I saw him move towards his hat, “might I propose that you accept that whisky and soda?”

He suddenly smiled, and there was something about the smile which made me long to pass my arm through his and beg him to sit down and tell me anything in the world that I could do for him. But the smile passed, and he was suddenly hard as steel.

“I will drink with you with pleasure,” he conceded. “Perhaps it is as well that the night is not yet finished for me.”

He drank a whisky and soda slowly and set down the glass. Then he made his way towards the door, unlocked it and, turning around, bade me good-night. Save that he refused to see my outstretched hand, his was the ordinary farewell of one acquaintance taking leave of another. I heard him descend the stairs, and presently

heard the concierge let him out, thanking him volubly for what was no doubt a more than adequate tip. He had come without his car, and from my window I watched him walk to the top of the street and disappear. I watched him with a curious, inexplicable foreboding. I had the feeling that he was on his way to trouble.

For over a month I saw nothing of De Preuil. It is a curious fact that in my mind I thought of him always as my preserver, as the man who had sent those three murderous rogues flying by the very sound of his voice, who had saved my pocketbook—perhaps my life. There seemed to me always something visionary, something not altogether real, in that early morning visit to my rooms when he too had attempted the rôle of highwayman. I was even sometimes half inclined to persuade myself that he had been masquerading, that he had been amusing himself with some grim jest at my expense. I certainly bore him no malice, and when day after day, and even weeks passed without my seeing anything of him, I found myself disturbed on his behalf, recalling that curious premonition which I had felt when he had turned the corner of the street. Then, one day, standing outside a small shop in a not too fashionable quarter, I recognised the coupé with the bent mascot. For a solid three-quarters of an hour I paced that little strip of pavement, smoking cigarette after cigarette. At last I had my reward. The shop door opened and there appeared not De Preuil but a woman. She crossed the pavement swiftly, and stepped into the coupé. I hurried up, and laid my hand upon the window ledge. She was already seated at the wheel when she turned and looked at me with a little start of surprise, in which I fancied was mingled some fear. She was quite young, apparently about thirty years of age, and like many Frenchwomen of her type she gave one the impression even in that first hurried glimpse of a certain elegance, a charm quite independent of the good looks which she undoubtedly possessed.

“What is it Monsieur desires?” she asked, a little haughtily.

“A word with Madame,” I begged, standing still at the window, my hat in my hand. “This, I believe, is the coupé of Monsieur le Comte de Preuil. I should be so glad to have news of him.”

“What do you want with Monsieur le Comte?” she demanded.

“An opportunity which I have sought for a long time,” I replied, “to repay in some measure a debt I owe him.”

She looked at me with growing interest.

“Are you, by chance,” she inquired, “the Englishman on whose behalf he interfered in the Rue de Grasse one night?”

“I am he,” I acknowledged.

She sat for a moment deep in thought.

“I return now to my apartment,” she announced. “If Monsieur will accompany me——”

I took the place by her side. Whatever further adventure might be in store for me, I knew at once that it was not one which depended upon the favour of Madame, for her attitude towards me, if not unkindly, was in some way stonily resentful. She drove to a small street opening off one of the principal boulevards, unlocked the door of a delightful-looking house, adorned with sun blinds and window boxes, and led me past the bowing manservant into a charmingly furnished sitting room on the ground floor. She closed the door carefully and motioned me to a seat.

“Monsieur le Comte de Preuil, news of whom you seek,” she began, “is lying *perdu* in fear of his life, and it is you who are the cause.”

“But, Madame!” I protested.

“It is you who are the cause,” she repeated. “The truth about Armand is known now. I shall not enter upon his defence although I might find much to say. It is known now to the Chief of the Police that he was the head of a small band of robbers who have made Nice their headquarters for some years.”

“It seems incredible,” I murmured.

“He was their head,” she went on, “but they grumbled often at his methods. No one possesses a stricter sense of honour than Armand. He will not permit violence, except in self-defence. He insists always that the person robbed should have his chance of retaliation and that it should be a match of brains and courage rather than of brute strength. You understand?”

“Perfectly, Madame,” I replied. “I find what you say easily believable.”

“There came a night,” she continued, “when on his way homeward he found three of his men engaged in the attempt to rob a single Englishman.”

“Myself!” I exclaimed.

“Precisely. He interfered and rescued you.”

I remained silent. I was thinking of that look which had always puzzled me, that look of fury as he had watched his flying subordinates.

“They never forgave him,” she went on sadly. “There came another night, a little over a month ago, when Armand attempted, single-handed, a great *coup*. Monsieur reads the papers?”

“The French papers, alas, never,” I admitted.

She looked at me in surprise.

“You have not read of *l'affaire* Gasseros? It is incredible!”

"I have neither read nor heard of it," I assured her.

She saw that I was telling the truth, but she was still amazed.

"All Nice has talked of nothing else. Gasseros was a strong, burly man who boasted that he had a few million francs always in the house, and was never afraid to let any one know it. Armand doubted his courage, and that night—he was desperate for money—he found his way to the house, into the room of Gasseros. There was a terrible struggle. The details filled columns of the papers for days. Armand secured the money, but Gasseros fought like a maniac. He got one arm loose and shot Armand through the shoulder. He was the first, mind you, to use firearms. There were sounds in the house. It was evident that the report of the revolver had aroused the domestics. Armand knew that to escape he must resort to his own weapon which he had kept concealed. He fired, meaning to wound his captor in the leg. Gasseros sprang at him and received the bullet in the heart."

"Horrible!" I murmured.

"Even then," she proceeded, "Armand got clear away. He is not only brave, but he is clever. He left no trace. The police were entirely at fault. They offered a large reward, and those three men from whom, Monsieur, he protected you, put their heads together and determined to have their revenge. They informed against Armand."

"Devils!" I cried. "He is taken then?"

"Not yet," she went on, dropping her voice a little. "Alas, he never will be taken alive, Monsieur. It is not death that he fears, but confinement. He lies hidden."

"But this is terrible!" I exclaimed. "Where is he?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Monsieur," she protested, "I have shown you great confidence, Armand spoke well of you, but——"

"Forgive me," I interrupted. "The secret of his whereabouts would be as safe with me as with you, but naturally you do not know that."

"I will tell you this much," she conceded. "I have not seen him since the night of the affair. I dare not go to him. I dare not correspond. An indirect word somewhere by the telephone is all that remains. I myself am watched, day and night, as this house is watched, and as the days go on fears grow within me."

Her eyes which, brilliant though they were, had seemed to me a little hard, suddenly softened, her lips trembled. She leaned forward for a moment, her arms folded upon the table, her head hidden from me. Twice or three times her shoulders twitched. I paced the room, and during those minutes it seemed to me that I was hearing of the peril of a dear friend.

"Listen, Madame," I begged at last, "I am the Comte de Preuil's friend. In my younger days I have not myself been always on the side of the law. Can I help?"

She looked up at me, looked at me in silence for several moments. I suppose she was satisfied with what she saw, for she asked no further question as to my fidelity.

"It is a terribly dangerous task," she warned me, "and the law counts those who would help him equally guilty. Yet without some such assistance as a person in Monsieur's position could render, escape for Armand is impossible. The charge against him is of murder."

"I will look after myself," I promised. "Tell me where he lies, and if there is any plan."

"Armand is hiding in a small hotel at Monte Carlo—the Hôtel de la Principauté," she confided. "It is kept by one of his old servants whose fidelity can be relied upon. So far he has avoided suspicion, but that cannot last. He can be saved in one way."

"And that?"

"If he can be got across the frontier into Italy," she went on eagerly. "A well-known person there has promised that if he can reach Genoa he shall be sent safely to South America. If Monsieur does not read the papers he is not, perhaps, aware that diplomatic relations between France and Italy are strained, and I do not believe that any Frenchman would be given up by the Italians even if he were discovered. The frontier, as you know, is barely eight kilometres from where Armand is lying. Find some way, Monsieur, of transporting him over those eight kilometres, and you will have saved his life—and the happiness of mine."

"Has he a passport?" I asked.

"His own," she answered. "Of what use is that?"

I pondered for several moments, and all the time I felt her eyes fixed anxiously upon me. Very soon I came to a decision.

"Madame," I announced, "the enterprise commends itself to me. If I fail, I fail; but in a few days I will disclose my plan to you. If it is humanly possible, I will go with De Preuil to Italy. About yourself?"

She shook her head sadly.

"Ah, Monsieur," she said, "they look to me some day to lead them to their quarry, or else that he will pay me a visit here. They lie and watch like foxes. He must go alone; but afterwards—who knows what may come afterwards! I love Armand dearly, but he must start life again."

"At this time to-morrow," I told her, "I shall have certain plans maturing. I shall write to the Hôtel de la Principauté for a room. Meanwhile you must give me a line

to the proprietor that he may know I am to be trusted.”

“You will be careful?” she asked anxiously. “Remember that if you fail, if they discover that you are trying to help him escape, you will stand in the dock with him.”

“I will be careful,” I promised.

“And you will not change your mind?” she insisted, as she led me to the door.

“Madame,” I assured her, “we are a stupid race, we English, but we do not often change our minds.”

Upon the whole I may say, I think, that I have had more adventures than fall to the lot of most men. There have been at least four distinct occasions upon which I have stood face to face with death, with the odds fairly level, yet I could search my memory in vain for any twenty minutes of my life in which I suffered, feared and hoped in such agony of spirit as during those twenty minutes outside the *douane* on the hill beyond Mentone. We had driven from Beau Soleil with scarcely an interchanged word, my companion’s hand upon the wheel, steady and precise, his face set in that rigid expression common to the well-disciplined chauffeur. He brought the car gracefully to a standstill at the first place of call, where my *carnet de passages* was cursorily examined. No undue interest was shown in us, and we started off again. On the hill came our first real period of probation. We had to wait for nearly ten minutes to take our turn, during which time a French *gendarme* strolled up and down past the car, and I at least found it hard to persuade myself that he did not now and then throw a curious glance towards myself and my neatly clad chauffeur. The time came, however, when his *confrère* was free. I took the passports from the pocket of the car and handed them over. My own passport he studied for some moments; the passport of Luigi Nessi, my chauffeur, he glanced at only casually, and returned them both without comment. We touched our hats, and moved on another blessed fifty yards towards safety. There seemed something less menacing about the Italian uniform, yet it was here that our worst moment arrived. Our luggage gave little trouble; it was carefully selected and harmless. My companion’s passport, however, remained in the hands of the examining *gendarme* for fully a minute. He glanced twice at the photograph, and read the text as though every word of it were of interest. Finally, as though we were not being sufficiently tortured, a tall figure passed the car, and the French *gendarme* joined his Italian *confrère*. What they said to one another was inaudible, but without any word to us they turned around and disappeared inside the Italian passport office.

I have courage of a sort, I believe, and I am inclined to fancy myself an optimist, but I admit that at that moment a wave of despair swept over me. The loitering

seconds ploughed their way into my heart, although in the midst of my agony I was forced to admire the magnificent imperturbability of my companion. The business of actual living seemed to become suspended. Life was like a remote dream. A woman selling bunches of carnations came and thrust her wares through the window. The perfume of the flowers, and the song of a bird which had risen unexpectedly from the little vineyard on our right, lingered long in my memory, although at the time I was barely conscious of them. The sun beat down upon us fiercely, and the second carabinier withdrew his chair into the shade of the grey stone building. Not a word passed between my companion and myself. His left hand was resting calmly upon the wheel, but his right hand, I noticed with a little shiver, had crept into his coat pocket.

They came out together—the French *gendarme* and his Italian *confrère*—and, for no reason that I could gather, to my deep and almost stupefied relief, their interest in us seemed to have evaporated. The carabinier folded up the passport which he had been carrying, and prepared to wave us on. Yet even then came one final shock which plunged me once more into a paroxysm of despair. With his hand resting upon the side of the car, the carabinier leaned over and addressed the pseudo-Luigi Nessi in fluent Italian. The words streamed from his lips, and all the time I found myself in a dazed turmoil of apprehension. Most Frenchmen, especially Southerners, speak Italian, but supposing that De Preuil were an exception. Supposing! . . . Then my suspense came to an end. The Italian ceased. De Preuil turned towards him so that I could see the smile which parted his lips. He replied in the latter's language, which he seemed to speak even more fluently than his interlocutor. His hand stole out in a little gesture. The carabinier smiled, and waved us on. Down went the clutch, in went the gears, a touch of my companion's foot on the accelerator, and we were gliding rapidly forward, round a corner, and the ordeal was over. Then I admit that I had a fit of weakness. That no one might see me, I put on my dark automobile goggles, and turned my coat up to the neck as though I felt the cold. In truth I sat there shivering. It was half an hour before either of us spoke. Then I noticed that we were slackening speed. My companion addressed me in his ordinary tone.

“Is it fancy, dear friend, or did I hear you demand of *Monsieur le Propriétaire* a bottle of his best wine?”

I produced it. We drew up by the side of the road, and I filled two tumblers. I drained the contents of mine almost at a gulp. De Preuil drank his with the lingering appreciation of a connoisseur.

“Excellent!” he declared.

We moved on again, bought lunch at a shop in Alassio, having the instinct to avoid hotels, and passed into Genoa with the shades of evening. A few hours later I stood upon the quay watching the great steamer in which De Preuil had embarked back slowly away from the dock, watched her, in fact, until she had emerged from the harbour, until she had turned round and the broadside of her saloon lights flamed up against the dark sea. Then I think that the reaction after my long day of anxiety really set in. I found myself, to the surprise of passers-by, a stolid Englishman, singing fragments of a Neapolitan ballad as I drove the car up the hill to the hotel where I was spending the night.

Mercifully recovered from the attack of influenza which, according to a carefully circulated report, had kept me a prisoner in my rooms during those eventful days, I met Madame, on the evening after my return from Genoa, in the hall of the Negresco, and led her to the corner table in the restaurant, where I had arranged to dine. We delayed any effort at serious conversation, but at the first opportunity I pressed into her hand the few lines written in great haste on the steamship note paper. She read them through twice, and slipped them into her bag. There was a look of ineffable gratitude in her eyes as she turned towards me.

“And now,” she insisted, after I had concluded a discussion with the waiter on the subject of caviare, and the man had retired with our order, “tell me everything.”

“The whole affair really worked out very simply,” I explained. “My Italian chauffeur, Luigi Nessi, happened to be still lying in the Queen Victoria Hospital with a broken leg, after the accident I had on the Corniche Road a month ago. I borrowed his passport, bought another car, engaged a room at the Hôtel de la Principauté, on the same floor as De Preuil’s, went in to see him when I knew the coast was clear, took him some chauffeur’s clothes, and made him up as well as my experience in amateur theatricals enabled me to. Fortunately he was the same height and complexion as Luigi, and though I only touched him up very slightly and cut his hair a little differently, I was able to turn him out quite near enough to the photograph to escape questions. We left the hotel in a perfectly natural manner early on Wednesday morning, *Monsieur le Propriétaire* keeping carefully out of sight every one likely to be inquisitive. From then on there was never a hitch. . . . And with you?”

“The telegram from Paris, for which I had arranged, duly arrived,” she confided. “The police got hold of it, as I thought they would, and there were two men watching my apartment from seven in the evening until seven the next morning. When they found that Armand did not come, they appear to have made up their minds that he must be still in Paris. The papers this morning announced that he was there, and

already under surveillance. Look,” she went on, gripping my wrist with her slim, white fingers, “you see the man in morning clothes who is taking a table opposite—the man alone?”

“Yes.”

“That is my special watchdog. It is he who has a theory that, because of our passionate devotion to one another, Armand will return to me, if only for a few hours, before he leaves the country. In you he beholds a complication. To see us together, intimately like this, may perhaps weaken his belief in my fidelity, and, who knows, he may leave me alone. Do you believe in fidelity, Monsieur Forester?” she concluded, with a sudden bewildering smile.

“It is sometimes a troublesome quality,” I ventured.

She leaned a little towards me.

“Then, do you think—for safety’s sake—that you could look at me now and then as though you admired—say, my frock, or my eyes, or any part of me that seems worthy of your notice?”

More than ever I was conscious of the witchery of her brown eyes, the magic of her subtly lowered voice, in which seemed to linger the illusion of a caress. Her fingers touched mine as though by accident, and I had no need to feign the rôle at which she hinted.

“For safety’s sake, Madame,” I promised, not altogether steadily, “the remainder of the evening will see me your devoted cavalier.”

She sighed and laughed at me almost in the same instant. She was indeed a woman of mercurial moods.

“You are generous with your time, Monsieur,” she whispered.

“There is that little matter of fidelity,” I reminded her, as the caviare was set before us.

“A quality which has yet to be defined,” she rejoined, helping herself to lemon.

CHAPTER III

THE SIREN OF THE MADRID

I knew that something was wrong the moment I parked my car under a cluster of eucalyptus and palm trees, and advanced to the picturesque entrance of the best restaurant upon the Riviera. Louis met me as usual upon the threshold, it is true, but what a Louis! Up till a month before, when I had last seen him, he was, as he had always been, the predominant spirit of the place, suave, bland, with the smile and voice of an ambassador. He was almost the best built man I have ever seen—over six feet in height, with broad shoulders and stately carriage, excellent complexion and grey eyes, the personification of what a *maître d'hôtel* should be, the very look of him suggesting good living, a knowledge of fine vintages, the whole artistry of food. To hear him suggesting a luncheon was a poem, a dinner an epic. And now! I shook hands with him, as was my custom after a somewhat prolonged absence, and although his eyes seemed to be begging me to ignore his changed appearance, I felt compelled to refer to it.

“Why, what’s the matter, Louis!” I asked.

“Influenza, sir,” he replied—“a nasty bout of it. You wish your usual table, sir, of course—after the cocktail.”

He drew out a stool from the bar, knowing my habits well. The barman was already busy with his shaker and Louis departed for a moment, returning with a menu. I could scarcely remove my eyes from him. His complexion was grey, he had lost flesh tragically. There was a stoop about his neck, a haunted look in his eyes. His clothes were as faultless as ever, but they fitted him no longer. He was like the ghost of himself, engaged in a hopeless task of personification.

“The *mareennes* are good, sir,” he suggested, “or there is a small *langouste*, which I could recommend, with your favourite sauce. And I have a *carré* of lamb I was keeping specially—too small for more than one person—some early *fraises de bois* and *vin rouge*, and a cheese just arrived from our own dairy.”

“That sounds all right, Louis,” I assented, trying not to look at him too curiously.

“The Montrachet 1914, of course, sir,” he concluded. “Will it be the *langouste* or the *mareennes*?”

“The *langouste*.” I decided. “I will be there, say in ten minutes.”

“Everything will be ready, sir,” Louis promised, making his escape.

I turned to my friend, the barman.

“What on earth has happened to Louis?” I asked, as soon as the latter was out of hearing.

“We are all wondering that, sir,” the man replied. “He had a bout of influenza, but nothing which ought to have pulled him down like that. Looks as though he were being kind of worried to death.”

“But what worry can he have?” I persisted. “He must make a large income, he’s a single man and he doesn’t even gamble, so far as I know. Why, last time I saw him, he was thinking of buying a new Lancia.”

“There’s other things besides money, sir,” the man observed enigmatically. “It isn’t my business anyway, and we’re all fond of Louis, but there, you see what he is, and you remember what he used to be. I wish you would get him to talk to you.”

“I’ll try later on,” I promised, a little doubtfully. “Glad to see you haven’t changed, Charles—or the cocktails.”

“They should be all right, sir,” was the cheerful reply. “We get all the Gordon gin we want now. There’s just half a one left in the shaker, sir.”

I fell as usual, and presently made my way to my table. The Madrid, notwithstanding its great reputation, is not a large restaurant, and there were barely a score of people in the room. A table exactly opposite to mine, commanding a view of the gardens instead of the sea, was evidently prepared for an expected arrival. A great bowl of pink roses had replaced the ordinary restaurant flowers, caviare, with its etceteras, was already upon the table, and a small gold-foiled bottle stood in an ice pail. I inquired of the waiter who served me—Louis seemed to be keeping a little in the background—as to the whereabouts of the proprietor.

“Monsieur is in Paris,” he confided. “Louis is left in sole charge. Monsieur is negotiating for the purchase of a restaurant in the Champs Elysées.”

I began my luncheon. Presently the arrival of another guest attracted my attention, and I looked up. She made her way to the table already prepared, ushered in that direction by Louis—a very tall, fair woman, large almost to ungainliness, florid of complexion, elaborately dressed, making those efforts, which always possess a leaven of the pitiful, to retain the freshness and air of youth. She leaned upon a stick, and a colourless-looking maid who followed her carried a small Pekingese. Louis placed a chair for the dog, as Madame somewhat ponderously seated herself, took her stick and handed it to a subordinate. She thanked him with a gracious smile, motioned him to lean down and began a whispered conversation in his ear. Louis fidgeted a little, bowed and hurried off to obey the summons of an imaginary client. Madame sipped a glass of vodka and commenced her meal.

It is not my custom to watch the gastronomic efforts of my neighbours at a restaurant or at the dining table, but I must frankly confess that I watched the progress of Madame’s meal with unpardonable curiosity. She ate at least three times

as much caviare as I found myself able to consume. She followed that with a dozen oysters, after which she had three lamb cutlets, peas, a *soufflé* of some sort, which baffled me, and wound up with cheese. She finished her pint of champagne early in the meal and called for another, and after each course she summoned Louis. Even at that short distance, and although I was frankly disposed to play the part of eavesdropper, I could hear nothing which passed between them, for on each occasion her voice rose scarcely above a whisper. One thing, however, was obvious. So far as it was in her nature to be gracious, she was gracious to Louis. She patted him once or twice upon the arm, there were little gestures, smiles and meaning glances, which, grotesquely out of place from her though they were, clearly indicated her predilection. Louis's manner all the time was that of a perfect *maître d'hôtel*, suffering from some internal complaint. He forced smiles to his lips, replied with almost ghastly politeness to her confidential speeches. Towards the end, she raised her voice a little and I could hear what she said.

"The food gets better and better, Louis," she pronounced. "I think that I shall stay here for the rest of my life. Give me Monsieur Léon's address, and I shall write and tell him how comfortable you are making me."

Louis answered only with a bow. Each time he escaped the proximity of her chair, it seemed to me that he avoided meeting my eyes. When I left to go, Madame was patting her dog, lingering over her second brandy, and Louis was lurking just outside, behind the orchestra. I took him by the shoulder, and made him pass across the threshold with me.

"What the devil is the matter with you, Louis?" I asked bluntly.

"The *grippe*——" he began.

"Don't tell me anything more about that *grippe*," I interrupted. "There's something on your mind, man. You're ill mentally. What is it?"

He groaned.

"It's nothing, Monsieur," he assured me.

"Who is that terrible old woman?"

He shivered.

"It is Madame la Comtesse de Granent."

"She isn't a Frenchwoman," I declared confidently.

"American, Monsieur," Louis confided. "Very nice——very nice indeed. She has taken the whole of the hotel. She has a manservant to wait when she dines in her salon, a maid for herself, a kennel maid for the dog, two chauffeurs and a secretary. She is very rich indeed—a wonderful client!"

"A widow?" I inquired.

Louis inclined his head. Some visitors had just arrived. He seemed to welcome the chance of escape.

“You will excuse me, sir,” he begged. “I hope we will see you here again before long.”

“I don’t think you will,” I rejoined. “I don’t like the look of you, Louis. Unless you can tell me what’s the matter, I shall stay away.”

He opened his lips, and closed them, hesitated and, with a little gesture of the hand, hastened off. I left him ushering some new-comers into the restaurant. I noticed he placed them at a table as far removed as possible from the one occupied by Madame la Comtesse.

Three days later, having firmly decided to lunch moderately at Nice, I turned through the gates of the Madrid, left my car in its usual place, and approached the restaurant. For once in his life, Louis was not upon the threshold to meet me. I gathered the reason as soon as I entered the place. I was a little later than on my previous visit, and Madame la Comtesse was already monopolising his attention. Upon the cushioned chair by her side sat her little Pekingese, opposite her a thin, sallow-faced youth, foppish and over-bejewelled, and by his side an elderly man, carefully dressed, and possessing a distinctly legal and slightly pompous air. Presiding over the service of the feast—from what I could see it was indeed a feast—was Louis, who scarcely found time to cast a glance in my direction.

“And how is he to-day, Monsieur Louis?” I inquired of the barman.

“Just the same, sir,” the man replied, pouring out my cocktail.

“Madame la Comtesse has company,” I remarked.

Charles looked down the room.

“That is her secretary,” he confided. “He generally has his meals in the hotel, but occasionally Madame invites him to lunch. The gentleman opposite is her lawyer. He comes over once a week from Marseilles.”

I caught the ogling, upward glance of Madame as Louis bent towards her, and saw his little shiver of aversion as he turned away immediately afterwards.

“Why the devil, Charles,” I demanded, “does Louis allow himself to be worried to death by that woman?”

The barman spread out his hands.

“God knows!” he exclaimed. “If I were Louis, I should go mad. She sends for him at all hours of the day and night. She will not be served by anybody else. It is true that her bills are enormous, but it is not Louis who gets the profits.”

“I suppose she gives good tips,” I ventured.

Charles became impressive.

“She drinks one cocktail before lunch, and perhaps two before dinner,” he told me, “and every Monday morning there are two hundred-franc notes for me. What Louis gets, no one can imagine, but besides money he has had, I know, a gold cigarette case, a platinum evening watch and chain and two sets of studs. It is a conquest which Louis has made, sir, without a doubt.”

“A conquest which seems to have cost him something,” I remarked dryly.

Just at that moment Louis caught sight of me, and, with a menu card in his hand, came hurrying forward. The change in him was more obvious than ever. His smile of welcome was forced. I noticed that the fingers which held the menu were trembling.

“Well, what have you for me to-day, Louis?” I inquired.

He suggested a simple luncheon, as usual with due regard to my tastes.

“Not often I lunch with you twice in a week, Louis,” I continued, as he showed me to my table. “I rather hoped to find you less busy to-day, so that we might have a little talk.”

He sighed.

“One is always busy here, while the season lasts,” he remarked evasively.

“How long is Madame la Comtesse staying with you?” I asked.

“As long as she is satisfied, I imagine, sir,” he replied, “or until the end of the season. If she wishes to stay on, I suppose Monsieur Léon will keep the hotel open. She is not an ordinary client.”

“So one perceives,” I conceded. “Why do you let her worry you so, Louis?”

“Worry me?” he repeated, with a startled air.

“Don’t be a fool, man!” I enjoined. “Do you think one doesn’t notice?”

He gave an order connected with my luncheon to a subordinate who was hovering around, and then he leaned a little nearer to me.

“Monsieur Forester,” he begged, “do not please have any wrong ideas. I am not in good health. Madame la Comtesse is very gracious; she is a wonderful client. We are all—the whole staff—myself included—very grateful to her.”

After that there was no more to be said to Louis. He avoided me for the rest of the meal, serving a wonderful banquet at the table on my right hand. Madame ate with the appetite of a grenadier, and this time there was no question of half-bottles; a magnum and a bottle reposed in the ice pails. The legal gentleman from Marseilles, with his napkin tucked under his collar, was already flushed with his efforts. The secretary ate rapidly, drank whenever his glass was filled, and remained entirely unmoved. The three conversed together incessantly, their heads almost touching. The lawyer had apparently brought news which was interesting to both his companions. Once he drew from his pocket a sheet of paper covered with figures, at which they

all looked, and raised their glasses. I gathered that some of Madame's investments had prospered, and that this was a feast of celebration. Anyhow, when I left, at three o'clock, they were still discussing the old brandy of the house in large glasses.

I completed my business in Nice, dined at a small restaurant in a back street, famous for its wines and food, but, alas, now known to all the world, and made my way to the Casino. Without being in any sense of the word a gambler, I enjoyed my occasional games of *chemin de fer*, and this evening was no exception. I won a little over a *mille*, turned in at the bar for a final whisky and soda, went in search of my car, and started off for Monte Carlo. As a rule, I take the lower road, but that evening, remembering that it was opera night, and warned by the lights flashing all the way ahead of me along the curving road, I turned up to the left just short of the hospital and made my way on to the Middle Corniche, which at that time of night was almost deserted. Arrived at the highest point in the road, I paused to admire the view—the blaze of lights from one of the dark-hulled men-of-war in Villefranche Harbour, the long arm of Cap Ferrat stretching into the sea, the glitter of the waning moonlight on the Mediterranean. Presently I lit a cigarette, and proceeded on my way. I had scarcely gone another two miles, when I met with adventure. I had turned a sharp corner, just short of the tunnel, when I saw a couple of cars drawn up, and two or three men standing in the middle of the road. At the sight of my lights, one of them started at once to meet me, holding out his arm. I slowed down, imagining an accident, and came to a standstill at his gesture. A moment later, I regretted it, for underneath his slouched, black Homburg hat, the man who had accosted me wore a mask, which he had at first concealed with his hand, and, a few feet from my head I found myself looking down the barrel of an automatic pistol.

“Stop your engine!” the man ordered, speaking in husky English, but with a decidedly French accent.

I obeyed promptly. There have been times in my life when I have been forced into adventure, and I have never unduly shrunk from it. I fully realised, however, that this was an occasion when discretion was called for.

“What else do you want from me?” I inquired, thinking with some dismay of that *mille* note remaining with several others in my pocketbook.

“Nothing,” was the curt reply. “Descend from your car, and remain at the side of the way there. *Par ici! Bien!*”

I obeyed, and glanced curiously down the road to where the other men were standing. An animated discussion was in progress, but I could only speculate as to its nature. My companion kept guard over me, although occasionally he glanced towards the others.

“A holdup!” I remarked, making an amicable attempt at conversation. “Are you not a little venturesome? We are within the limits of the police patrol from Monte Carlo.”

The man made no reply. He moved his position slightly, so that he was able to keep watch on me and still cast frequent glances at his companions.

“You permit that I smoke a cigarette?” I inquired, taking out my case.

He had swung suddenly round, and I certainly have never disliked the look of a weapon more than his. At the sight of my harmless cigarette case, however, he relaxed.

“Monsieur is not afraid?” he asked.

“Horribly,” I confessed. “However, you have never hurt any one yet, have you, if you are the same gang who robbed the Duc de Nimes and Monsieur de Falleron a few weeks ago?”

“It is the wish of the chief that we should carry on our affairs without violence,” the man announced with a faint sneer, “but we should never hesitate to use force towards unreasonable people. There is a gentleman in the car there who narrowly escaped a bullet through his head. I think he has seen wisdom now.”

There were signs of a breaking up of the little party ahead. Two of the men, both in evening dress, and one whose figure was, I fancied, familiar to me, stepped back into the car headed for Monte Carlo; two of the others entered the limousine pointed in my direction; a third man planted himself a few feet from the chauffeur of the former car. A moment later there was the roar of a powerful engine, and the limousine, starting at a tremendous speed, dashed past us. I could see nothing of the two men inside, but I know something about automobiles, and the lines of this one intrigued me. It was obviously a faked car, clumsily built to conceal a very powerful engine. It was out of sight almost at once.

“And now?” I asked.

“You can go in a few minutes,” my guardian conceded.

Apparently convinced of my reasonableness, he strolled away to where a couple of motor bicycles were propped against the bank, turned on the lights of one, and started the engine. He wheeled it to the side of my car, and stood leaning upon it.

“As a matter of curiosity,” I inquired, “what would happen if another car came up?”

“There are not many who use this road at night. If a car should come, what we did would depend upon you. If you attempted to hail it, or signal to it in any way, I should first shoot you in the leg—not to make too serious an affair of it—afterwards I should shoot through two of the tyres of the car, and bid you all good evening.”

“An amiable programme!” I observed. “And supposing any of the occupants of the car were armed?”

The man shrugged his shoulders.

“One must risk something,” he admitted.

The minutes passed. He took out his watch and looked at it. I, too, glanced at the dial with fascinated eyes. As soon as he had apparently satisfied himself as to the hour, he slipped it back into his pocket, whistled down the road, sprang on to his bicycle, and left me. I watched him make mad progress towards Nice, his exhaust open, his light flaring down the road. Soon his companion followed. Directly they had disappeared I started my car and drove slowly on to join my companions in misfortune. They were very frightened men, both of them, and very angry. The one I recognised first was Van Nestos, an Armenian millionaire, the other, an American motor manufacturer, also enormously wealthy.

“Did they get away with it?” I asked.

“A hundred thousand from me,” Van Nestos confessed.

“And more than that from me,” the American grunted. “Say, where’s the police station at Monte Carlo, Major Forester?”

“In Monaco,” I replied. “We can be there in ten minutes. Come along.”

I went first to show them the way, and we arrived at the Commissariat in little more than the time mentioned. My companions told their story, and I mine. The listening functionary was intelligent, and *gendarmes* were out on their motor bicycles within half an hour. Afterwards Van Nestos, who was still shaking with fright and anger, insisted that I stop at the Hôtel de Paris for a drink. Every now and then he looked longingly towards the telephone.

“You won’t hear anything from the police to-night,” I warned him. “These men have laid their plans exactly. They wouldn’t have let us go if they weren’t sure of being out of reach before they could be caught.”

I finished my drink and prepared to depart. It was already light over Mentone. Van Nestos, within four walls, was beginning to be braver.

“To-morrow,” he announced, “I shall offer a fifty-thousand-franc reward. If the police in this part of the world are worth a dime, we’ll have them.”

I made my *adieux*.

“The police here are clever enough,” I assured him, “but so are the criminals.”

Of course there was nothing else talked about from one end of the Riviera to the other for the whole of the following week but this sensational robbery on the Corniche Road. There had been two previous attempts at a holdup, one of which

had been partially successful and the other a failure, as the great financier whose car was stopped had lost everything he possessed in the way of ready money at Cannes, and had been obliged to borrow a few hundred francs before leaving the Casino. It was obvious that the thieves were in a position to obtain accurate information as to the movements of their proposed victims, and for some nights afterwards Monte Carlo habitués returning from Cannes or Nice travelled together and along the lower road. Meanwhile, the police confessed themselves without a clue. Their telephone instructions intended to block all exits from Nice might possibly have been a little late, but in any case it seemed impossible to trace either the car or the motorcyclists. The ordinary criminal gives himself away in many different fashions—by haunting his favourite bar, by being unusually flush of money, by gifts to his lady love, and many obvious follies. These criminals, however, were undoubtedly of a different type. Their plans had been perfectly laid, and they seemed, so far as one could gather, to have disappeared from the face of the earth. Van Nestos' fifty-thousand-franc reward remained unclaimed, the usual amount of abuse was lavished upon the police of Nice and Monte Carlo, several futile arrests were made, but at no time during the following week was any real progress effected towards the discovery of the missing criminals. I came in for a certain amount of chaff from my friends for my calm acceptance of the situation, but, as I pointed out, if the two losers had been content to accept it, why should I, whom the highwaymen never even attempted to rob, force matters to extremes. Nevertheless, there were points concerning that robbery which kept me thoughtful day after day. I found myself studying the bills announcing the reward. Fifty thousand francs was a very useful sum of money. I even went so far as to make a personal tour of the principal garages in Nice and its environs in search of that curiously formed car. I travelled even farther afield, but here I met with no more success than the police. But for one circumstance of trivial import, the criminals might as well have driven their car over the side of the road into the Mediterranean for any clue they had left behind them.

As soon as the excitement of my adventure had in some measure abated, I found myself lunching again at Beaulieu. Conditions at the famous restaurant seemed absolutely unchanged. Madame, with her enormous appetite, was still there, lunching alone this time. I sat her out, waited until her maid had departed with the Pekingese, and she herself had taken her leave, passing down the room between a little row of bowing waiters. She lingered at the door to talk with Louis for a few moments, but as soon as he returned I took him by the arm and led him out on to the terrace. I ordered some brandy and forced him into a chair.

“Look here, Louis,” I said, “something is preying upon your mind. Do you mean to tell me, as one man to another, that you are allowing that wretched woman to make you miserable?”

“Monsieur is mistaken——” he began.

“No more of this, Louis,” I interrupted firmly. “Tell me why you permit yourself to be worried almost to a shadow by that outrageous female.”

He looked around to be sure that we were not overheard.

“But what can I do?” he demanded. “The *patron* has secured her custom and has left me here with the strictest orders that she is to have everything her own way, that she is to be kept well satisfied, that on no account is she to be denied anything. She has practically the whole of the hotel, the cheques which she sends the *patron* each week are enormous, and—and——”

“Go on, Louis,” I enjoined encouragingly.

“Every day,” he confided miserably, “it is the same. You see what she is like, Monsieur—a terrible woman! I have my little friend at Nice—you know well enough that I am a man of taste—yet all the time she seems to have taken some absurd fancy to me. My life is becoming a horror,” the man went on. “When she sends for me, I have to arrange to be fetched in a few minutes on important business. She is always asking me to dine with her at Nice. The thing is becoming a joke with my clients. I shudder when I hear the telephone from the hotel, or when the page boy comes across. If she doesn’t soon let me alone, Monsieur Forester, I must go—although I am earning more money than ever before in my life and I am devoted to Monsieur Léon. He will never forgive me if by any chance she should be offended, if she should leave.”

I leaned across the table.

“Is this the whole truth, Louis?” I asked him earnestly.

The man’s honesty was transparent.

“What more could there be?” he exclaimed. “What more horrible position could a man be placed in? We will speak frankly, if you will. She makes proposals of affection to me. She keeps telling me of the miserable time she had with her first husband. I have lied, Monsieur; I have done everything. I have told her that I am married. She only laughs and wags her cheque book. It is an obsession, of course, but it is driving me to distraction. If I were independent, if I did not owe the *patron* an eternal debt of gratitude, I should walk out of the place to-day.”

“Then you have nothing more to tell me, Louis?” I persisted.

“What else could there be?” he groaned.

I made him drink his brandy, and I did my best to cheer him up.

“She can’t stay here for ever,” I reminded him.

“But why should she leave?” he rejoined ruefully. “She tells me continually that she was never so comfortable in her life, that nowhere she has travelled has she met with better food and wine. She wins at the tables, although that is nothing. She gives tips of a stupendous size. If I could accept them, Monsieur Forester, she would give me enough to-morrow to be independent for life, but her money I loathe—I cannot touch it. Presents I must accept; money I have the courage to refuse.”

I looked at him thoughtfully, remembering the Louis of last year, portly, benign and dignified. It was a strange collapse in a man, but there was no doubt about his honesty. I lit my final cigarette, and rose.

“Louis,” I advised, “keep your mind from dwelling upon the situation. She’ll give it up in time. What if I promise to bring another admirer along, and distract her attention?”

“I should be Monsieur’s grateful slave,” Louis declared dejectedly, “but it will not happen. Many of my clients here, knowing who she is, and of her wealth, have been more civil to her than I can bring myself to be. She is simply rude to them. There is another gentleman from Nice who visits her frequently, but she never brings him in here. Her smiles are for me, and me alone.”

I patted him on the shoulder.

“Cheer up, Louis,” I enjoined. “I watched her to-day, and I think she is tiring of you. She smiled almost affectionately at one of your clients who bowed when he went out, she only patted your hand once, and she almost found fault with your *sauce tartare*.”

“If only I dared poison her,” Louis muttered, as I took my leave.

At my usual time—a few minutes before one—five days later, I established my luncheon guest, Monsieur Desrolles of Monaco, upon a stool at the bar, seated myself beside him, gave an unnecessary order to my friend Charles, and swung round to find Louis. He came presently towards us, but without the alacrity of former days.

“Monsieur’s table is fortunately disengaged,” he announced, “but we have new clients here to-day.”

I looked down at the restaurant. In France, whether it be a matter of susceptibility or digestion, one chooses usually for luncheon or for dinner a feminine companion, yet to-day, by chance, the tables were mostly occupied by men lunching with a solitary male *vis-à-vis* or in parties. A few of the usual habitués of the place were there, and Mademoiselle *la danseuse* of the moment from Monte Carlo was in

a corner with her latest admirer. At Madame la Comtesse's table were seated her secretary, her lawyer, and a third man—a Parisian, to judge from his appearance. Madame was wearing mauve, with a large hat, and a tulle scarf. Her little Pekingese, too, was adorned with a bow of the same colour. Louis caught me looking towards her, and glanced shamefacedly away.

“Madame la Comtesse is still with us, Louis,” I remarked, as I took the menu.

A momentary gleam of hope lit up his face.

“She has spoken of leaving,” he confided. “Her lawyer is anxious for her to proceed to America to look into some of her investments. Meanwhile, what will Monsieur and his friend fancy?”

We ordered luncheon—a simpler one, I imagine, than usual. I drank my customary two cocktails, but my companion was abstemious, and barely finished his first. When we took our places at the table, Madame glanced at us with some curiosity. For a moment I thought that she was about to bow—a civility which would perhaps not have been out of place from one habitué to another. The arrival of a new dish, however, distracted her attention, and we passed from her mind. My companion looked across at her long and searchingly, but without remark.

We were perhaps halfway through our meal when a little note was brought in to me, which I passed to my companion. He read it carefully, permitted me to glance at the few words, and tore it absently into pieces. Afterwards we continued the conversation in which we had been indulging as to the relative merits of the white wines of the Pouilly and Montrachet districts. For my part, however, my appetite was gone, and I waited impatiently for my brandy and coffee. The sight of those few lines had stirred me curiously. I looked round the place almost as one might look upon a scene in a film or a descriptive chapter in a story, not altogether sure that I myself was one of the little company. There was the tall, dark, rather melancholy violinist, playing a *valse* a few yards away from Madame, accompanied from the rear by his little orchestra; there was Charles in his white linen coat, leaning over the bar counter to catch a glimpse of a passing steamer through the window. Down the curving semicircle of the room, men and women were engaged in the usual business of lunching, with here and there a staccato note of flirtation. There was a party of four men whom I noticed particularly, apparently absorbed in their food, yet with every now and then a curious watchfulness in their demeanour. Mademoiselle *la danseuse* was in a gracious mood, and I could see her fingers steal more than once under the tablecloth. An American, precisely dressed, in a plain grey business suit, with a shirt and tie of alien characteristics, was entertaining two or three loud-voiced, bespectacled ladies who had apparently just landed from some steamer. The

waiters, so carefully selected at the Madrid, passed up and down the room, swift-footed, eager and attentive. As usual, Madame and her party were lunching profusely, and demanding a great deal of attention from Louis, from his subordinate *maître d'hôtel*, their table waiters, and the leader of the orchestra. The whole service of the place seemed almost to centre about them, and with the opening of that third bottle of champagne Madame's cheeks were more flushed than ever. My companion glanced out at the gardens. Another luncheon party had apparently arrived. There were loungers in front of the hotel entrance, more loungers examining a miniature aviary just outside the restaurant. Monsieur Desrolles suddenly addressed me in a lowered tone, and I realised with a thrill of imminent drama where I was—the thing which was about to happen.

“Monsieur will excuse me for a moment,” he begged. “It is better, perhaps—Monsieur will understand.”

He rose to his feet and approached the American, who was just paying his bill. He whispered a word in his ear, to which the departing guest listened, apparently in blank amazement. Then he passed on to another group, where a man was entertaining two ladies, and finally paused before the table of Mademoiselle *la danseuse*, and whispered also in her ear. Then he returned to me. His movements had been so unobtrusive that scarcely any one seemed to have noticed his little *détour*, but he had hardly regained his seat before the American and his party hurriedly took their leave, before Mademoiselle *la danseuse*, with her arm through her companion's, moved to the bar, and the man entertaining the two ladies was clamouring for his bill. My friend summoned the *sommelier*.

“The wine is becoming too cold,” he said. “Please remove it from the pail.”

The man obeyed, and placed the bottle upon the table. Afterwards I knew that this must have been a signal, for the scene which followed, notwithstanding its evidences of magnificent organisation, its swiftness, its unexpectedness, resembled pandemonium. Monsieur Desrolles stepped behind my chair, threw down his unneeded *pince-nez* upon the table, and cast a lightning-like glance up and down the room. The four men who had been lunching alone, and the two others from a distant corner, sprang to their feet. Outside, the newcomers who had been watching the aviary, closed around the door, and before I could realise it the whole company had encircled the table of Madame. Two men had gripped the shoulders of Monsieur the Avocat from Marseilles, two the secretary, two the visitor from Paris, and even before their knives and forks had fallen clattering upon their plates, even before the cry had altogether escaped from the startled lips of any one of them, there were handcuffs upon their wrists. But if these men, her myrmidons, had seemed to

become easy prey to the officers of the law with whom the room appeared unexpectedly to swarm, it was otherwise with Madame. She had risen to her feet at the first alarm, and she seemed veritably to swell in her place as she stood there doing battle for her liberty. She kicked the chair away from behind her, her huge, muscular arms suddenly freed themselves, as though by some magical effort, from the unnatural constraint of her chiffon gown. The first man who laid hands upon her lay senseless upon the floor. With a sudden dive she seized hold of the other and, gripping him in her arms to shield herself from the bullets which threatened, she dashed down the room to the amazement of the scattering company, only to find herself face to face at the door with the guard whom Monsieur Desrolles had posted there. For the first time she must have realised that the game was up. What followed, we saw wedged together in our frantic rush from behind. She held out the struggling man she had been carrying as though to shelter her from the threatened attack, and then, bending one knee, she flung him straight in the faces of the nearest of her antagonists. He fell crashing upon the path and lay there unconscious. There was something terrifying, almost splendid, in the sight of the man, who, with his disguise abandoned and with his feminine trappery hanging around him now in rags, stood dauntlessly facing certain death or capture. Not even the displaced flaxen wig, the patchy complexion, the tattered shreds of his undignified masquerade, could make him ridiculous. One great arm swung out, and laid low a man who had foolishly approached within reach. He stood there, counting the chances against him, and finding them overwhelming. The next moment his right hand had momentarily disappeared, the sunlight flashed no longer upon the diamonds but something more sinister gripped in his fingers. He collapsed amongst them all, but the hand which had rid the world of her most notorious modern criminal had been his own.

For over a week the epicures of the Madrid were denied the delights of their favourite restaurant, for the police went to the extreme lengths of closing the place altogether until their preliminary examination had taken place. On the day before its reopening I went out there to find it still under surveillance, but there was access to the American bar, and Louis wandering about the grounds. He greeted me warmly, and the change in his appearance was marvellous.

“We reopen to-morrow, Monsieur,” he announced cheerfully. “The police have decided that neither Monsieur Léon nor I had any suspicion as to the characters of our guests. Only Jean, the hall porter, was one of their people, and he escaped on the night of the raid.”

“You’re much better, Louis,” I remarked, as we took our cocktails to one of the

small tables.

He looked at me half shamefacedly.

“Monsieur will admit that the situation for me was terrible,” he pleaded; “and the curious part of it is that I, who was so much the subject of her pretended whims, never had the least idea but that she was indeed a woman. She imposed upon every one, and she made a fool of me to keep up the illusion. There was no other disguise, I suppose,” he went on, “which could have concealed the face and figure of Martin Fynes. There were descriptions of him at every police centre, but as a woman—a great, muscular fellow like that! Who would have believed it?”

“I sat opposite to him three times,” I acknowledged, “and I never had a moment’s suspicion.”

“Except for Jean, who was one of them,” Louis went on earnestly, “there was not a soul connected with the place who had the slightest suspicion. The man who I told you used to visit her—was herself. The police found in her room a whole wardrobe of masculine attire, and naturally when there was an expedition on foot she went as a man. You see, the hotel being in the grounds, no one sees who comes in and out, and Madame as a man had become quite a familiar figure, and was accepted as one of her friends. What we are all curious about, Monsieur,” Louis concluded, after a moment’s pause, “is how the police discovered the first clue which led them to the truth. All the time I have been here there has never been a single inquiry concerning the *bona fides* of either Madame or any member of her entourage.”

The fifty thousand francs was already in my pocket, but I hesitated about letting Louis know the truth. It seemed incredible that a momentary glimpse of the secretary’s oblong, platinum watch would have brought to justice one of the greatest of international criminals, so I kept my secret, and the police in that part of the world have the reputation of being very clever fellows.

CHAPTER IV AN ETHICAL DILEMMA

I was standing upon the steps of the Milan foyer gazing down at the gay crowd below and asking myself the inevitable question whether or no it was worth while reviving old associations, when a cloak-room attendant, grey-headed now and heavier with the years, answered my thought.

“Glad to see you back again, Major Forester. It does one good to see some of the old faces sometimes.”

He relieved me of my hat and stick, and retreated with them. After that I hesitated no longer. I took my place amongst the diners at a small table as far removed from the orchestra as possible, ordered a simple dinner, and looked around me without any of that intuitive thrill which is sometimes the precursor of adventure. Yet adventure was to come even before I had finished my melon.

I had lighted a cigarette—one of my bad habits, to smoke during meals—whilst waiting for my *sole Colbert*, and poured out a glass of Chablis, when a young man, who seemed to appear from nowhere, stopped before my table with a slight bow of greeting. He appeared to know me, but so far as I was aware I had never seen him before in my life. He was quietly but well dressed, and would have been good-looking but for some slight pit marks in his face, and a scar on his left temple. Nevertheless, he was personable enough, and his smile was evidently meant to be ingratiating.

“When did you reach England, sir?” he inquired.

I was a little taken aback, but I answered him truthfully.

“This afternoon. You will forgive me, but I don’t seem to recognise you.”

He smiled.

“We have never actually met before,” he admitted, “but I have been expecting you for some time. Perhaps it would excite less comment if I sat down at your table.”

“Why on earth should you?” I asked, a little coldly. “It is not my custom to dine with strangers.”

“Capital!” he murmured. “Still I think you are unnecessarily careful. This place was once the happy hunting ground of espionage. Those days have passed. I doubt whether there is a soul in this room who would recognise either of us.”

I did my best to conceal my irritation.

“Look here,” I said, “I think that you are making some mistake. My name is Forester. To the best of my belief, I have never seen you before.”

He was in no way discomposed. He even leaned a little nearer and lowered his voice to a whisper.

“Marlingham comes back to-night,” he confided. “Somewhere about eleven o’clock. I have an appointment with him for later on.”

“Then for heaven’s sake go and keep it,” I enjoined, a little testily. “I don’t know you; I never heard of Marlingham, and I should be glad to be allowed to go on with my dinner in peace.”

The waiter had arrived with my fish. I took up my knife and fork and ignored this persistent young man. He hesitated for a moment, and then shrugged his shoulders.

“A trifle overdone,” he declared reproachfully. “Still, you are within your rights not to anticipate.”

He strolled away and as soon as I was sure that I was rid of him, I watched his movements curiously. He made his way to a table at which several men and women were already seated—an ordinary-looking crowd, so far as I could see, of well-bred, pleasant people, undistinguishable save for one woman whom I had noticed upon my entrance, a woman who was strikingly dressed in a yellow chiffon dancing gown, which went strangely with her chestnut-coloured hair and brown eyes. She alone seemed to take any notice of the young man’s return. He leaned towards her, and talked for several moments, apparently in a low tone. Afterwards they proceeded with their dinner and I with mine.

I was halfway through my partridge, when a smiling *maître d’hôtel* laid a twisted slip of paper upon the table in front of me. Before I could ask him what it meant, he had passed on. I opened it—just a half-sheet of the hotel note paper without any envelope—and read a few lines written very precisely in a bold upright handwriting in pencil:

You were quite right. Maintain your present attitude. X.

I summoned the *maître d’hôtel*.

“Who gave you this note?” I demanded.

“It was passed on to me by another waiter, sir,” he replied.

“Which one? Where is he?”

The man shrugged his shoulders.

“I am very sorry, sir,” he regretted. “I was busy at the time and I didn’t notice.”

If I had been a woman, and carried a mirror, I should certainly have looked at myself to ascertain whether my appearance was in any way unusual. As I did not possess such a luxury, however, I continued my dinner, a little intrigued by this time

as to what might happen next. I looked around at my fellow diners with a new interest, and was forced to admit that they were not a crowd with any particularly inspiring characteristics. We were on the whole a sedate and almost a commonplace assembly. The young man who had first addressed me had never since glanced in my direction, nor was there any other of my neighbours who seemed to be unduly interested in me, or whom I could possibly identify with the sender of that little note. I finished my dinner, ordered my coffee and *fin*, and laid my cigarette case upon the table.

Soon the orchestra which had been playing through dinner time was replaced by something in the nature of a jazz band, and dancing began. I watched the couples without any real interest. For some time the young lady in the yellow gown retained her seat. Presently, however, she was led on to the floor by an elderly man, to all appearance a typical English lawyer or barrister. She did not once glance towards my table, or show the slightest consciousness of my presence. She danced beautifully, and I saw that she was younger than I had imagined. Afterwards she waltzed with the young man who had approached me, and this time I saw them both glance furtively in my direction. When the music had stopped, the woman paused on the border of the dancing circle to speak with an acquaintance. The young man, after a moment's hesitation, approached me.

"Amabel is in one of her moods to-night," he said in a low tone. "She says there is no reason why you should not dance with her."

Almost as he spoke, she came towards us. I rose to my feet.

"The only reason I can suggest," I rejoined, "is that I have not the pleasure of knowing the lady."

The young man smiled cryptically. He had the irritating air now of one humouring the whim of an eccentric person.

"Permit me to present you, then," he begged. "What name shall I say?"

"My name is Forester—Major Forester," I told him stiffly.

"Amabel," he said, turning towards her, "may I present Major Forester—Miss _____"

"Brown will do excellently," the young lady interrupted, with the faintest of smiles. "Come and dance with me, please, Major Forester."

We danced—in silence for some time, for, although I am not a wonderful performer, I am able to appreciate a perfect partner. The waltz changed to a fox trot, and with its less seductive movements I found opportunity for speech.

"Do you know," I confided, "I think your friend is under some misapprehension as regards me."

“What misapprehension could he be under?” she asked.

And from the first I liked her voice. She spoke so precisely and in such a liquid tone that one listened for that trace of a foreign accent which seemed somehow suggested.

“He appears to think,” I explained, “that we are acquaintances. I am quite sure that I never saw him before in my life.”

She nodded a little vaguely.

“Your school is becoming played out,” she remonstrated. “It is the vogue now to flirt with danger. I suppose, though, you are right. There is always the thousandth chance. Why did you dance with me?”

“Because I admired you, and because you dance beautifully,” I ventured.

Her hand suddenly held mine tightly. I returned the little squeeze.

“I find your pastime amusing,” she whispered softly.

“Let us continue it,” I begged, as the music stopped. “Must we go back to the table?”

She made a little grimace.

“You see who is with us,” she pointed out. “Later perhaps.”

I returned to my place, lit a cigarette, and ordered myself another brandy. Decidedly this home of past adventures, though much of its glamour had departed, still held possibilities!

The music called, but my late partner seemed to have become deaf to its invitation. For some reason or other, the conversation at her table had become much more serious. The man with whom she had danced was leaning forward, drumming upon the table with his fingers, as though to give added effect to what he was saying.

I glanced across at the table twice as the orchestra started afresh, but my late partner gave no sign. People were beginning now to leave. I decided that the mistake as to my identity had been discovered, and called for my bill. When it was brought, there was another twisted up note, which I immediately opened. It contained a few lines in the same upright calligraphy:

I withdraw my congratulations. You are a fool. I shall visit you in your room in a quarter of an hour.

I paid my bill, stuffed the note into my pocket, tried in vain to obtain a parting salute from my late dancing partner, crossed the floor, and, after having bought an evening paper, made my way to the lift. At least, I thought, there was a possibility that if my unknown correspondent kept his word I might learn something of the truth.

One of my few extravagances in life has always been a profound dislike of the bed and bathroom provided by the ordinary hotel. At the Milan, I had discovered a pleasant suite upon the fourth floor of the Court, and in my easy-chair, with whisky and soda by my side, I slowly filled a pipe and awaited developments. They were not long in coming. I had barely been there five minutes when my telephone bell rang. I took up the receiver and uttered the conventional "Hallo!"

"Are you alone?" a voice asked quickly.

"Certainly," I replied.

"Leave your door open. I shall be with you in two minutes."

I replaced the receiver, opened my door, lit my pipe, and again awaited impending events. I had scarcely settled down when I heard the sound of swift and stealthy footsteps outside, the pushing open and closing of my door. My late dancing partner made her breathless entrance. I rose at once to my feet. She seemed to be listening. Outside in the corridor there was blank silence, no sound except the clang of the descending lift. She closed the door. There was nothing in her manner to indicate whether her visit was one of adventure, or a part of the maze into which I seemed to have drifted.

"Tell me," she begged, coming a little farther into the room, "has any one else approached you this evening? You must tell me this quickly, please. We are all the same—uneasy of something, and yet we don't know of what."

She paused breathlessly. I was tired of answering questions. There were a few things I wanted to know myself.

"Sit down, please," I insisted. "Now that you are here, and we are alone, for heaven's sake clear up this mystery for me. Who is the young man with the scarred face who came and spoke to me? Why did you dance with me? Why did he imagine that I ought to have recognised him, or known who he was?"

She assumed the air of a patient woman determined to humour an unruly child.

"His name," she told me, "is Maurice James Philpot."

I produced the second of the hasty notes I had received during dinner.

"It is something," I admitted, "to have penetrated the identity of Mr. Maurice James Philpot. Perhaps you can also tell me whose handwriting that is."

She gave one glance at the note, and if ever I have seen horror chase the natural expression out of a face I saw it then. Twice she tried to rise from her chair. The third time I held out my hand and steadied her.

"I was a fool to come," she exclaimed, "but you were so difficult!"

She moved towards the door, but even at that moment there was a quiet though imperative knock. She turned towards me, and the pallor of her face was such that

her becarmined lips seemed like vivid wounds. Her eyes asked me a dumb, passionate question. I took her by the arm, passed through the sitting room to the entrance beyond, softly opened the door of my bedroom, and pointed to the independent exit on to the corridor.

“I will shut you in,” I whispered. “As soon as I have opened the outside door you can slip away.”

I left her uncertain myself whether or no she fully understood, but I carried out my part of the programme. I closed the bedroom door softly, and went back on tiptoe to the sitting room. Arrived there, I paused for a moment, then, crossing the room, turned the handle of the outside door.

My impression of the man who stood waiting there filled me at first with something of that same apprehension which my late visitor had shown when confronted with that upright handwriting. He was of medium height, wearing a black cape over his evening clothes, and carrying a silk hat in his hand. His beard was black and carefully trimmed; his hair, parted in the middle, was of the same colour. It was his complexion, his eyes, and the extraordinary stillness of the man which terrified. His eyes were uncannily brilliant, set deep back, and his complexion was more than pallid—it was waxen. Apart from that, he was standing perfectly still, without the slightest sign of impatience, without a vestige of movement.

I looked at him, and I had no breath for any obvious inquiry. It is a ridiculous thing to confess, but it was an absolute relief to me when he spoke, and gave actual evidence of being a creature of flesh and blood. He spoke pleasantly but in a voice entirely nondescript as regards inflexion or accent.

“May I come in?” he inquired quietly. “I should be glad of a few minutes’ conversation.”

I became at once more or less myself. I opened the door wider, closed it with unnecessary force, and purposely raised my voice as I answered him.

“Of course you can,” I acquiesced. “If you are the person who wrote me those notes, I am very curious indeed to know what they meant. Come in, please. Won’t you take that easy-chair. Can I offer you a whisky and soda?”

He listened to all I had to say without direct reply. Then he subsided into the chair which I had indicated, and sat there for several moments, subjecting me to the most incomprehensible scrutiny.

“In the first place,” he began, at last, “may I inquire whether I am in time?”

“In time for what?” I asked.

“Your question is a satisfactory response,” my visitor declared, withdrawing a morocco case from the inside pocket of his dinner coat. “I am here to tell you that

we have decided to accept your terms.”

I addressed myself once more to the business of obtaining some explanation as to this mysterious intrigue which was going on around me. I drew my chair up a little and leaned forward.

“Look here, sir,” I said, “I don’t know who you are, I don’t know whom you came from, I don’t know why you wrote me those extraordinary notes at dinner time, and I haven’t the faintest idea what you mean when you say that you have decided to accept my terms. There can be only one explanation of all this confusion. You and several others must be mistaking me for some one else.”

My visitor smiled patiently, but did not cease the task which he had commenced. I gave a little gasp of surprise. He was counting out bank notes from one hand to the other—not five-pound notes, or tens, or fifties, but five hundreds! I stared at them in blank amazement.

“Pretty things, those!” I murmured idiotically.

“They represent an absolutely rational consideration in life,” was the calm reply. “Their present use is that they seal the bargain which we have just concluded.”

I recognised the futility of mere words, and decided to wait upon events. My visitor counted twenty of those wonderful notes, smoothed them out upon his knee, folded them up, and passed them over to me.

“Ten thousand pounds,” he announced, replacing the case in his pocket. “I will now take the liberty of helping myself to one of your cigarettes—you smoke a reasonable brand, I see, and wishing you good night.”

I held the notes in my hand.

“What do I do with these?” I demanded.

My visitor buttoned up his cape and took up his hat—the glossiest I had ever seen, and bearing the name of a well-known maker.

“From what one knows of you, Major Forester,” he remarked, “you are very well in the position to answer your own question. Mind,” he added, as he moved towards the door, “what has been done to-night has been done against my advice. I believe in other measures. I have been overruled. Good night!”

“Look here——” I began.

He glanced at me over his shoulder, and the words dried up on my lips. My instincts towards the convention of speeding the parting guest seemed paralysed. I allowed him to open the door for himself and take his leave. I stood there, listening to his retreating footsteps with ten thousand pounds’ worth of bank notes clutched in my fingers.

I presently poured myself out a stiff whisky and soda, re-lit my pipe, and,

determined to deal with the situation in a common-sense fashion, carefully went back through the incidents of the day. I had arrived late in the afternoon from abroad, having wired for such accommodation as I had found reserved for me. I had been received pleasantly by the manager, who was evidently new, and who had seemed a little uncomprehending when I had spoken of the old days I had spent in the Court. I had registered in my correct name. I had telephoned to no friends, nor had I left the hotel since my arrival. Such things as had happened to me had happened in the sequence recorded, and the longer I thought about them the more completely I failed to find in my mind any possible explanation. In the end, I knocked out my pipe, put the notes into an envelope, inscribed it with the date and hour, and wrote as follows:

Handed to me by an unknown man for an unknown reason, hour and date as above.

Then I went to bed.

The first gleam of enlightenment came to me when in one of the principal columns of my morning newspaper I read that Major Forester, an ex-King's Messenger, but now retired, had been one of the victims of a crash in the afternoon service of aeroplanes from Paris to Croydon. There was only a brief record of the officer in question, who was no connection of mine, and whose career seemed to have been in a way undistinguished.

I had intended to visit several of my tradespeople in the morning, but the conviction that under the circumstances I should have callers was so strong that I remained in my rooms until almost one o'clock. No one came near me, however, nor did my telephone bell once ring. At five minutes past one, I left a note in the office that I should be back during the afternoon and made my way towards Piccadilly. Just as I was passing the St. James's Club, a taxicab drove up, and, with a little start, I recognised in its solitary occupant my visitor of the night before. I patted the breast pocket of my coat to make sure that the notes were still there, and waited whilst he paid the driver. He turned round to find me by his side.

"Good morning," I said.

He looked at me doubtfully.

"Good morning," he answered coldly, and would have passed on, but I still blocked the way.

"Perhaps you can understand, now," I continued, "my astonishment of last night. You were evidently taking me for the poor fellow of the same name who was killed."

Again the man impressed me with that sense of extraordinary stillness. He was

leaning slightly upon the gold top of his malacca cane, so perfectly dressed that I found myself wondering at the set of his collar and cravat and the rich purple of his tie.

“I fear, sir,” he said, “that you are making some mistake. I have not the honour of your acquaintance.”

I swallowed hard. Just as I had imagined myself stepping back into the world of commonplace things, the mists of Arabia were once more rolling up.

“Look here,” I expostulated, “you came to my rooms last night at the Milan Court, and you handed me ten thousand pounds, which I have in my pocket here for you. You had better take them. I don’t want to inquire into your business, but they were evidently meant for the Forester who was killed.”

Again the shadow of that irritatingly patient smile.

“My dear fellow,” he protested, “I don’t know who you are, and I am not a poor man, but I can assure you that I am not in the habit of going about distributing ten thousand pounds to perfect strangers. You will excuse me. I am a little late for luncheon here.”

I stood in the middle of the pavement with the pedestrians streaming by on each side, and I began to wonder whether I were in the throes of some sudden streak of lunacy.

“Sir,” I insisted firmly, “I repeat that you wrote me two notes at dinner time at the Milan last night. You visited my rooms afterwards. You told me that you had accepted my terms, and you handed me twenty five-hundred-pound notes. I have them in my pocket at the present moment.”

He lifted his silk hat to a lady passing—the same hat, and the same maker’s name inside. Then he turned back to me.

“My friend,” he inquired, “have you lived in the East at all?”

“Some part of my life,” I admitted.

“A touch of the sun,” he said meaningly. “Be careful! These little weaknesses will crop up sometimes. Last night I was dining at Claridge’s, I have never seen a five-hundred-pound note in my life—or you. Good morning!”

I watched him disappear within the portals of the club. He whispered a word to the commissionaire who looked at me suspiciously. Nevertheless, I stepped forward and addressed him.

“Can you tell me the name of that gentleman?” I asked.

The man scrutinised me sternly.

“You should know better than to ask such a question, sir,” he replied. “Move on, please.”

So I moved on to luncheon, with the ten thousand pounds still in my pocket.

I met a few friends at the club, and spent a pleasant hour or so, during which I recovered a certain amount of confidence in my own sanity. Shortly before the closing hour, I presented myself at my bank, and asked to see the chief cashier. I produced my notes.

“Can you tell me,” I asked, first of all, “if these are genuine?”

The man examined them gingerly, produced a magnifying glass, shook them, and nodded.

“There is not the slightest doubt about that, sir,” he informed me.

I produced the packet, the contents of which rather astonished him.

“Will you put these to a deposit account in my name?” I instructed. “I wish them cleared through the Bank of England as soon as possible, but I am not proposing to draw against them at first. I will come in and see you again in a few days, but in the meantime I should be glad if you would drop me a line to the Milan Court if by any chance payment of the notes should be stopped.”

I was an old client, but he looked at me doubtfully.

“I understand that you are not wishing to draw any of this money, sir?” he asked.

“Not a penny,” I assured him.

I played a rubber or two of bridge that afternoon at another club to which I belong, but the game ended early, and I found myself back at the Milan by six. The sounds of music in the foyer attracted me, and I strolled down to witness the last stages of a *thé dansant*. As I stood upon the steps I recognised, with a little start of satisfaction, the young lady with the chestnut hair who had spent a portion of the preceding evening in my bedroom. I crossed towards her with a smile of welcome. She was accompanied by the elderly lady with whom she had been dining.

“I wonder whether I might have a dance?” I ventured.

She looked at me, not unpleasantly, but with a slight air of surprise. Her companion raised her lorgnette. Even then I could not realise what was about to happen.

“I am sorry,” the young lady said, rather stiffly, “but I do not dance with strangers.”

I had become hardened to surprises, so I recovered myself more quickly than might otherwise have been the case.

“But I am not a stranger,” I told her. “I was presented to you last night. We danced together, and——”

I broke off there. What I was on the point of adding might possibly have been indiscreet. The young lady’s brown eyes, which I had admired very much the night

before, were fixed upon me coldly. Her eyebrows were drawn slightly together.

“I am sure that you are making a mistake,” she said, “or you would not need me to tell you twice that I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance. Who did you say presented you to me?”

“The young man who was with you,” I replied. “He did not tell me his name, but I think you told me that it was Philpot—Maurice Philpot.”

She turned her shoulder towards me.

“You are entirely mistaken,” she insisted.

I backed away, feeling more or less of a fool, but at the top of the steps I came face to face with the young man who had first approached me on the previous evening. He showed no signs of recognition, but I buttonholed him firmly.

“Look here,” I said, “I want you to come with me and remind the young lady to whom you presented me last night of my existence.”

He looked me sternly in the eyes.

“You must be making some mistake,” he said. “I haven’t the slightest idea who you are.”

Although I suppose I ought to have been prepared for it, this final shock was at the moment the most unrealisable of them all. I stared at him blankly. Then I pointed down the room.

“I sat at that table there at dinner last night,” I told him. “You came up to me and said a few words—obviously taking me for some one else. Anyhow, later on you presented me to the young lady with whom you had been dancing. You’re not going to deny that, of course?”

He shook his head gently, and began to move away.

“I hope you won’t mind my saying so,” he declared, “but I think you must have dined somewhere exceedingly well last night. I can only repeat that I neither saw you, spoke to you, nor introduced you to anybody.”

Then I lost my temper.

“Be damned to the whole lot of you!” I exclaimed, and made my way up to my rooms.

I dined at my favourite club that night, and in the course of the evening I found myself one of a small group who were discussing the tragic death of my namesake. When the majority had drifted away, to bridge or billiards, and there were only three of us left, an old friend of mine—Angus Haynes—who was in a Government office, spoke for the first time.

“It was a terrible end for any one, of course,” he said, glancing around to be sure that we were alone; “but, on the other hand, I am not sure that it was not for the

best.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“No relation of yours, was he?”

“Not the slightest.”

“Well, I am afraid, if the truth were known, Forester was a pretty bad lot. He lost his job as King’s Messenger during the War, and neither of the recognised branches of the Intelligence Department would employ him at all. Since then there have been some very unpleasant rumours. In fact, I don’t think I should be betraying any confidence if I told you that this last time, from the moment of leaving Paris, he was shadowed. He would have been met at Croydon, and although the evidence at present was insufficient to go to the full length of arresting him, I fancy that even that would have happened during the next few weeks.”

“Arresting him for what?” I asked, a little breathlessly.

“As a spy.”

“The word seems to have a sort of pre-War flavour about it,” the third of our little party observed.

Angus Haynes shrugged his shoulders.

“There is still a great deal of information,” he said, “especially in the part of the world from which Forester was just returning, which several countries besides our own are very anxious to get hold of. One of these countries, as I happen to know, has two agents who were waiting in London for the express purpose of meeting Forester.”

“Would it be a great advantage to your department,” I asked, “to have these people pointed out?”

Angus Haynes smiled as he rose to his feet.

“Not the slightest,” he assured me. “They take the most meticulous care to remain unsuspected, but we know them all perfectly well—and what we didn’t know,” he added, dropping his voice a little as he passed out, “we found by going through Forester’s papers.”

This was all the explanation I ever received of the extraordinary behaviour of the girl in the yellow dancing dress with the chestnut hair, the man with the scarred face, and the waxen-complexioned foreigner who had visited me in my rooms. Not one of the three showed up again at the Milan, or came anywhere near me. I was able to piece the story together a little more completely after a conversation with the reception clerk and headwaiter, both of whom had been begged to point me out to them, and the only problem that remains is, after all, rather an intriguing one.

What am I to do with that ten thousand pounds?

CHAPTER V

THE FUGITIVE OF ADELPHI TERRACE

I was in the act of closing the front door of the building in which my temporary abode was situated, and stepping out between the spiked iron railings on to the pavement of Adelphi Terrace, when I recognised the familiar but always exciting sound of a police chase near at hand. From where I stood, I could hear the hurrying footsteps, the disjointed shouts, always with their underlying note of savagery, and a shrill police whistle in the distance. I stepped hastily forward, and almost at that moment the fugitive appeared, swung himself round by the railings and prepared to continue his flight. He was barely half a dozen yards away from me, and I had a lightning-like impression of his miserable state. He was small, shabbily dressed, ginger-haired and sandy of complexion. The blood was streaming from one side of his face, and his breath was coming in little sobbing gulps. Even in those few moments the blueness of his eyes moved me to wonder, and the twitching of his agonised lips was like the whimpering of a frightened child. Close behind came the chase. It was a matter of seconds now before they too would appear round the corner to pounce exultantly upon their quarry. The little man seemed indeed wholly at their mercy. He had swung himself round the corner, taken two steps along the pavement, but, at the sight of me standing there, he had hesitated—a hesitation which must be fatal—unless——

A great dramatist has written a play to prove that the instinct of helping any creature to escape from constitutional authority is practically a primeval one. I subscribed to that instinct without pause or delay. A look flashed between us, and he understood. I stepped a little on one side. He sprang at the door, which I had held ajar, disappeared inside, and slammed it after him. The footsteps and catcalls were now almost at hand, the Terrace was deserted and I myself could scarcely hope to escape questioning if discovered loitering there. I played the Jesuit. To avoid a spoken lie, I acted one. I crossed the street hastily, leaned over the railing and peered below into that strange piece of waste ground which borders the Embankment gardens. The chase—consisting of the usual crowd—two or three rough-looking men who seemed to be in earnest, half a dozen loiterers who had evidently joined in the man hunt for the thrill of it, and a sprinkling of others, mostly nondescripts—accepted the hint without qualm or hesitation, crossed the road and plunged down the steps into the little entry, scarcely troubling to glance along the empty Terrace. They did not even stop to ask me a question. My attitude and apparent interest in the blank space below were enough for them. A burly policeman

pushed his way from the rear and disappeared round the corner of the steps in a couple of bounds. I made the inevitable inquiry from one of the pursuers who seemed to have had enough of the chase and had come to a standstill at the steps.

“What’s the little man done?”

The youth shook his head.

“Dunno,” he answered. “I just seen ’em all running and came along.”

I re-crossed the street, turned my key in the lock, and entered. I closed the door carefully, made my way to the second floor and switched on the electric light. There was no one in sight. I looked upwards, and, three flights above, I caught sight of a white terrified face, peering through the banisters. I called to him softly.

“Come down and I’ll let you in. There’s no one else in the building. These are all offices.”

The face disappeared, and soon I heard the sound of light, quick footsteps. When the hunted man came to the last flight of stairs and slackened his pace a little as he approached me, I felt almost inclined to smile. His appearance was entirely that of a frightened, even a terrified child. He looked ridiculously young, yet the wound on his cheek and the partly dried blood gave a touch of the sinister to his appearance. He came hesitatingly towards me.

“They’ve all gone on,” I told him. “Come this way.”

I unlocked my door, and he followed me into the little hall. I pushed open the door of the bathroom, and threw him out some towels from the cupboard.

“Do what you can to your face,” I recommended, “and brush your clothes.”

He looked down at his shabby blue serge suit apologetically.

“I fell down once or twice,” he confided, speaking in a not unpleasant voice with some trace of a cockney accent. “Curse them all,” he added, with a sudden vindictive note in his tone. “They ran me pretty near to death, and there wasn’t one of those who nigh caught me who’d ever seen me before or knew whether I’d done anything or not. Blast them!”

“Make yourself look as decent as you can,” I directed, “and then come this way.”

I passed into my sitting room and looked out of the window. One or two youths and men who had abandoned the chase were slowly climbing the steps, and dispersing towards Duke Street or along the Terrace, without even a glance at my front door. I turned away, seated myself in my easy-chair and in a few minutes my guest made his timid entry. His appearance was very much improved. The wound had evidently not been a deep one, and he had been able to wash off most of the blood. He carried a towel in his hand with which he dabbed his chin every now and

then. He had made some attempt to straighten his mass of touseled hair, and he had brushed his clothes until the shine of wear was visible. A more inoffensive-looking person I have never seen.

“Well, what have you been up to?” I asked him.

“It is a longish story, gov’nor,” he answered hesitatingly.

I saw his eyes fixed greedily upon the sideboard. I mixed him a mild whisky and soda, and another for myself.

“Sit down there,” I invited, pointing to a chair. “You’ll have to tell me all about it before I can make up my mind whether to march you round to the police station or not.”

He shivered a little.

“I don’t think you’ll do that, gov’nor.”

“I may. A man doesn’t run away for nothing, you know.”

He drank, or rather gulped down, his whisky and soda. Now that I looked at him closely, I saw that there were little wrinkles about his eyes. He was probably not so young as I had thought.

“Have they gone?” he asked, glancing towards the window.

“I believe so,” I answered. “They will think that they missed you down that entry. It’s where you ought to have gone at any rate.”

He shook his head as he sank wearily into the chair to which I had pointed.

“I was done,” he confessed. “I couldn’t have kept on my legs another minute. My knees ain’t left off trembling yet.”

“Now then, out with it,” I enjoined. “I’ve given you a chance, but whether I help you further or not depends on what you have to tell me.”

He looked into the fire despondently. Then he looked at me, studied my face, almost, as it seemed, hungrily, as though he were trying to make up his mind what manner of man I was.

“I could tell it better on a drop more whisky.”

I had made the first dose mild enough, so I repeated it. He sucked it down greedily.

“I’m a ship’s steward, sir,” he confided balancing the tumbler in his hands. “Bibby Line between here and Australia. I was on the *Oretavia*, landed early this morning at Tilbury.”

“You haven’t been long getting into trouble,” I commented.

He shivered, listened for a moment, and rose to his feet. He made his way on tiptoe to the window and peered down from behind the curtain into the street.

“There’s more people about down there,” he remarked uneasily, “a cop, too,

over by the railings.”

I left my place and stood by his side. There were a few passers-by and certainly a policeman talking to the man who looks after unattended motor cars, but there was nothing particularly disturbing.

“You’re as safe here as anywhere,” I assured him. “Get on with your story and I shall know what to do if they come here for you.”

He resumed his place.

“When I’ve told my story,” he said drearily, “you may want to march me round to the police station yourself.”

“That depends,” I told him. “Get on with it.”

“It’s what the newspapers would call ‘An Everyday Drama,’” he began, looking sorrowfully into the fire. “I married a good enough girl a couple of years ago—I’d been saving up a long time for it. She didn’t mean no harm. She was good enough then, I think, but these long voyages was too much for her. This last time they let me off the ship early, and I suppose I got home before I was expected. Anyhow, there he was—the man I’d always been afraid of—sitting in the kitchen smoking his pipe.”

I lit a cigarette, simply that I might have an excuse to look away from him. His lips were whimpering again, and there was a suspicious break in his voice.

“We had words, of course,” he went on. “Agnes she didn’t seem to know rightly what to do. She wouldn’t admit anything, and she wouldn’t deny. He just sat there, and most of the time he laughed at me. At last I got up. ‘Look here, little spitfire,’ he said to me, ‘if you want your wife back again you’ve got to fight for her. How does that strike you?’ I looked at him, and I couldn’t see nothing for a moment. He was over six feet—a drayman by trade—with great shoulders and arms—why he could pretty well put me in his pocket. And he wanted to fight me for my wife!”

“What did you do about it?”

“I told him I’d fight,” the little man continued, with a queer light shining in his blue eyes—“and I did fight. Only me weighing about eight stone and him fourteen, and him being a fighting bully and me never having hurt a man before in my life, I had to equal things up a bit. He was toying with me. I could see what his game was. He just wanted to get hold of me, and he was going to throw me out, but when he bent over to grab me by the neck—I surprised him.”

There was something sinister in the simple conclusion to his sentence. I leaned forward. I felt the cigarette burning away between my fingers. The little man had paused in his story. He was moistening his lips with his tongue. The seconds of that silence seemed like a whole epoch. I heard a train shriek on its way into Charing

Cross Station, the tooting of taxi horns in the Strand, the commissionaires' whistles showing that the theatres were emptying.

"Yes, I surprised him," my companion repeated, breaking at last that incredible silence. "The light wasn't too good, and I'd got hold of my knife when he wasn't looking. As he came for me, I stabbed him right in the chest. I ain't strong, but I drove hard that time, and some of the blood on my cheek—that wasn't all where I fell down—some of it was his. He looked at me kind of helpless-like—couldn't believe it—and then he crumpled up."

"You mean that you killed him?" I cried.

The fugitive looked at me plaintively.

"He had chosen to fight me for my wife," he pleaded. "I couldn't fight him with my fists. Look at them."

He held them up—a child's doubled-up hands and thin at that.

"It had to be made fair," he went on. "I didn't ask him to come and steal my wife. He got what was coming to him."

"And then?" I asked, somehow afraid of another silence.

"Agnes, I think she was fearful I was going to do her in too," he proceeded. "She rushed out into the street. After that there was nothing for me to do. I'd felt brave enough for the first few minutes. I'd meant to sit there until the police came, but all of a sudden my courage went. I wasn't glad he was dead any longer. I followed Agnes out into the street, and I ran away, and presently they ran after me. So that's that!"

He finished his story with a little gulp of satisfaction. I could see him watching eagerly to gather what effect it had had upon me.

"Do you really believe that the man is dead?" I said.

"I hope so," was the dogged reply. "I tried to kill him."

We sat and looked at one another—this self-confessed murderer of puny physique and I who had given him refuge. Perhaps in a measure we were each seeking to read what was in the other's thoughts.

"What are you going to do about me, sir?" he ventured at length.

"I believe," I decided, after a moment's hesitation, "that the best advice I could offer you would be to give yourself up."

"I sha'n't do that," he declared sullenly. "I've got a chance of getting away, anyhow, if you don't peach."

"I shall not peach," I assured him. "I was responsible for rescuing you from that crowd, and I certainly shall not give you up to the police. On the other hand you must remember this. They lost the trail completely at that alley. When they find that it

leads them no farther they will visit these houses one by one—the nearest at any rate—to see if by any chance you could have slipped in.”

“Do you think they’ll come to-night?” he asked anxiously.

“I can’t tell,” I answered. “Have you any plans yourself for getting away?”

“If I could get down to Southampton,” he confided, “I could work a passage on a South American steamer. It wouldn’t be any use my going near Tilbury, or any of the London docks—they’ll be looking for me there—but I’ve got a pal—a ship’s chandler—in Southampton. He’d see me through it.”

“Have you any money?”

“Not a penny. The bit of pay I’d drawn—it wasn’t much, for I’d had to send Agnes something every week—was in my overcoat pocket.”

“And when did you think of trying to get to Southampton?”

“To-night, sir—midnight train,” was the prompt reply. “You see it happened too late to be in the morning papers. There won’t be anything in till the afternoon editions, so except for the police I’ll have a good chance of getting away. If you could lend me a coat and hat, sir—and help me a little about my fare,” he added wistfully.

I crossed the room to my desk and counted out some notes. Then I went to the bathroom and found a last year’s winter overcoat which was too small for me, and a bowler hat.

“Try these,” I enjoined, returning. “The coat will be too large for you, of course, but it might pass muster.”

He put them on quickly.

“If you would lend me a razor for a few minutes, sir,” he suggested.

I waved him off to the bathroom. In ten minutes, with a walking stick and a pair of gloves of mine, clean-shaven and with a cigarette in his mouth, he paraded for my inspection. I pushed the little bundle of notes into his hand.

“I don’t know whether I’m doing right or wrong,” I admitted. “Good luck to you!”

His eyes were brimming with tears. He half extended his hand. I shook it and escorted him downstairs. He passed unnoticed out on to the Terrace and, swinging his stick, disappeared into the shadows. I looked at my watch, and finding that the whole episode had taken longer than I had fancied, gave up my idea of a short visit to the club and went to bed.

I was engaged during the time when fate led me to take a hand in the affairs of Alfred Pegg—as I afterwards found his name to be—upon some literary work of no

great importance to any one except myself. The next morning was wet, so after breakfast I settled down to a few hours' writing. I had scarcely begun, however, when the bell of my flat rang, and Jennings, my servant, somewhat diffidently disturbed me.

"A young person has called, sir," he announced. "She says that she must see you at once."

"Any name?" I asked.

"No name, sir."

I was on the point of motioning him away when a sudden thought occurred to me. Without any obvious reason, I connected this visitor with my last night's adventure.

"What sort of a young person?" I inquired.

Jennings coughed.

"Not a lady, sir, by any manner of means," he confided. "If I might venture to say so, I do not think she is a young woman you would be likely to know anything about."

"She knew my name?"

Jennings hesitated.

"Now I come to think of it, sir," he admitted, "she asked for the gentleman who lived here."

"Show her in," I ordered tersely, rather to his surprise.

I understood Jennings's difficulty as soon as he had ushered in my caller. The young woman was dressed in the somewhat flamboyant fashion of the moment, her skirts were very short and her hair yellow. Her face was not innocent of cosmetics. Her manner was respectful enough, but with that faint indefinable suggestion of underlying freedom which seems to belong to a certain class all over the world. She waited until the door was closed.

"Won't you sit down?" I invited.

She chose an easy-chair close to me.

"Are you the gentleman who helped Alfred last night?" she demanded.

"Who is Alfred?" I inquired. "And who are you?"

"Alfred is my husband," she explained. "He's got himself into a whole lot of trouble. You know all about it?"

"Do I? If you are Alfred's wife, I suppose you saw what happened?"

She shivered, and half closed her eyes. I had an idea, however, that she was not so greatly affected as she seemed.

"I suppose Alfred wasn't so much to be blamed," she admitted. "It was his own

fault, though, for marrying me. I was never one to sit quietly at home with a husband at sea for three months. There are some women might do it, I couldn't. I warned him of that. Then he always knew that Jim Meadows was a pal of mine. He took his risks, Alf did, when he married me. I never thought he'd cut up rough like yesterday though—never thought he had it in him."

"Well," I suggested, "tell me exactly what you want of me."

She looked at me earnestly. I had no longer any doubts concerning her.

"I suppose," she reflected, "Alfred would about kill me, too, if he knew I'd come here after all he told me of your goodness to him, but what am I to do? I've lost them both now. Jim used to help me from time to time, and Alfred always sent his pay regular. Now I've got nothing, and I don't mind telling you I'm not a worker."

"You are perfectly sure, then," I insisted, "that it was not your husband who advised you to apply to me for help?"

"Not on your life!" she replied hastily. "He'd about kill me if he knew. To hear him talk there isn't another gentleman in the world but you."

"But how is it that you found your way here?" I asked. "When did you see your husband?"

She smiled triumphantly.

"I just knew what he'd do. Whilst the police were looking for him to double back to some of his old haunts, and the tecs were on their way down to Tilbury, I just made my way to Waterloo and watched all the trains to Southampton. I knew where his great pal lived. Sure enough, last night at twenty minutes to twelve, there he was upon the platform. I didn't recognise him at first," she went on—"I'll admit that—but he started when he saw me, and gave the whole show away. Besides, Colson, his Southampton pal, was with him. They'd met at the booking office, accidental like."

"Well, if you wanted money," I remarked, "your husband had some. He could have spared you a little."

"That's just what he couldn't do," she replied eagerly. "You'd given him ten pounds, and enough for his fare. You see he told me all about it, and how you pushed him in here out of the street. Colson is sending him to sea to-night in a pretty well empty tramp steamer bound for South America. It'll take all the ten pounds to get him there. The three of us had a drink together, but Colson wouldn't let him part with a quid. Of course Alf promised to send me some as soon as he'd got a job, but that may be months, and what I want to know is how am I going to live until then?"

"An interesting problem, no doubt," I remarked, keeping my eyes fixed upon

her. "The only thing I don't see is where it concerns me."

She smiled at me meaningly.

"Well, it might," she ventured.

"Explain, won't you?" I insisted.

She stretched out her hands towards my cigarettes.

"May I have one?"

She helped herself without waiting for my reply, took a mirror from a cheap and tawdry bag which she was carrying, studied her reflection for a moment, and indulged in a little grimace.

"Not looking quite my best this morning," she remarked. "Not my fault though, after yesterday. Ugh!"

She shivered. Then she went on.

"Couldn't you help me a little?" she begged, leaning forward in her chair. "Just a few pounds a week to be going on with?"

"Certainly not," I answered. "There is not the slightest reason why I should."

"You helped Alfred," she reminded me. "Surely I'm as well worth spending money on?"

"I helped your husband to escape from the law," I replied—"perhaps unwisely—but I did so upon impulse, and have not regretted it. His position was a serious one, and I looked upon you as the person responsible for the crime he committed, and not himself."

Her face hardened.

"Look here," she said, "I've got to live as well as Alfred. I don't wish him no harm, and I don't wish you no harm either, but Alfred's killed my man, and if I go to the police station and tell them where he is, there'll be something for me out of it, and if I tell them," she added, "that you helped him to escape last night and gave him the money for his ticket, why there'd be something for me out of that, too."

"So you're trying a little blackmailing, are you?" I remarked.

"You can call it what you like," she replied sullenly. "Much better to be amiable about it and make friends."

Now, my first impulse was to ring the bell which stood upon my desk, and to have her shown into the street. So far as her threat to me myself was concerned, I was perfectly ready to do so. And then I thought of the poor little man who had sat opposite to me last night, and told me his pitiful story. I somehow felt that the personality of his wife would tell against him rather than for him at the trial.

"You are perfectly at liberty to inform the police of my share in your husband's escape," I assured her, "but why don't you give him a chance?"

“Why should I?”

“Because whatever he did,” I pointed out sternly, “was the result of your infidelity to him.”

“He shouldn’t have used the knife.”

“How else was he to fight?” I demanded. “A puny little fellow like your husband up against a six-foot drayman!”

Curiously enough the idea seemed to afford her an unholy satisfaction.

“Jim could have broke his neck by just squeezing it,” she said.

“Yet you blame your husband for using a knife. Anyhow, there the matter stands. He came home, found you with your latest choice, and revenged himself. The law takes one view; human nature another. If you’re a sensible woman, you won’t do a single thing to prevent his escape.”

She meditated for a moment. She was distinctly no fool, for she changed her tactics very cleverly.

“I’d like Alfred to have another chance,” she declared. “I’d like to let him get away. I wouldn’t even mind going out to South America after him, if he finds a good job, but I ask you, sir, how am I to live and keep myself in any way respectable until he sends me money?”

“Do you wish to keep yourself respectable?” I asked bluntly.

She tossed her head.

“There’s ways and means,” she murmured, with that peculiar smile again at the corners of her lips. “I’m not too fond of hard work and that’s a fact, and there’s no one could say anything against one gentleman friend.”

I considered for a moment.

“Look here,” I said, “so far as I’m concerned, I’m perfectly indifferent as to any information you could hand to the police, but I should like your husband to have another chance. As to anything in the nature of a regular allowance from me to you, that would be out of the question. I will give you twenty-five pounds now in cash, to keep your mouth shut.”

“Fifty,” she suggested, with a covetous gleam in her eyes.

My momentary hesitation was of course fatal. I counted out fifty pounds. She produced a soiled card.

“You wouldn’t like to come now and then and see how I’m getting on?” she invited.

I took no notice of her proposal, nor did I appear to see the card.

“In consideration of that money which I have paid you,” I stipulated, “I shall also expect that when you give your evidence at the inquest, you will do your best for

your husband. Your friend is dead; nothing that you say can affect him. Your evidence may make all the difference in case at any time your husband is brought home to stand his trial.”

She rose unwillingly to her feet.

“Can’t think why you take such an interest in that little squib of a man,” she grumbled, “when you treat me as though I were of no account whatever. However, I bear no ill will against Alf, and, as you say, poor old Jim’s gone. Good morning, sir.”

I was holding open the door, and she departed, still unwillingly. I closed the door behind her, and went back to my work. Poor Alfred!

My studious morning, however, was destined to suffer more than one interruption. Barely a quarter of an hour had passed before Jennings again made his appearance. He was carrying a card in his hand, and he had the air of one impressed.

“The gentleman’s waiting, sir,” he announced.

I glanced at the card:

Inspector Brownlow,
Scotland Yard

with “C.I.D.” in small letters in the left-hand corner.

I tried to look as though I were used to receiving visits from highly placed officials of the law, but I was inwardly conscious of a certain amount of apprehension.

“Show the gentleman in, Jennings,” I directed.

The inspector, very true to type, formal but in no sense of the word overbearing, made his prompt appearance. He looked at me very keenly. “Major Forester?” he inquired.

“That is my name,” I admitted.

“A word with you, if you please, sir.”

I motioned to Jennings, who left us. The inspector, obeying my gesture of invitation, took a chair.

“I have ventured to call, Major Forester——” he began looking steadily across at me, “to a certain extent unofficially. Last night there was a police chase in this district in which the man who was hunted rather mysteriously got away. You will perhaps have seen something of it, sir?”

“I did,” I admitted.

The inspector stroked his chin.

“The police who were following the criminal, and the rest of the crowd,” he continued, “lost him just below your window. Under certain conditions it would come within the province of my duty to make inquiries at the three or four houses—this is one of them—in which the fugitive might have taken refuge.”

“You can search these premises, if you like,” I suggested affably.

“Quite unnecessary, thank you, sir,” the inspector replied. “It will put matters upon a simpler footing if I tell you at once that I have just seen the wife of the wanted man leave your flat. You will perhaps be so kind as to tell me anything you may know with regard to his escape, and also the object of his wife’s visit to you this morning.”

Well, there I was, up against it, and without the slightest inclination to make a bad matter worse by inventing an improbable tale or being committed for contempt of court by refusing to answer reasonable questions. I pushed across the cigarettes—an offer which the inspector declined with a shake of the head. I lit one myself, however, and, leaning back in my chair, told him the whole of the story, with the exception of the destination of the fugitive and his projected means of escape. The inspector was a good-looking man, with a hard, clean face and keen, grey eyes. It was not an expressive face, yet as I told my story I fancied I saw signs first of surprise, then almost of emotion in the way he received the details. When I had finished, he was silent for several moments. He had walked to the window and was standing with his back to me.

“I have told you, Inspector, as much as I intend to,” I concluded, after a brief pause. “If I have committed an offence, I am quite ready to answer for what I have done, but I do not propose to tell you the man’s present whereabouts until I am forced to.”

My visitor picked up his cap.

“I shall trouble you, sir,” he said, “to come with me.”

“Am I under arrest?” I asked.

“Not precisely—not at the present moment. We will discuss the situation again a little later on. Perhaps you had better go out smoking a cigarette, sir, as I am in uniform. I have no wish to cause you any embarrassment.”

I called for my hat and stick, and we left the flat, the inspector whistled for a taxicab, and gave an address which I failed to catch. We pulled up presently in a side street on the way to the City, before a large and opulent looking public house.

“A question of identification, sir,” my companion explained. “Will you please follow me.”

I obeyed without demur, we entered the place unnoticed, and sat down at a

small table in the corner. Almost immediately I rose again to my feet with a little start of surprise. The inspector pushed me back again, however, into my place, and with a peremptory gesture checked the exclamation which had almost escaped me. I stared across the room in blank wonder. Seated upon two chairs at the bar were my friend Alfred and his wife. A bottle of champagne stood before them, and they were devouring with evident satisfaction considerable portions of bread and cheese.

“Our friend, I think,” the inspector remarked.

I looked at him curiously. Suddenly he smiled, and I realized at once what that other emotion had been which had driven him from his chair to the window of my room.

“Ginger Alf, we call him, sir,” the inspector continued, “and I don’t know that there’s a petty criminal upon our records who’s provided the Force with more amusement. This last little affair with you, though, is a fair masterpiece. Of course you have gathered by now that all that tale of his being a ship’s steward and coming back and killing a man was bunkum, and very good bunkum too. Alf isn’t what I should call much of a criminal. A shoplifting job is about his limit, but he is cute—as cute as they make ’em.”

“But what were they all after him for yesterday, then?” I gasped.

“For pinching the change from a sovereign in a baker’s shop,” the inspector replied with a humorous gleam in his eyes. “He wasn’t as clever as usual when he tried to make a getaway, for the money was found on the floor, and we haven’t a charge against him for the moment. How much did he get out of you, if I might make so bold, sir?”

“I’d rather keep that to myself,” I confessed.

Just at that moment my ginger-haired little friend looked round. He was holding his glass of champagne in one hand and a portion of bread and cheese in the other. He recognised us both, and a look of blank dismay gradually spread itself over his expressive features. A weak smile parted his lips. He set down his glass and nudged his wife, who also turned her head, and uttered a cry of consternation. The inspector beckoned imperatively, and they slid down from their stools and approached the table.

“Well, Ginger, how are you feeling this morning?” my companion inquired. “Pretty smart you are, aren’t you, Mrs. Pegg?” he went on. “Look as though you’d been paying an afternoon call.”

The lady, at any rate, was not nonplussed.

“I’ve been to see this gentleman,” she announced, indicating me, “and a fat lot of use it was.”

There was a moment's rather awkward pause. Mr. Alfred Pegg evidently found the situation beyond him.

"I had no idea you were such a blood-thirsty fellow, Alf," the inspector proceeded, with a little twinkle in his eyes. "Fancy killing a man just because you found him smoking a pipe in your kitchen! Now, what about that little amount of cash which this gentleman advanced to get you out of the country?"

The fugitive of Adelphi Terrace heaved a deep sigh, and his hand crept towards his breast pocket. I stopped him.

"Too wonderful a performance altogether," I declared, "to go unrewarded. I have some slight influence in theatrical circles, Mr. Pegg, and if ever you should be thinking of a change of vocation you might pay me a visit."

A slow, incredulous smile spread gradually over his face. His wife was quicker in grasping the situation.

"Well, you're a sport!" she exclaimed. "I shouldn't mind a job myself in a good musical comedy."

"Run along now, both of you," the inspector enjoined. "If the gentleman chooses to forget what's happened, it's no concern of mine."

Alfred Pegg's face as he turned away bore the beatific expression of a charmed and happy child. His wife looked over her shoulder towards me.

"If ever you're down our way," she said, "don't forget I left my card on the corner of your desk."

They climbed once more on to their stools at the counter; Alfred, perhaps, still a little sheepish, but his wife frankly exultant. I ordered refreshments. The inspector smiled.

"You're letting them off light, sir," he observed.

I took a cigarette from my case and tapped it upon the table. I was still watching that cherubic face with the blue eyes and happy mouth.

"The lady was no fool," I reflected, "but Alfred Pegg earned every penny of his passage to South America."

CHAPTER VI

THE BATTLING PACIFIST

There is something which has never failed to kindle in my brain and pulses a thrill of excitement, even now that I am reaching middle age, about that wide-flung, multitudinous carpet of lights through which one passes when entering a great city at night. The roar of one's brief passage through tunnels, the slackening of speed, the momentary glimpse of that lurid blaze of reflected light lowering over the maze of buildings, all minister to that curious sense of excitement which on such occasions I have never failed to experience. On this particular evening we had come a long journey with an overloaded train, sobbing up the gradients, making up time over the long stretches of wind-swept country, white with the first snows of winter. We were an hour late when we groaned our way into St. Pancras Station, to arrive there under every possible condition of discomfort. A cold thaw was in progress, and the platforms were wet and inhospitable. The tail end of a strike was still in existence, porters were few, and taxicabs scarcer still. By an amazing piece of luck, after having disembarked my own luggage, I marked down a taxicab which had been hailed but refused a fare into the country, and filled it with my impedimenta. I was in the act of establishing myself, when I felt a light touch on the shoulder. I looked round to find myself confronted by a tall but weedy-looking man whom I had more than once seen walking up and down the platform as though in anxious search of some one.

"If you are going towards the Strand, sir," he asked, "I wonder whether you would allow me to share your taxi. I've been trying to get one for the last quarter of an hour."

Now, in strike time there was nothing unusual about the request, and I should not have hesitated for a moment but for the fact that I had noticed this particular person peering into the carriage windows, into the faces of the passengers, and even examining the labels of the luggage spread out upon the platform ever since the arrival of the train, and certainly I had not remarked any special effort on his part towards providing himself with a vehicle. He was of ordinary appearance, and might well have been a city clerk or something of the sort. The only noticeable feature about him was his nose, which was slightly hooked, and the brilliancy of his eyes.

"I am going to the Strand," I conceded. "You can come along if you like, with pleasure. Have you any luggage?"

"None at all," he replied, stepping in and taking the place by my side. "I came up to meet some one who apparently hasn't arrived."

I motioned the taxicab man to proceed. We drove out of the station yard in silence. Afterwards I made a few remarks upon the discomfort of the weather, the strike and travelling at all under such conditions, to which my companion replied only in monosyllables. Upon the seat, exactly opposite to us, was my dispatch box. I surprised my companion gazing intently at the worn initials—A. F. He asked me a question abruptly.

“Is your name Andrew Fuller?”

Now, I am not an irritable person, but this man’s manner had begun to annoy me. I could conceive no reason why he should display any curiosity as to my name or why I should satisfy him.

“It might be,” I answered. “Fuller is quite a common name.”

After that he held his peace for some minutes. Just as we were reaching the British Museum, however, where pedestrians were few and the street illumination almost nonexistent, I was conscious—I had relapsed almost into a doze—of a sudden and wholly unexpected blow on the side of my head. The Homburg hat which I was wearing was dragged over my face and held there. I heard the door of the cab open and a rush of cold air entered. For a moment or two I was half stunned. Then I sat up in my place and released myself from my hat to find myself alone in the cab. I knocked on the window and called to the driver. He pulled up beside the kerb.

“What’s the matter, sir?” he inquired.

“The man to whom I was giving a lift,” I gasped. “He’s gone! Hit me on the head and jumped out.”

The chauffeur descended and joined me on the pavement. There was no one in sight who in the least resembled my late companion. Any form of pursuit seemed useless, for we had neither of us any idea which way he had taken.

“Has he gone off with any of your luggage, sir?” the taxicab man asked.

I added up my belongings.

“My dispatch box!” I exclaimed. “It was on the seat opposite. I saw him looking at it.”

“Shall I drive on to Scotland Yard, sir?” the man suggested.

I hesitated. I knew what waiting about at Scotland Yard would mean. I was very cold and I was longing for nothing so much on earth as the warmth of the Milan Court, a hot bath, a cocktail, and dinner. I went over the contents of the box in my mind. There were my English and French cheque books, a bundle of letters from my lawyer concerning the investment of a recent small legacy, various unanswered letters, of no particular interest to anybody, a very small amount of money, and a few

trifles of no value. I dismissed the idea of Scotland Yard.

“No, drive straight to the Milan Court,” I told the man. “I’ll make a report tomorrow.”

He obeyed, and we rattled on into the warmer heart of the city. In the pleasure of my arrival at my destination, the sense of luxury one feels in a warmed atmosphere after a long winter journey, the delight of my bath, the general sense of well-being which filled me with pleasurable anticipation as I tied my tie and prepared to descend to the restaurant, I might very well have forgotten for the remainder of the evening the disagreeable incident in the taxicab, but for the fact that upon leaving the bedroom for the sitting room I found, to my astonishment, my missing dispatch box upon the table. On the reverse side of the label, facing me, was scrawled in pencil: “Many apologies.” I stared at the inscription, and then rang the bell. “Who brought this?” I inquired, pointing to the box.

The waiter shook his head.

“I have no idea, sir,” he replied. “It was not here five minutes ago when I came in with your bottle of whisky.”

I looked back in my room, and found, as I had expected, the key to my suite upon the corner of the dressing table.

“The latch was down, wasn’t it?” I asked the man.

“Certainly, sir,” he replied. “I had to use my key to get in.”

“Go and find out from the valet and chambermaid whether they know anything about it,” I directed.

He disappeared promptly. The box was unlocked, opening by merely pressing the catch, and I examined the contents. They showed signs of having been looked over, but, so far as I could see, there was nothing missing. Presently the waiter returned.

“Neither the valet nor the chambermaid have been in the room, sir,” he reported.

“Yet some one with a key has been in and left that box here,” I pointed out.

The man was puzzled, but on the whole not greatly interested.

“Perhaps you left it in the taxicab, sir,” he suggested, “and one of the reception clerks brought it up.”

“On the contrary,” I told him, “I arrived here without it. It was stolen on the way.”

He was apparently a person of little imagination, and with many affairs on hand. He edged towards the door.

“Well, you’re fortunate to have it back again, sir,” he remarked in congratulatory fashion. “Tea at the usual time in the morning, sir? Good night.”

I hastened downstairs. Now, there are two of the reception clerks at the Milan with whom I am on friendly terms, and the concierge has been my trusted ally on many occasions, but after a few minutes spent in the recital of my adventure with each one of them I came to the conclusion that I had never encountered a more unsympathetic trio. The concierge assured me that no stranger had entered the Court carrying a dispatch box the whole of the time he had been on duty, and ventured upon the perhaps obvious suggestion that it had been found after all with my luggage and taken upstairs. I crossed the Court to the reception office, and, to my profound irritation, the same suggestion was smilingly made to me by each of my friends there. It was only then that I realised how improbable my story must sound. To have had a perfect stranger enter my taxicab, knock me on the head, and bonnet me for the purpose of stealing my dispatch box, and then go out of his way to return it to my rooms in mysterious fashion was a happening which, as it led nowhere, provoked in every one to whom I told the story a mild and polite conviction that somehow or somewhere or other I had made a mistake. On the face of it the incident had no significance; I had been robbed of nothing, and the man who had made a brutal attack upon me had taken the trouble to return his spoils. The story had no point, amounted to nothing. I suppose that is the reason why I failed to interest either of my two friends the reception clerks, or the concierge. They edged off to their duties as soon as they could get rid of me, so in the end I was forced to go out and dine with the mystery of the return of my box unsolved, and in a state of irritation bordering upon anger.

People have often asked me—a somewhat drab bachelor, approaching middle age—why I have never married. I realised, not for the first time in my life, the probable answer to that question, when I came face to face with Violet Barrison that night in the lounge at Claridge's. She was unchanged—to me, at any rate—fair and slim, with those sweet, thoughtful eyes and lips which seemed always about to break into a smile, at or with the world. As I bent over her hand, however, it seemed to me that the smile was a little further away.

“So you're back from your wanderings, Andrew,” she murmured.

“For a few days. And you? You're not by any chance dining with Lady Markby, are you?”

“That is just what I am—or rather we are doing,” she answered. “And you too? How odd! Though we used to meet at dinner parties sometimes, didn't we? You remember my husband?”

I turned to greet him—a short, thick-set man of the Napoleonic type, an eminent

financier in the days when I'd known and hated him.

"Forester, isn't it?" he said carelessly. "Of course I remember. How are you?"

We shook hands, and if I had been disposed to be critical, I should have said that something of the strength had passed from his face during the last few years. The jaw seemed less stubborn, the mouth less rigid, the eyes not so clear.

"Are you dining with Lady Markby?" he went on. "I wish these women would be punctual. I want my cocktail. Hanged if I'll wait! . . . Waiter," he ordered, turning on one side, "bring me a cocktail—no, three. You'll have one, Major Forester?"

We sat down together, but we were soon absorbed in the arrival of the dinner party. I noticed that Barrison, whom I remembered as a man of rigidly temperate habits, drank the cocktail he had ordered, took one from the tray passed around before entering the restaurant, and, finding an odd one left, drank that too. Lady Markby, who was a distant connection of mine, drew me on one side.

"I have put you next Mrs. Barrison," she confided. "Does that please you—or would you rather——?"

"Immensely," I assured her.

She smiled understandingly, and presently we took our places at the table.

"Tell me about things," I begged my companion as soon as we had settled down. She fidgeted with her bracelet.

"What is there to tell you about?" she rejoined. "We are leading just the same old life—one month in Scotland, the season in town, and now Henry has bought a villa at Le Touquet—and we have both taken to gambling a little in our middle age. I have given up hunting. Henry hates horses, and to keep a stable up for one person is terribly expensive."

I raised my eyebrows. In one of her unworthy moments, Violet had once told me that she meant to marry for money—a great deal of money.

"It doesn't sound like you to be considering expense," I remarked.

She turned and looked at me thoughtfully. She seemed to be making up her mind whether to confide in me or not.

"Henry doesn't like me to say so," she murmured, "but I don't think we are so well off as we were."

That was the sole confidence that passed between us. We went through the usual phases of a restaurant dinner party. We danced with those people with whom the *convenances* required that we should dance, sat and talked now and then in the lounge, and said good-bye and escaped as soon as we could. Just as I was departing, however, Barrison stopped me.

"My wife tells me that you've just arrived from New York, Forester," he said.

I nodded.

“This afternoon,” I told him.

“You were on the *Audania*. Fine ship! I wonder whether you happened to come across a fellow named Fuller on her—Andrew Fuller, I think his name is?”

“I don’t remember him,” I replied, “although curiously enough the first person I spoke to at St. Pancras Station asked me whether that was my name. As a matter of fact I am rather unsociable on board ship, and unless any one sits next to me at table I seldom make acquaintances.”

Barrison nodded.

“Man of about your height and figure,” he remarked. “My people want to get in touch with him on a matter of business. They can’t find out his present whereabouts though.”

“There were four or five hundred saloon passengers,” I reminded him.

I made my *adieux*, and thought no more of my probable fellow passenger until I took up my paper the next morning and read that a visitor newly arrived from America, who had registered at the Milan under the name of Andrew Fuller, had thrown himself from the window of his bedroom, exactly one floor beneath my own, into the courtyard six stories below, and had been picked up dead.

There is nothing which a large hotel, especially one of a residential character, dislikes so much as the scandal of a suicide or any similar tragic happening taking place under its roof. The Milan was no exception to the rule, and a single question as to the appearance or habits of the dead man was quite sufficient to close the mouths of any of the servants in the Court. Nevertheless, a certain amount of information leaked out and found its way about the place although mostly of an unexciting character. The dead man had at one time been a Professor of Mineralogy, and had written two treatises on abstruse subjects connected with the fusion of metals, and was supposed to be engaged on a *magnum opus* dealing with the same subject, to collect material for which he had been visiting the Western States of America. He seemed to have been fairly well provided with money, and an elderly sister who arrived to claim his belongings was able to give all the necessary information with regard to his means, which it appeared, though moderate, were certainly sufficient. The general impression up to the morning of the inquest was that the affair had probably been an accident. The windows are unprotected, and put outwards, and in opening his the unfortunate man might conceivably have slipped, lost his balance whilst leaning out, and fallen. It was the view generally accepted by the hotel authorities, and instructions were given for alterations to be made in the width and

height of the windows along the whole front.

The inquest, which I had decided, after some reflection, to attend, opened without any fresh evidence except for the production of a wireless message addressed to Fuller upon the *Audania*, begging him to stay at the Milan Court and remain there until further notice. It was signed "Larimore," and might be taken to account for the dead man having stayed at an hotel apparently beyond his means. The coroner went through the evidence, and was obviously on the point of directing the jury to return a verdict of "Death from Misadventure." During the last few moments, however, there was some slight commotion at the back of the court, and two men entered, one a well-known solicitor. He at once hurried to the front.

"Mr. Coroner," he said, "I am here to beg for an adjournment of the inquest."

"An adjournment!" the coroner repeated. "On what grounds, Sir William?"

The latter hesitated.

"I have only just this moment been instructed," he explained, "or I should have communicated first with the police who would have requested the adjournment officially. I suggest that it will not be in the interests of the law to go further than to ask you to accept my word that an adjournment is necessary."

The coroner considered the point.

"I regret, Sir William," he decided, "that I cannot order an adjournment without evidence."

The lawyer turned reluctantly towards the man who had followed him into the court.

"Here is a gentleman who desires to give evidence," he announced.

A middle-aged man, having the appearance of a well-to-do business man, stood up before the coroner. He gave his name as James Tomkins, and described himself as a merchant.

"Tell us what you know of this affair, if you please, Mr. Tomkins," the coroner invited.

"In the first place, sir," the witness answered, "I should like to say that I am a very large shareholder in the Andromeda Estates, concerning which there has been a great deal of difference of opinion in the money market for the last twelve months."

The coroner inclined his head. The Andromeda Estates discussion was one which had agitated City circles for many months.

"All reports from the mine which is the chief asset of the company," the witness proceeded, "for the last twelve months have been increasingly satisfactory, but I myself and a few other shareholders, without daring to go so far in public, have not been satisfied as to the *bona fide* nature of the engineer's and manager's reports.

We decided, some months ago, to send out an expert to test some of the statements which have been made. We decided to do so secretly, and for our expert we fixed upon Mr. Andrew Fuller as being absolutely out of touch with commercial life and yet a great scientific authority. Mr. Fuller has cabled us that he was prepared to make his report upon landing from the *Audania*. I was unfortunately in the South of France, but I hurried home as fast as I could, although too late to meet him.”

“What is your point, Mr. Tomkins?” the coroner asked, a little puzzled.

“My point, sir,” was the grave reply, “is that the deceased was in possession of information which was without a doubt worth hundreds of thousands of pounds. My second point is that the wireless message directing him to go to the Milan Hotel is signed ‘Larimore,’ which is the cable address of my firm. It was never sent by me.”

There was a little buzz of excitement in the court. I myself was conscious of a sudden sensation of horror. I seemed to see my dispatch box in the taxicab with its misleading initials, the face of the man who had begged a lift and made his savage attack upon me—a man who by some mysterious means had found access to my rooms in the Milan Court. For a moment I wondered whether my own vague story should not be added to the evidence of the last witness. Then I heard the coroner’s pronouncement: the inquest was adjourned for a week.

I made up my mind as I left the court that, vague though my connection with the affair was, it was my duty to report myself at Scotland Yard, and describe the adventure which had befallen me in the taxicab. I stopped first, however, at Lowndes Square, to make my apologies to Violet, who had asked me to come and see her that afternoon. I noticed that a limousine was waiting outside, and as I rang the bell the door opened and Barrison made his appearance.

“You had better come down with me to the City, Ardlow,” he said, turning to some one behind. “I can give you all the notes you require there.”

The man from the background came into fuller view, walked calmly by me without the slightest trace of recognition, and stepped into the limousine. I stared after him until the butler addressed me.

“Mrs. Barrison is expecting you, sir,” he said.

I followed him across the hall, into a very charming room, opening into the gardens at the back of the house. At that moment, however, I saw nothing. I could scarcely wait until the door was closed behind the servant. Violet looked up at me from her chair with surprise as she held out her hands.

“Have you seen a ghost, Andrew?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “Tell me who was with your husband when he left the house just now?”

She frowned for a moment as though perplexed.

“No one,” she replied, “except Ardlow—his manager—and junior partner now, I believe.”

I sank into the chair she had indicated close to her side, for my knees were trembling. It was Barrison’s manager and partner then who had been my assailant in the taxicab, who had coveted the dispatch box with the initials A. F., and who possessed apparently the run of the Milan Court.

“You don’t happen to know where he lives, do you?” I inquired.

“I believe he has a small apartment in the Milan Court—a useful headquarters for clients. Why on earth this curiosity?”

I sat quite still for a moment. Never before had I conceived such marvellous mind pictures as those which I seemed to see on the other side of the yellow panelled walls. Yet, as the thing became fixed in my mind, I began to recover my self-control.

“It was just a coincidence,” I told her.

I was thankful for the servants who brought in tea at that moment. It was some time before we were alone again.

“Travelling has made you *distract*, my friend,” she remarked.

“It is one of the afflictions of a lonely life,” I reminded her, “to find one’s thoughts occasionally a little too insistent.”

I saw just then a fleeting memory of the past in her eyes. She misunderstood me—happily—and pressed my fingers. After that we talked during my visit of things which have nothing to do with this story.

After all, I decided, on leaving Lowndes Square, to postpone my visit to Scotland Yard until the next morning. I had an idea that before then other things might happen. I gave up a dinner at the club and ate a solitary cutlet down in the grill room. At half-past eight I was back in my rooms, where I ordered coffee and brandy. I then lit a pipe, made certain preparations so that I should not again be at a disadvantage, and awaited what might happen. Precisely as I had expected, at half-past nine there was a tap at my door, and, in response to my invitation, Ardlow entered. He closed the door behind him and looked across at me doubtfully.

“Can I talk to you for a few minutes, Major Forester?” he asked.

“Certainly,” I replied. “There are a good many things I want to hear from you.”

He came slowly across towards me. His hair was dishevelled, his tie disarranged, his clothes needed brushing. For the first time I seemed to discover something sinister in his appearance.

“Sit over there,” I directed, arresting his approach.

He smiled feebly, but obeyed.

“You have nothing to fear,” he assured me. “I wanted to find that man Fuller like hell the other day. I knew he was on that train. You answered the description, and you had the same initials: I made a mistake, that’s all. I’m not likely to make it again.”

“You wanted Fuller’s report on your mine, I suppose,” I remarked dryly. “Yours must be a more romantic profession than I imagined if there are many of you who are prepared to go to such lengths to obtain the information they require.”

He looked into my eyes.

“Sometimes,” he said, “it is necessary to go further.”

I felt a little shiver down my spine. Was it possible that, seated there, only a few feet away from me, this man was going to plead guilty to a horrible murder?

“Anyway,” he continued, “my little effort with you didn’t come off. I did my best to make amends. I brought your dispatch box back again.”

“Yes,” I acknowledged. “How did you get into my room?”

“I acquired a pass-key of the suites on this floor and the floor below a week ago,” he confided. “I won’t tell you how; it might get some one into trouble.”

“A pass-key just now,” I observed, “might be rather a dangerous possession—a key which would have enabled you, for instance, to have entered the room below this on the night that poor fellow went out of the window.”

“Threw himself out,” Ardlow corrected gently.

I made no reply. He moistened his dry lips.

“I wonder if you would mind if I smoked?” he begged. “I’ve got the cigarette habit, and my nerves just now are rotten.”

I nodded assent. He produced a packet of Gold Flakes and lit one.

“As chance has made you a possible and a very dangerous witness at this adjourned inquest, you had better understand the whole business, Major Forester,” he said. “I’ll begin about the governor. I’ve been with him twenty-two years—since I was nine years old. I’ve found him a good master. I started life as an errand boy. Today I’m drawing my two thousand a year, and I’m coming into the firm. People call him a hard man; I don’t. He simply doesn’t suffer fools. No one ought to in business. That’ll do for Barrison. I’m as keen in my way as he is, perhaps, but I’ve sentiment enough for this. The good name of the firm, its honour and stability, are just my religion, the blood and pulses of my body. I can’t say more than that.”

“You certainly can’t,” I admitted.

He threw away the burnt-out cigarette he was holding, and lit another.

“Now let’s talk about Andromeda Estates. The firm bought out that company fourteen years ago. We’ve dealt in the shares more than any one else. It’s come to

be almost the biggest part of our business. The great asset was, of course, the famous copper mine. The shares have stood as high as sixty shillings. You know where they are to-day?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," I replied.

"Thirty. The drop has all been due to the continual attacks of that man Tomkins. Somehow or other he got to know the truth."

"The truth?" I repeated.

Ardlow nodded.

"The copper mine is played out," he admitted. "We've come to the end of the lode. In a couple of years' time it won't be worth working. Tomkins got on to it somehow, although in none of our reports have we admitted a thing. We've gone right ahead as though the lode were inexhaustible. It was Tomkins who sent out that fellow Fuller—sent him out to bring back a report."

"It doesn't seem to me," I said, looking at him steadily, "that you're making your case much better. You admit that your great mine, upon which the prosperity of your firm depends, is in a hopeless condition, and that you have concealed the truth from the public, and you admit that this poor fellow Fuller had been out to discover the truth and met with his death under peculiar circumstances on the night of his arrival in England. I think you had better not say anything more to me. There is only one course I could pursue."

For some reason or other Ardlow, as he reached the end of his recital, was becoming calmer. His cigarette now was burning steadily. He sat up in his chair, and the long fingers of his left hand, their tips resting lightly upon the table, were firm. His voice, too, had gained in strength.

"There is even more against me in connection with this matter than you know, Major Forester," he said. "The wireless which brought Fuller to this hotel was sent by me, in Tomkins' name. As you know, I have a pass-key to all the rooms. I visited yours for the purpose of returning your dispatch box; I visited his on the night of that—regrettable accident."

"Why not tell all this to the police?" I suggested.

"We haven't quite reached that point yet," Ardlow replied. "There's something else you must know—the reason why Mr. Barrison, who is an honourable man, was fighting with all his body and soul to keep the Andromeda Estates from crashing. We had other land which we hadn't worked, and on the borders of it stands Mount Verneen, round the base of which people have suspected the existence of copper for a long time. Do you know anything about mining, Major Forester?"

"Absolutely nothing," I assured him.

“Then I’ll speak in the language of A B C,” my visitor went on. “Four years ago we knew that before long our lode would come to an end, and four years ago we knew that if only we could acquire the rest of the Mount Verneen property which borders on the Andromeda Estates we could just move our machinery there, and that we should possess a mine more productive, richer in every way, than our old one. But it’s been the struggle of years to buy that property. We’ve had to use subterfuge, bluff, brains and courage the whole of the time, to deal with the Dutch syndicate who owned it but never had the capital to work it. To-night the whole of Mount Verneen is ours, has been ours, as a matter of fact, since four o’clock this afternoon. When Fuller landed in England with his report, which was an absolutely faithful one, as to the old mine, the syndicate had not closed with us. If Fuller’s report had been published, if its contents had been hinted at, if it had once passed into Tomkins’ hands, we could only have stopped the complete collapse of the Andromeda Estates, the ruin of our shareholders and ourselves, by telling them what we hoped for, and if we had told them what we hoped for, do you suppose for a minute that this Dutch syndicate would have sold? Never. That was the position, Major Forester. If Fuller’s report could be held back for a few days—even a few hours—Barrison was saved, the firm was saved, the shareholders of the Andromeda Estates were saved; on the other hand, if Fuller’s report reached the man who sent him out, we were all ruined, simply because he and Barrison had been the two great opposing forces in a certain section of the market for the last fifteen years.”

“You have provided me,” I admitted, after a moment’s pause, “with a very powerful motive for getting Fuller out of the way, but you haven’t said a word yet which would excuse your murdering him.”

“We arrive at that now, Major Forester,” Ardlow continued. “From the little I know of you, I believe you to be a man of the world, and a man of broad judgment. Now, if you please, adjudicate. I entered Fuller’s rooms at a quarter-past two in the morning. He had gone to sleep in the easy-chair of his sitting-room, and the contents of his dispatch box and the letters he had been writing were all over the table. The electric lamp was still burning, and he was sleeping like the dead. I discovered more about Mr. Fuller during the subsequent quarter of an hour than any one else in the world had ever dreamed of. I read his report of the mine, which was a little scientific for me, but the result of which was absolutely correct and damning, but I also learned that Mr. Fuller, far from being the man of high character which every one believed him to be, was a thief.”

“Professor Fuller a thief?” I exclaimed incredulously.

“He had been entrusted by Tomkins with twenty thousand pounds to buy certain

properties in South America. He had not bought one of them. He had used that money to sell in his own name shares for the full amount in the Andromeda Estates as soon as he had come to the definite conclusion that the mine was ruined.”

I sat up in my chair. A new note of drama seemed to have stolen into our conversation. Ardlow’s problem was already framing itself before me.

“I made no excuse for studying the man’s papers whilst he slept, for discovering his secrets in what, perhaps, you faddists would call a dishonourable fashion,” Ardlow went on, a harsher note creeping into his tone. “I was fighting for the honour and the existence of the man who had been my protector and whom I loved. I possessed myself of all the documents that were necessary to prove what I had discovered, and then I woke Fuller. It must have been about three o’clock by that time. At first, when he found that I had been tampering with his papers, he was for ringing the bell. I stopped him. I put the case before him plainly. I told him that if he would give his report into my keeping for forty-eight hours I would destroy the proofs I had of his misappropriation of Tomkins’ money. I told him why. The news, of course, was a shock to him. He had no alternative but to refuse my terms. If he held back the report, and the Andromeda Estates shares soared, he would be unable to replace the money he had used, and was a convicted thief. On the other hand, my position was none too strong, for if he put about the truth regarding the mine the next morning, the Dutch syndicate would fight tooth and nail to avoid concluding the deal, and Andromeda Estates would drop out of the market. There we were, hard up against it—and we settled it the only possible way.”

“You fought!” I exclaimed.

“We fought,” Ardlow confessed. “It was the only thing we could do.”

He was silent for a moment. His keen eyes seemed to have become the eyes of a visionary, to hold in their depths something of fear or awe, as though he himself were amazed at what he was about to recite. He drew a little nearer to me. He had lost that quality of mediocrity with which his appearance had always impressed me.

“He was a better built man than I, and more powerful, and, Major Forester, I don’t mind admitting that during the war I was a conscientious objector, and I have never fought a man in my life. The first time I have ever struck a blow, ever felt a man’s grip upon my body, felt the stir and heartbeat, and the throbbing pulses of a hand-to-hand fight was that night. And we fought for our lives. Soon after I had awakened him, whilst we were in the middle of our discussion, Fuller had opened the window. He had made up a tremendous fire before he went to sleep, and the room was terribly hot. Somehow or other that black, oblong space, with the few raindrops pattering into the room, the distant lights, the thought of the six stories

below, brought to us both at a single moment a single thought. I saw it in his face as he glanced towards it, just as he saw it in mine. We had no weapons. We didn't need any after then. There was the window—the window of death.”

He drew a soiled handkerchief from his pocket, and dabbed his forehead. I could almost see the little beads of perspiration springing out upon it.

“Things didn't go well with me at first. He was stronger than I had thought, and I didn't seem to be able to control my limbs. Once my head was out of the window, with the rain falling upon it, and if his feet had not slipped for a moment it would have been my body which was found six stories below in the courtyard. I wriggled back somehow or other into the room, though—I remember how I felt when I came out of that black gulf and saw four walls around me! Then I don't know how I did it. I fought like a mad creature. My whole body seemed on fire, my arms seemed to swell. I suddenly saw him weaken, and I knew that I had him. We went back inch by inch. I forced him on to the window sill. Then I got one of his legs. He lost his balance. I didn't wait then. I just pushed him hurtling over, and it was all I could do to keep from screaming. I couldn't watch, but I stood there, gripping the wall on each side of the window with my hands, and listening, and presently I heard the dull flop—there wasn't even a cry, just the muffled sound of his body hitting the flags. I tried to look down, but I couldn't. I staggered back into the room, poured myself out some whisky and drank it without knowing what I was doing. Then suddenly I seemed to become cool. There was no one stirring. I cleared up the papers, put the room in order as far as possible, took what I wanted, left the window open, and got back to my rooms without meeting a soul. Now, I ask you, Major Forester, did I murder Fuller, or didn't I?”

I made no immediate reply. The man's simply told story had somehow thrilled me. He rose to his feet. I saw then that he had no physique, no shoulders. I could quite believe that he had never done an athletic exercise in his life. The idea of his having been engaged in a life and death struggle seemed ridiculous.

“Remember,” he pleaded finally, “Fuller was a self-convicted thief who had used his employer's money for his own means. If he had lived, he could have got away with it, the Andromeda Estates Company would have been ruined because the Dutch syndicate would have fought like hell to have avoided carrying out their contract, the man who is more than anything else in life to me would have been broken, to say nothing of my own career. As things are, the stockholders in the Andromeda Estates Company will not lose a penny, the great firm of Barrison will remain where it was, and my benefactor, the only honest man in the crowd, will be saved from ruin. At what cost? The life of a scoundrel. You see me. I've no muscle,

no real courage. You could throw me out that window in less than a minute if you wanted to. I risked my life. He was stronger than I. I happened to succeed, and he failed. Was that murder?"

"I don't know," I answered.

There was probably sympathy in my face, for he smiled and turned towards the door.

"That's all, then, Major Forester," he said. "I thought you ought to know the truth. Good night!"

He left the room, closing the door quietly behind him. I liked his last steadfast look, and I liked the courage which enabled him to leave without asking a single question. He had insight enough, perhaps, to know that it was not necessary.

CHAPTER VII

MR. BROWN AND THE MADONNA

I thought, in common with the other *pensionnaires* at the Villa Blanche, that Mr. Clement K. Brown, when he first presented himself amongst us, was the shyest man I had ever met. I myself happened to be the first to make his acquaintance. He came up the narrow path leading from the road, passed underneath the pergola of drooping roses, and emerged to climb the few steps leading on to the terrace where I was lying in a long chair, looking lazily over the distant valley. He hesitated as he saw me there, and then, raising a worn tweed cap, he addressed me nervously, but in a voice which was not devoid of pleasing qualities.

“I beg your pardon if I disturb you,” he said. “I was looking for an apartment for a few days, and a passer-by recommended me here. Can you tell me, please, where I may find the proprietor or proprietress?”

I raised myself a little in my chair in order to see him more clearly. His was not the figure to be framed in a bower of roses and clematis. He was short and slight of stature. His rather worn face disclosed humorous lines about the eyes and mouth, which I liked—the deep-set eyes of an artist, and features which, though at first sight they were insignificant, were nevertheless well enough on further investigation. His hair was of a light brown colour, almost sandy, his eyes a remote shade of hazel, unusual in a man. His clothes were fit for nothing but the rag bag, and there was a gaping hole in the knapsack which he carried. I somehow fancied that Madame, who was rather a martinet, would scarcely welcome him as a respectable addition to our little company, and simultaneously with that reflection I felt a desire to help him to obtain the hospitality he sought.

“Madame Servelle is on the other side of the house,” I told him. “If you wish I will take you to her.”

“You are very kind, sir,” he acknowledged gratefully.

I led the way along the terrace, and around the corner, to where Madame had chosen a sheltered spot. She was endeavouring to avoid the sun which I had courted.

“Madame,” I announced, “I have brought you a traveller who is seeking an apartment.”

Once more the tweed cap left the head of Mr. Clement Brown. He bowed. Madame, who was a short, fat woman, black-haired, and of somewhat forbidding appearance, looked at him over her spectacles, and I felt that matters might not go well with my companion. Accordingly I lingered.

“Monsieur is a traveller,” she remarked, gazing fixedly at a hole in his coat.

“I am an artist in a small way,” he confided humbly. “I have seen beautiful country in this neighbourhood. It would please me to remain for a time.”

Madame looked him up and down.

“Monsieur,” she said, “I entertain here but a few guests. They are mostly artists, but they are——”

She stopped short. Perhaps there was something in the traveller’s air of polite suspense which checked the words upon her lips.

“They are people of good condition, mark you,” she continued. “This gentleman here—Major Forester—is an officer in the British army. I have a great artist and his wife from Paris, an American lady with diplomas, and an English colonel and his wife.”

My protégé seemed a little puzzled. I ventured to intervene.

“Madame thinks, perhaps,” I pointed out, “that your attire——”

He looked down at himself, and a little smile broke from his lips. From that moment I definitely liked him.

“It is true,” he confessed. “I am in bad condition. But I have other clothes, Madame, down at Cagnes, not far from here. My easel and paintbrushes are there too. I regret that I should present myself like this. I travel much on foot, and I lose the habit of thinking of my appearance. So long as one bathes——”

He turned to me as though for mutual understanding. Certainly his skin was fresh and cleanly, and his hands amazingly well cared for.

“I have a small room,” Madame admitted. “My terms are thirty francs a day.”

“I will take the room,” the stranger said eagerly.

Madame frowned.

“That includes,” she went on unperturbed, “the little breakfast, the *déjeuner* at twelve-thirty—we have fresh fish and vegetables, but it is not always that I can promise meat. The evening meal is at seven. I cook it myself.”

“Madame,” my protégé said, with a courteous bow, “I am assured of good fare if you will accept me as your guest. I should have remembered my appearance. If you will allow me——”

He took out a worn pocketbook and produced notes. Madame rose to her feet and waved them away.

“That will do later,” she said. “If Monsieur will give himself the trouble to walk this way, I will show him his room.”

So that is how Mr. Clement K. Brown came to join our little circle at the Villa Blanche.

We were a curiously assorted company—we who had sought the hospitality of Madame Servelle, at thirty francs a day. There was myself, who had the trick of wandering into strange places, who had come for a night and lingered on entranced by the beauty of the spot—the swelling pasture lands, dotted with olive trees, by which we were surrounded, the rose farm which every night lent fragrance to the air, the turbulent stream which rushed down from the mountain only a few yards away from the back door of the Villa, those fine promontories of the lesser Alps, in the distance, the snow-clad peaks—and turning round again towards the more peaceful prospect—the sea—that long, fine line of celestial blue. We were all nature lovers more or less. There was Monsieur Léon, an artist from Paris, and his wife. Monsieur Léon wore a velveteen coat of dark green, and a black tie which drooped from his low-cut neck like a silken handkerchief. Madame his wife was small and dainty. She spoke no English, and did little except watch her husband work. Then there was an American girl of somewhat bold type, also a reputed artist—a Miss Carrie Wilcock—attractive in her way, with her brilliant eyes and very beautiful figure, but a little noisy at close quarters. She, it was understood, had won a travelling scholarship from some American university, and she certainly worked. Then there were two quiet English people—a Colonel Grayson and his wife—both of whom amused themselves by painting indifferent water colours in a quite inoffensive way; a young man named Seymour, whom no one knew anything about—an Englishman, passably good-looking, but uncommunicative, who was apparently an author, as he spent most of his time writing, and carried a notebook always with him; and to complete our numbers, there was another man whom no one knew anything of—a silent, dark-complexioned, melancholy-looking person, middle-aged, civil but aloof, whose chief occupation was walking or exploring the Château. His name was Parsons, and the only thing one had discovered about him during the fortnight of his presence at the Villa was that he had at one time followed the profession of an architect. Taken all in all, we could scarcely have been considered a very formidable-looking gathering, yet when Mr. Brown made his appearance amongst us—he found us seated at the dinner table—he had the look of a frightened child who would have liked to sink through the floor. He bowed to Madame, and then bowed to the company. Most of us said “good evening.” I ventured upon a word of welcome.

“Will Monsieur be pleased to sit at the end of the table,” Madame invited. “We are punctual here at the Villa, but we are only at this moment assembled.”

Mr. Brown took his place, and sat nervously crumbling his roll. My length of stay had seen me promoted to a place on the left-hand side of Madame, but my interest

that night was with the newcomer. Our table was of an oval shape, and conversation, as a rule, general. Mr. Brown was placed between Parsons and Seymour. I noticed that they had both eyed him curiously, and Parsons, who was one of our most silent guests, at once asked him a question.

“Have you come far to-day?” he inquired, looking at his neighbour’s attire, which, carefully though it had been brushed, still bore the marks of travel.

“From Cagnes,” was the quiet reply.

“You have come to see the Château, I suppose?”

“And the country around here, which struck me as being very beautiful,” Mr. Brown replied. “Is the Château interesting?”

“Interesting?” Parsons exclaimed.

“Say, do you hear that? Interesting, indeed!” Miss Wilcock echoed.

The Colonel and his wife smiled benevolently. Madame was too busy calculating how many portions of fish she still had to serve to do more than nod her head vigorously. There was a moment’s somewhat curious silence. Monsieur Léon was staring at the harmless questioner with eyes that were almost fiercely interrogative; Seymour was looking at him none the less steadfastly because there was something surreptitious about the way his eyes drooped under their lids. Suddenly, to me, the silent watcher, the situation appeared to have developed. Madame’s little dining room had become an arena, and all these people who had seemed, I must confess, during the long weeks, rather like dummies to me, had sprung into life. The only two who remained wholly normal were Madame, breathing a sigh of relief as she concluded her successful attack upon the salmon trout, and Mr. Brown, who had asked a harmless question.

“Say, doesn’t that sound queer,” Miss Carrie Wilcock exclaimed, “to hear any one speak of the Château like that? Don’t you realise, Mr.—Mr.—sorry, but I didn’t quite catch your name.”

“Brown,” the newcomer vouchsafed modestly—“Clement Brown.”

“Do you mean to say that you’ve just climbed up here and found a room at the Villa Blanche to admire the scenery, or for your health, or to paint the usual stuff with which every gallery in Nice is overfull? Do you mean to say that you didn’t know about the Château?”

Mr. Brown looked for a moment from one to the other of us. His expression was the expression of a child.

“The Château?” he repeated vaguely. “As I climbed this afternoon, I watched the bending rose fields, and the stiff carnations, and I heard the little breeze pass through the corn, and I watched the trout jump in that stream, but of the Château I

did not think. Externally you surely would not consider it beautiful?"

There was another brief silence. Then Colonel Grayson, the mild-eyed painter of watery landscapes, plunged in where others for various reasons, held aloof.

"You are not a reader of guidebooks, Mr. Brown?"

"God forbid!" was the hearty but tremulous response.

The Colonel cleared his throat.

"That may account then," he said, "for your ignorance concerning one of the great charms of this district. The Château which seems to you a little forbidding, is the shell which guards a great treasure. Within its walls are parts of the ancient Château—the twelfth-century Château, mind you—where Francis the First came down from Paris to sign the Treaty of Peace with his great Italian rival. There are one or two of the original rooms which are still to be seen—some indeed of the famous tapestries—and there are three paintings upon the wall, behind the oak screens, which many people claim to have been the original commissions from Francis to Andrea del Sarto when he stayed here on his way to the Court of France. There is the Gold Cup, too, out of which King Francis and the Comtesse—ah, let us call her only by her wonderful name—Beatrice—are said to have drunk."

"And these treasures," Mr. Brown inquired, "are they on view to the general public?"

"There are certain difficulties," Colonel Grayson replied, "but they are on view—if you know of them. The Château is rigidly held and sightseers are not welcome."

"It is occupied then?" Mr. Brown asked.

"By custodians only."

"But such custodians!" Seymour murmured.

Madame, who was in a good humour, because the meal had passed pleasantly, and because something of the skinny *poulets* had been left owing to the revival of this ever-engrossing subject of conversation, leaned forward to make things clear to her new guest.

"The custodians," she said, "are a woman and her daughter, about whose lives there is much of romance and much of gossip, for many say that they are descended from the great family who once owned the Château. The girl is very beautiful; Madame is very strict. They carry on a family tradition, for those who were before them kept the keys of the castle, but——"

"But!" groaned Monsieur Léon in agony.

"But!" echoed Mr. Parsons.

"But," Madame continued, "there is a tragedy to be faced. The Château is sold—not only sold, but sold to an American!"

Monsieur Léon leaned forward. Every muscle of his face twitched. His black imperial rose and fell with his words.

“It is of all things the most infernal,” he declared. “Year after year, have I and many others visited here to worship before those beautiful things—the windows and panels that remain of the old Château within the walls, the tapestries, the paintings—and before God, I believe them to be the veritable handiwork of Andrea del Sarto—the Cup—the wonderful Gold Cup! I am one of the scattered artists who came here to worship. Year by year it has been our pilgrimage, and now there arrives one to whom they say these things belong, and who will hide them from our view. Within a month the Château is to be closed. Madame and the divine Beatrice are to return to the hills. The Château is to be modernised, electric lights are to flash from the windows, jazz music is to float down the valleys at night, motor cars will spit and roar their way across the portcullis. This little corner of heaven is to be vulgarised and destroyed!”

“It is an infamy,” Madame murmured, without particular emphasis, because, as I very well knew, she had never quite made up her mind whether the change would bring good or ill to her.

“It is sacrilege!” Monsieur Léon groaned.

Madame rose. We accepted the signal, and followed her out on to the terrace, where Marthe, the one waitress, served us with coffee. I took our new arrival by the arm, led him to a corner of the piazza, and pointed upwards. There behind a ridge of pine trees, towering above the precipitous crags, was the Château—a square mass, flanked by four towers, reached only from this side by a grass-grown avenue. A single light burned from one of the narrow windows.

“That,” I indicated, “is the Château of the Audiberts.”

He looked at it earnestly. Below us the frogs had begun to call; every now and then a bat wheeled above our heads. Madame Léon, who was sentimental, held up her finger. A nightingale was singing in the grove behind the garden.

“It is a little corner of paradise,” Monsieur Léon lamented, “which materialism would remove from us.”

I had ventured to offer Madame a liqueur cognac, and her humour was good.

“After all,” she said, “the long threatened sometimes never happens. It is months since we were told that the Château was sold. No one comes here but Monsieur Latoste, the notary from Nice. Madame and Mademoiselle Beatrice remain. Why not hope for the best?”

We drew our chairs together, and talked more hopefully, but outside our circle, leaning still with his arms upon the terrace and his queer little face turned up

starwards, Mr. Clement Brown remained, his eyes fixed upon those stark pines and what lay beyond.

It fell, as it chanced, to my lot to pilot this latest guest to our great show place, the Château. Monsieur Léon—contrary to his custom—was painting in the valley, and Madame remained his adoring shadow. Colonel and Mrs. Grayson had gone to Nice for the day by the crazy motor diligence, to meet some friends. Miss Carrie Wilcock was writing letters in her room. Parsons and Seymour had both disappeared without explanation. Mr. Brown timidly attached himself to me, explaining that until the arrival of his painting paraphernalia he could do nothing. So I climbed with him the steep way to the Château, and clanged the bell outside.

“Be prepared,” I warned my companion, “to see the most beautiful girl in the world.”

Almost at that moment, the key was turned from inside, the nail-studded doors thrown open, and Mademoiselle Beatrice smiled her usual demure “good morning” to me. When she saw that I had a companion, however, she stood a little back, and in her expression as she gazed at poor Mr. Clement Brown there seemed to be born a great aversion. She was very beautiful, this Mademoiselle Beatrice, in her plain black gown and narrow white linen collar, with her yellow-gold hair brushed back from her forehead and her sweet though rather arrogant face. Just now, unfortunately, she was disturbed. The smile left her dancing lips; a fine frown drew her eyebrows together. She looked at my companion with a strangely absorbed expression—an expression half of fear, half of vehement dislike.

“Whom do you bring here?” she demanded.

“Only a visitor like myself,” I replied. “He has joined us at the Villa Blanche. He would like to see the ruins of your famous paintings and the Gold Cup.”

“These things are not to be seen to-day,” she answered shortly.

“But, Mademoiselle,” I protested, “it is not a Saint’s Day or a Festival, it is not even the Sabbath! Why then deny us a view of the treasures?”

“Too many people look upon them day by day,” she declared. “It becomes dangerous. Let this person wait. Soon, we are told, he who calls himself the owner of the Château will come with a mass of workmen. Let Monsieur wait until then. The treasures will still be on view.”

I listened to her almost passionate outburst in amazement. I had never known her like this. She answered the unspoken question of my eyes fiercely.

“Do you ever consider, Monsieur!” she exclaimed. “We are here alone—my mother and I. There is Monsieur Seymour from your villa. He is no artist, but he

spends whole days in front of the Gold Cup, watching it, turning it in his hands as though to feel the smoothness, and all the time with a covetous gleam in his eyes. Then Monsieur Parsons, he brings a chair and he sits in front of the paintings, and the American girl—why does she continually commence another picture of our Adoration? These people are impossible. Shall I tell you what I think, Major Forester?”

“If you will,” I acquiesced.

For the moment she had forgotten my companion. She thrust her hand through my arm. Her violet eyes were filled with fire, her beautiful lips were trembling with earnestness. Mr. Clement Brown watched her as one would watch a divinity.

“They are frauds, these people at the Villa,” she cried. “Mademoiselle Wilcock—what diploma could she have earned? She cannot paint. She sits in front of my pictures, and what she is thinking of I can guess too well. And this Monsieur Seymour, who would bring me jewellery from Nice! And Monsieur Parsons, who does not even take the trouble to pretend to be a writer or a painter! These men I fear. Listen! I know what is in their minds. If they are not watched night and day, they will steal the pictures; they will steal the Cup. It is for that they are there.”

We had drawn a little apart, my companion remaining patiently in the background.

“Beatrice,” I said reassuringly, “you make trouble for yourself. These people whom you have mentioned are all harmless. They may not be great artists, but I am convinced that they are not thieves.”

“Then why have I this feeling?” she demanded. “Who is this stranger whom you have brought this morning?”

“To tell you the truth,” I confessed, “I know little about him, but surely he is harmless. You would not suspect him of being a criminal.”

She turned half fiercely round, and I followed her example. Mr. Brown, having lit a cigarette, was seated upon the moss-grown parapet, whistling softly to himself. He did not once glance in our direction, but as she watched him, Beatrice’s cheeks were once more blanched.

“Who is he?” she insisted, tugging at my arm in a frightened manner.

I laughed.

“I don’t know, but I can’t really imagine any one being frightened by Mr. Brown,” I expostulated.

“Perhaps not,” she answered gloomily, “and yet it is another stranger. Does he really want to see the pictures?”

“If you please, Mademoiselle Beatrice.”

She turned slowly away—a slim, exquisite flower she seemed, with her pearl-white skin, dark eyes and scarlet lips. She motioned us reluctantly to follow her, and I saw Mr. Brown obey like a man in a dream. We passed underneath the ruined oriel windows of marvellous grace, in through the twelfth-century doorway of the great hall. From here she led us into the chapel. My companion followed my example as I kneeled for a moment. Then we passed to the three pictures, and she opened the oak cases.

“They are here,” she said—“here where the great master kneeled side by side with King Francis.”

My companion was directly opposite the Madonna, which occupied the central space. He raised his eyes to it, and they never once faltered. He appeared to have passed into some sort of ecstatic trance. He never even glanced at either of the smaller pictures. He seemed to have become absorbed in what I can only term an “ardent” contemplation of that one masterpiece. I myself, who had worshipped before it nearly every day since my arrival, felt a curious new sympathy for this strange little man. I longed to read his thoughts, to pass with him into that world of abstractions in which he was surely dwelling. Then I caught Mademoiselle’s sullen, watching expression, saw the cloud of suspicion which had darkened her beautiful face, and I felt a sudden spasm almost of anger. It was prejudice carried to the point of absurdity.

Mr. Clement Brown, who had disappeared for a couple of days, returned in due course on the motor diligence from Cagnes, bringing with him a battered and somewhat inadequate easel and painter’s outfit, some slight addition to his scanty store of habiliments—and a bombshell. The latter he cast amongst us all at *déjeuner* on the morning of his arrival.

“In Nice,” he announced, looking at Madame, but speaking to me, “a great piece of fortune befell me. Monsieur Latoste has given me his permission to make a copy of the Madonna.”

It is no exaggeration to say that a veritable scream of voices arose.

“It is impossible,” was Madame’s contribution.

“If I believed that was true,” Miss Wilcock exclaimed, “I would go and shake the life out of that little shrimp. Why, I went all the way into Nice the week after I arrived to beg for that permission, and he wouldn’t even listen to me.”

“And I,” Seymour, in whose eyes there was a very angry gleam, intervened, “have begged only for an hour a day in the chapel alone that I might write my impressions.”

“And what about myself?” Monsieur Léon cried in great excitement. “I—an

artist of repute—an exhibitor at the *Salon*, a gold medallist—I present myself before that attorney. I demand the right of an artist to study a great work and reproduce it. What is his reply? ‘It is impossible.’ Only a week ago his clerk showed me to the door. He gave me no hope. This gentleman must be mistaken.”

“In any case,” I warned him, “I don’t think Mademoiselle will ever let you in for more than our customary ten minutes.”

Mr. Brown seemed surprised at the clamour. He produced a sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it to me. I read it to the little company. It was written upon the note paper of Monsieur Latoste, Notary and Attorney-at-Law, and it was addressed to Madame and Mademoiselle St. Ivery:

The bearer, Mr. Clement Brown, has my permission to enter the château and chapel at will and to occupy himself in such fashion as he desires with the paintings and objets d’art.

Some of them got up and looked over my shoulder. The terms of the permission were unassailable.

“Say, I’d like to be there when Mademoiselle reads that,” Miss Wilcock declared, stabbing the butter in front of her viciously.

“It does not seem to me an unusual privilege,” Mr. Brown ventured, “to be permitted to copy a wonderful picture.”

“Perhaps you are a great artist in disguise,” Seymour suggested sarcastically.

Mr. Brown shook his head.

“Often I have tried,” he confessed, “but never once have I had a picture exhibited.”

Outside, instead of taking our coffee together as usual, that evening we broke up into little knots. Miss Wilcock, with Seymour and Parsons, deliberately drew away, and conversed in low tones. Madame led me on one side.

“I have an uneasiness,” she confided. “The little man, he is evidently poverty-stricken. Even the clothes he has brought back are little better than those he is wearing. I fear he is a scamp.”

“He puzzles me, Madame,” I confessed, “but I think he is all right. As to his clothes, you will notice that he has plenty of linen, and he is your best customer for the bathroom. There is a type of man who thinks little of such things as clothes. He may be one.”

“That letter?”

“I feel convinced that it is genuine,” I assured her, “and he cannot be altogether a

vagabond to have received it.”

“I am uneasy,” Madame persisted.

She meant it, too. I liked Madame. I felt in a way responsible for the little man’s presence, for I am certain that if I had not piloted him round that corner, Madame would have sent him away. Therefore I determined to do my best to allay this feeling of disquietude.

“I will write to Monsieur Latoste,” I promised. “He once transacted some business for me. He will tell me if there is anything suspicious about Mr. Brown.”

Madame was properly grateful and much relieved. By degrees the others drifted back for their coffee, and the evening passed as usual.

We were a curious little company, for one by one, when Mr. Clement Brown shouldered his easel and set off for the Château with his tin case under his arm, we trooped after him. We wanted to see what happened when he presented himself. We were disappointed, however, for when we arrived in the outer quadrangle, Mr. Brown had already gained admission, and we had no chance of witnessing Mademoiselle’s consternation. Thereafter for days the same programme was repeated. Inside the chapel, at a proper distance from the Madonna, each morning Mr. Brown set up his easel, and each morning, with a sort of dogged ferocity, Mademoiselle Beatrice established herself on a hard stool a few yards away, with a bundle of sewing, and stolidly went on with her tasks. Soon understanding dawned upon us—it was her firm intention, although she had been compelled to admit this unwelcome visitor, not to leave him alone, either with the pictures or the great Gold Cup which, in its iron cage, was chained to the wall above the altar. Now and then one of us paid our franc and entered for the prescribed ten minutes. At such times, Mr. Brown always carelessly covered up his work and accepted the opportunity of a chat and word of conversation. On one of these occasions I drew Mademoiselle on one side.

“Tell me, Mademoiselle Beatrice,” I begged, “why do you watch this poor little man as though you feared something from him? Monsieur Latoste’s letter was genuine. I have proved it.”

She drew me round the corner into the long, cool passage, with its cloistered roof, which led to the great banqueting hall.

“Monsieur,” she confided, “I cannot explain with what feelings that man inspires me. There is something about him disturbing.”

“He is perhaps a greater painter than we believe,” I suggested.

She laughed scornfully.

“But, Monsieur,” she begged, “do not believe it! I have seen nothing of what is on his canvas, but I picked up a sketch of his yesterday. Why, even one of those pretenders outside could do better. My mother has written to Monsieur Latoste. We cannot continue here without further protection. I do not trust any of Madame’s household, except Monsieur le Colonel and you yourself. We cannot remain here. It was kindly meant to offer us the post, but we shall have to return to the farm. The responsibility is too great.”

We retraced our steps. Mr. Brown had ceased to work. He was leaning forward, his chin resting upon his hand, looking with rapt eyes at the picture.

“Is that the face of a thief, Mademoiselle?” I whispered.

She shook her head doubtfully.

“No,” she admitted, “but he is fast becoming friendly with those others, and he is poor. His paints are of inferior quality. He has not even enough brushes. Look yourself, Monsieur, at his shoes.”

“It is true,” I agreed; “but poverty is not a crime. I am quite sure that in conversation he never offends you.”

“On the contrary, he is always gentle,” she acknowledged reluctantly—“always respectful. Yet I am never at ease with him. In any case, we have decided to go—my mother and I. We have written to Monsieur Latoste.”

“Then the charm of the Château will pass,” I told her, honestly enough.

She was her old exquisite self for a moment. She even took my hand and pressed it.

“Monsieur is a good friend,” she whispered. . . .

Now, watching more closely, I saw signs of what Beatrice had hinted at. That evening, for instance, the American girl, with Seymour and Parsons, took Mr. Brown out with them for a promenade along the moon-blanchéd road. We heard the sound of their footsteps as they passed up and down, but their voices were inaudible. When they came back, Mr. Brown was silent and abstracted. For the first time he accepted my offer of the Englishman’s good-night drink—a whisky and soda—with hesitation. He sat with me in the tiny sitting room, vouchsafed to me of Madame’s grace, almost in silence.

“They are strange people, these artists,” he remarked abruptly, after a somewhat prolonged pause.

“So Mademoiselle Beatrice thinks,” I acquiesced, watching him closely. “She tells me that she and her mother have made up their minds to leave—to go back to their home in the mountains.”

“But why?” he demanded, startled.

“It is the responsibility of those treasures,” I pointed out.

“But they are foolish,” he argued. “At six o’clock each evening the great gates to the castle are locked. Who could win admittance? The castle is as strong as in olden days. The windows are too small for burglary; the locks are the size of my fist. And then, by day, Mademoiselle, it seems to me, never leaves the chapel. At any rate,” he added, with a whimsical little smile, “she never leaves it when I am there.”

“Burglary has become one of the arts,” I reminded him. “If a real craftsman were here, he would find a way.”

“I wonder,” Mr. Brown murmured.

A few nights later, after dinner, we all trooped out to the little tin shed which Madame dignified by the name of “garage,” to see a car which Parsons had bought and driven home from Nice. It was merely a Citroën, and a second-hand one at that, but as we none of us possessed such a luxury, we were all interested. For some reason or other, Mr. Brown seemed more interested than any of us. He and Parsons went over it several times, the latter explaining all the details of starting and stopping, with almost painstaking accuracy. Mr. Brown hoisted himself into the driver’s seat, turned on the lights, switched on the power, and tried the gears. He stepped down with a little sigh.

“It must be a great pleasure,” he said, “to own a machine like this, and to wander about the country at will.”

Parsons smiled enigmatically. I fancied that I caught a gleam of admiration in his eyes as he glanced at the speaker. . . . We strolled back to our coffee, of which I consider myself a judge, and very soon I put my cup down only half empty. It had a peculiar flavour which reminded me of one of the most unpleasant nights of my life. I looked round at the others. No one seemed to have noticed anything, and presently we wandered off to our usual occupations. I myself unpacked a box of new books, and before long—a most extraordinary occurrence for me—fell asleep over one of them by the window. . . .

Now it seemed to me as I lay there that I had a dream. I thought that I saw Mr. Clement Brown steal out of the garden and, keeping in the shadow of the hedge, climb upwards towards the Château. I lost sight of him for a time, and then my dream returned. I saw him again, descending the road, this time walking softly, bare-headed, and looking anxiously about him. Under his arm he had a roll of something—parchment it might have been, or brown paper—I could distinguish nothing. Finally he disappeared into the tin shed, and the dream passed. I tried to rouse myself, but failed. When I awoke, the sun was shining into the room.

It was our custom at the Villa to carry our little breakfast out on to the piazza and eat it in the flower-scented sunshine, gossiping or remaining silent as we chose. This morning my barely stifled yawn as I carried out my own tray was the signal for a chorus of exclamations.

“You, too, Major,” Colonel Grayson remarked. “Do you know, we’ve come to the conclusion that we were all drugged last night. I never slept like it in my life.”

“I can’t keep awake now,” Miss Wilcock declared.

“As for me,” I confessed, “I fell asleep in my chair and dreamed.”

“Tell us about it,” Mrs. Grayson begged.

“It didn’t amount to a dream,” I acknowledged. “I just thought that I saw our persevering friend Mr. Brown on his way up the hill to the Château, and presently come down again and visit the garage.”

I looked round for Parsons, but he was absent. Just at that moment he emerged from the little tin shed, waving his arms.

“Hallo, what’s up with our friend?” Colonel Grayson exclaimed.

Parsons broke into a run.

“My car!” he shouted. “Gone! Stolen!”

Then I felt a shiver through all my frame. I could have bitten out my tongue for having told my dream. It seemed to me that I knew what was underneath Mr. Brown’s arm, and I knew who had taken the car, and the shadow of a great disappointment was already depressing me.

“Any one seen Mr. Brown this morning?” Miss Wilcock demanded.

Madame never hesitated. She entered the house, and I heard her flying footsteps up the stairs. When she returned her expression was portentous.

“I knew it!” she cried, looking accusingly at me. “My instinct never fails me. He has gone. It is he who has stolen the car, and——”

Madame could say no more. Her eyes were fixed upon the Château. One by one, moved by a common impulse, we rose to our feet and hurried up the hill. I myself, with a moment’s start, was first to reach the great bell. Apparently nothing was wrong. Everywhere the early morning stillness seemed undisturbed. A flower cart went jogging down the road, bringing faint whiffs of perfume, and the farmer took off his hat with a sweep to one of Madame’s guests. Then round the corner from her cottage came Mademoiselle, a little surprised, but dangling the keys in her hand.

“But at this hour, Monsieur! What has happened?” she exclaimed. “And the others too—they all come!”

“Presently, Mademoiselle,” I replied. “Open the gate, please.”

She obeyed. We passed into the courtyard. Opposite us was the other huge door, tightly closed.

“Open it,” I begged.

“But, Monsieur,” she protested, “it is not yet the hour.”

“Never mind. Do as I say.”

She obeyed me. The huge lock turned slowly, and the door rolled back. We passed across the stone-paved hall, and through the inner door to the chapel. There before us was the ghastly truth. The glory of the place was gone. The middle frame above the altar stood empty, a thin shred of canvas hanging down. The Madonna had gone—and Mademoiselle’s shriek of horror will live in my memory for ever!

They all came streaming in, even Madame, panting hard, bringing up the rear. We grouped ourselves in front of the desecrated shrine. Mademoiselle Beatrice had sunk on to her stool, her frame shaken with sobs. Every one seemed to be talking at once. Then, with an effort, I pulled myself together.

“Have the keys left your possession since you locked up last night, Mademoiselle?” I asked.

“Not for a single second,” she answered fiercely.

“And the picture was there when you locked up?”

“Naturally.”

We looked at the windows—mere slits, and the lowest fifteen feet from the ground. No wonder we were stupefied.

“Colonel,” I proposed, “you and I had better get down to the village. There is a telephone there. We can speak to the police at Nice, and to Monsieur Latoste.”

“It must be done at once,” Parsons agreed. “I will accompany you.”

“I can ride a motor bicycle, if there is one to be found,” Seymour suggested.

Even then I found it hard to move. My heart was torn with two great sorrows—the gash in the wall, and Mademoiselle Beatrice’s bowed head. Presently she looked up and, though there were red rims underneath, the violet of her eyes seemed clearer than ever.

“Did I not tell you, Monsieur,” she lamented, “that there was something strange? I could not tell what it was. Sometimes it frightened me, sometimes it was different, but he was not as other men.”

“You had instinct, Mademoiselle,” I admitted sadly. “I must confess myself at fault. I thought him harmless.”

There were sounds outside. Madame ran back to the door.

“Here are some early tourists,” she announced. “They have cars. It is good.

They will take you to Cagnes. . . But behold!"

She stepped aside in amazement. We all stood around like dummies. Through the open door came Monsieur Latoste, the Notary, by his side Mr. Clement Brown, and behind two *gendarmes*. Mademoiselle Beatrice rose slowly to her feet. There was passion rising in her face. Her eyes flamed.

"He is there!" she cried. "It is he who has stolen the picture."

"He is already in custody," Colonel Grayson observed, watching the *gendarmes* range themselves at the door, "but why have they brought him here?"

The girl's passion flamed out in her words. She picked up a canvas at the side of the altar.

"I always knew that he was a thief," she denounced—"a thief and an impostor. Look—look, all of you. This is what he sat and worked at when he pretended to be copying 'Our Lady.' Look!"

We all leaned forward. It was a crude but not ungraceful likeness of Mademoiselle Beatrice herself which we saw, seated upon her stool. Mr. Brown, too, examined it, screwing up his eyes.

"Not so very bad," he ventured timidly. "The pose is good, I think, Mademoiselle, even if I have failed as yet with the expression."

She looked as though she were about to strike him. In fact we were all becoming somewhat incensed with this little man who accepted his ignominious position so coolly. As though conscious of our growing indignation, he laid his hand upon his companion's shoulder.

"Monsieur Latoste," he suggested, "perhaps it would be as well if you presented me to these ladies and gentlemen."

The Notary held out his hand. There was a certain cynical pleasure gleaming in his eyes as he glanced towards Parsons and Seymour.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "permit me to present you to the owner of the Château—Clement Audibert, Marquis de St. Ivery, Comte de Gourdon, Seigneur de St. Jeannet."

No one said a word. Yet a very curious thing happened. With this pronouncement of his names and titles, the man who was standing in the centre of the little group seemed to cast away the mantle of Mr. Clement Brown. He drew himself up. His smile was pleasant and self-assured. One forgot the shabbiness of his clothes.

"My friends," he apologised, "I regret having imposed upon you. Mademoiselle ma cousine," he added, moving nearer to her, "it will be the task of my life to win your forgiveness."

She stood trembling in every limb. I had no eyes for any one but her afterwards. I watched the slow change in her sensitive face, the wave of incredulity, the coming of hope, the promise of joy.

“May I explain,” the pseudo-Mr. Brown continued. “You all know that the Château was bought by a successful American financier. He was my uncle—Henri de St. Ivery, an American by naturalization. He died last year. He left me the Château with all his money, and I had a fancy—a foolish one, no doubt—to come here just as a wanderer, and see it in its old state before those workmen who, alas, must deface to beautify, arrive. A foolish notion, perhaps,” he repeated, looking around with that familiar smile which seemed to ask for sympathy, “but some of you, I think, will understand. It has always been my dream to see it like that, before a hand was laid upon the ruins, and afterwards to carry out my uncle’s will, for he was very wealthy, and it was his desire that the Château should once more become a great abode. So I came here and, thanks to my friend”—he bowed to me—“I found lodgings with Madame. And then,” he added, his voice becoming a little sterner, “a strange and terrible thing happened. I found that several of those guests of Madame whom I had thought were attracted here by the beauty of the place were here in reality as robbers.”

There was another silence. I saw Parsons’ quick look towards the guarded door. Seymour thrust his hands into his pockets. The *gendarmes* were immovable, and bluff was all that was possible.

“I found, too,” the new owner of the Château went on, and with every sentence his voice seemed to gain in authority, “that the picture which I had grown almost to worship since I came to the hills here, was in real danger. A definite proposition to assist in its theft was made to me by one of those who were here for that purpose, and who imagined that in my apparent poverty I might become their tool. I was to cut the picture from its frame and convey it by motor car to Paris.”

“But that is just what has happened!” Mademoiselle Beatrice cried, pointing to the gash in the wall. “Some thief has surely been here.”

“Ah, no, Mademoiselle. Last night I took it carefully from its frame in order to save it, because I feared that it was in danger. I drove myself most uncomfortably to Nice, and I sent the canvas off to my good friend, Monsieur Dubois in Paris. You see, there was a little spot upon the robe,” he explained, “which day by day would grow larger until it reached the gorgeous scarlet of the hem. By to-morrow it will be in the hands of the greatest of all renovators, and when it comes back again I promise you that the spot will have disappeared. . . . And now, my friend Latoste, to conclude!”

There was a brief period of strained expectancy. The Notary stepped forward, and motioned to the *gendarmes*, who stood away from the door.

“It is the desire of Monsieur le Marquis,” he announced, “that his return home should be unmarred by any unpleasant episode. There is a spare motor car outside. It will be well if those who were connected with the proposal made to Monsieur le Marquis took their leave.”

They hurried off without a word of protest—Mr. Parsons, the ex-architect, Mr. Seymour, who was writing a story, and Miss Wilcock, the young lady with the travelling scholarship from an American university. Curiously enough they had scarcely crossed the threshold before the same idea seemed to occur to all of us. Monsieur Latoste passed out to see them safely off, and Madame followed. Colonel and Mrs. Grayson showed an almost indiscreet haste to disappear, and I myself, I must confess, was last. I have an idea, though, that Mr. Brown looked upon me as one who was in his secret, for as I passed him I saw his hands creep out, I saw the light steal into her face, I even heard her little sob. I glanced back once more from the doorway. The morning sunlight, pouring through the narrow window, just caught the empty space above the altar, and I fancied somehow that I could still see those gentle, kindly eyes, that benedictory hand uplifted towards the two people who stood below, clasped in one another’s arms.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DANCING GENTLEMAN

I have never felt any particular affection for professional dancers as a class, but when, on entering the Chat Blanc at Marseilles, Maurice rose from his table near the door to greet me, I felt constrained to exchange a few amenities. The meeting somewhat surprised me. Maurice, only a season before, had been one of the most popular young professionals upon the Riviera, and his name was continually being coupled with one or another of those society dames with plenty of money who have a fancy for making pets of their dancing companions. Furthermore, the Chat Blanc was far from most of the resorts of fashion, and Maurice's appearance, although he was neatly dressed as usual, nevertheless showed signs of waning prosperity. My greatest surprise, however, was when, after a moment or two's desultory conversation, he turned a little hesitatingly to his young lady companion, who was looking into her mirror and toying with a lipstick.

"You remember Miss Handcock, Major Forester?"

The young lady held out her hand, and I made a somewhat incoherent reply. If Maurice had been a successful male dancer, Sybil Handcock was certainly one of the most admired of the English *danseuses* for many seasons. This evening, however, she was barely recognisable—the ghost of herself—thin, with sharp lines, and that indefinable look of age which illness leaves. There was something else about her, too, which seemed to account for her complete loss of charm. Her use of cosmetics had become too undisciplined; even her voice had a little rasp in it which I never remembered. In short, in place of a very attractive young woman in the early twenties, I should have taken her to-day for a woman of altogether a different type, approaching middle age.

"You didn't remember me, Major Forester," she complained.

"For a moment I'm afraid I didn't," I admitted. "You see, I've been away a good deal, and I thought that you were still at Monte Carlo."

"We finished there last season," she answered, fidgeting with her rings. "They wanted us back again at the Café de Paris, and the Carlton, but we thought we'd like a change. I daresay we shall be there again next season."

"Are you doing a show here?" I asked, trying to keep up the semblance of credulity and interest.

"Not every night," Maurice intervened. "Sybil has been ill and doesn't feel quite up to it."

At that moment, a *maître d'hôtel* tapped him upon the shoulder, and indicated a

table close at hand where two elderly ladies were seated. Maurice hurried off with a little bow.

“You will excuse me,” he murmured. “One of my clients. . . .”

“Sit down for a minute,” Sybil Handcock begged.

I accepted her invitation, and called for the wine list.

“Have you supped?” I asked.

“Not yet,” she admitted with a curious little gleam of anticipatory satisfaction in her eyes. “We were just thinking about it.”

“You must let me be your host,” I begged.

She accepted without hesitation, and again something in her expression made me feel a little uncomfortable. I ordered some caviare, some cutlets, and a bottle of champagne, and in obedience to her gesture the waiter removed the carafe of *vin ordinaire* which had been standing upon the table.

“Maurice and I are not quite so spoilt as we used to be,” she confided nervously. “You didn’t recognise me, did you, Major Forester, when you first came in?”

“Not at once,” I admitted.

“I have been ill for seven months,” she went on. “I haven’t really recovered yet, but Maurice would have had to find another partner if I had been laid up any longer, so I do my best. . . . You still dance?”

“As badly as ever,” I regretted, “but if you will——”

I have a certain amount of instinct in some things, and I knew very well that the suggestion of dancing—once it would have been considered rather an honour to have danced with Sybil Handcock—was made for the sake of the customary *douceur*, and I was convinced, also, that if I had not happened to come along, supper would have been a somewhat meagre affair. For some reason or other the two had fallen upon evil times. The Chat Blanc, although popular enough in its way, was a café for the people, and not to be compared with the fashionable *rendez-vous* of the Riviera. The decorations were tawdry and a little shabby; the service and the table appointments were second-rate. The walls were ornamented with huge pictures of simpering, naked women, with here and there an attendant sprite, and at the end of the room was a representation of an immense white cat, the presiding genius of the place. The young men seemed mostly of the shopkeeper class, but even they showed no signs of pressing their attentions upon my companion. She sat, after the dance, looking round the room with a tired yet wistful look in her eyes. As soon as the wine came, she drank a glassful eagerly, and I noticed that Maurice, as he passed with one of his clients, looked at her with some anxiety. He rejoined us before supper was served, and I caught something of the same expression in his face

as I had seen in hers when I had mentioned food. He tried to explain the sudden gleam in his eyes.

“I had a headache this morning, and went without luncheon,” he said.

“I am never hungry in the middle of the day,” Sybil observed, stretching out a not too steady hand for the toast.

Their manners, as always, were excellent, yet I came to a rather terrible conclusion before the meal was over: they were without a doubt half starved.

Now I had never been particularly intimate with either Sybil Handcock or Maurice, but the next night found me back again at the Chat Blanc simply with the idea of seeing them. Sybil was dancing with a heavy, loutish young man in morning clothes and thick brown shoes—an enterprise which in the old days she would have avoided with horror. Maurice was sitting gloomily alone at his table. He brightened up, however, when I arrived. I ordered wine and supper. He leaned towards me, and, after a moment’s hesitation, asked me a question.

“You find Sybil very changed, Major Forester?”

I looked around to be sure that she was not within earshot.

“I’m afraid I do,” I confessed. “She has been ill, I suppose?”

“Very ill,” Maurice replied. “Not only that, but—she became just a little inclined to drink more wine than was good for her.”

I nodded sympathetically.

“Of course the life is most unsettling,” he continued in apologetic strain. “If I had any natural taste for drinking, it would be just the same with me. We are all expected to accept if any one offers us wine. I’m afraid that’s how Sybil got into the habit. She’s better now, though,” he went on—“much better—and although the people here won’t believe it, she can still dance.”

The manager came hurrying up. He spoke to Maurice in French, and, against my will, I was obliged to overhear the whole conversation.

“They are asking to-night for the Basque dance,” he said. “You will dance it with Mademoiselle Claire there.”

He nodded across the room to where a fair and very pretty girl was supping alone.

“You must excuse me, Monsieur,” Maurice replied nervously, “but I cannot do that. I am under contract with Miss Handcock to do exhibition dances with no one else.”

“But that is ridiculous!” the manager exclaimed. “No one would look at Mademoiselle Handcock dancing. Her dress is not good enough, nor is her appearance attractive. With Mademoiselle Claire, on the other hand, you would be

sure of a grand success.”

“It is quite impossible,” Maurice insisted. “I can assure you that if you will allow me to dance it with Miss Handcock, the public will approve.”

The manager scowled for a moment. I leaned forward.

“If you will pardon my interference, Monsieur Basset,” I said, “it would give me very great pleasure to see Miss Handcock dance. In fact, I came here to-night in the hope of seeing these two young people perform, as I have done very many times before in Monte Carlo and Cannes.”

The manager made a little grimace.

“That was in the old days, sir,” he remarked. “Miss Handcock has lost her looks and dances like a stick. Still, if Monsieur desires, it shall be so—but if you have no success,” he added, turning to Maurice, “it must be for the last time.”

He took his leave. Maurice drew a sigh of relief. Almost immediately afterwards, however, the old anxiety was back upon his face.

“It was kind of you, Major Forester,” he acknowledged. “Of course one can’t pretend that Miss Handcock is quite what she was, but she is still capable of dancing beautifully. It is a chance for us at least. To tell you the truth,” he added, “we came here to do exhibition dances, but the first night was not a success, and we have not been allowed to dance since. They just let us sit here and earn anything we can. Please don’t let Miss Handcock have an idea of this,” he concluded in an undertone as she approached.

The young man with whom she had been dancing left her at our table. She greeted me warmly. Maurice assumed almost a boisterous air.

“Good news, Sybil!” he announced. “They want us to do the Basque dance.”

“What—to-night!”

“In ten minutes.”

There was a little rush of real colour to her cheeks, and a momentary impression of the Sybil of other days.

“I must fly!” she exclaimed. “Fortunately I have my dancing shoes here. If only I had worn my yellow dress!”

“I like that one better,” Maurice assured her. “I’ll meet you in the hall when they give the signal.”

She hurried away. Maurice drank half a glass of wine, but it was obvious that he was nervous.

“Sybil is not so easy to dance with since her illness,” he confided, “and it is a dance which few others attempt. I hope that the audience are in a good humour.”

He looked round the room anxiously.

"If you will excuse me, Major Forester," he said, rising, "there are one or two people here I know slightly. Just a word or two about Sybil's illness, and this being almost the first time she has tried to dance since, may help us."

"Don't worry too much," I begged him. "I am sure you will have a success."

Maurice moved round the room exchanging a few words with acquaintances. Then he disappeared, and in a minute or two the familiar signal was given. . . . I am no judge of dancing, but it was obvious from the first that Sybil was attempting something beyond her present capacity or strength. Her smile was so fixed that it was almost grim—in the limelight mercilessly thrown upon them, the anxiety of her expression seemed almost ghastly. Maurice, on the other hand, danced magnificently. He was all the time supporting his partner—a marvellous background—lending even to her performance a certain reflected charm. When the dance was over and he held her hand, I saw him glance round the room with a quick wistfulness, unrecognisable by those others, but to me, who was a little behind the scenes, ineffably appealing. The applause was at first very half-hearted, but by strenuous efforts I managed to make enough noise to bring them back again on to the floor. They disappeared, however, without attempting an encore. The *patron*, who had been standing near, approached my table.

"You see how it is, Monsieur," he said gloomily. "Maurice is magnificent, but she has lost the art as well as her appearance. It is strange how obstinate he is. I have offered him the full sum for which I engaged them—two *milles* a week—if he will dance with Mademoiselle Claire there. He is a fool."

I looked at the *patron*, who was a pudgy little man with a disagreeable expression, and I suddenly hated him and the whole atmosphere of the place.

"I am not so sure," I answered.

They came back presently. I shook hands with both of them, and did my best to assure her of a complete success. Maurice was still breathing heavily.

"It is a difficult dance," he said. "I could not dance it with any one in the world except Sybil."

She suddenly leaned across and patted his hand. Her face softened. She was once more beautiful.

"I wonder!" she murmured, and her eyes seemed to be trying to tear the truth from him.

Hers was that most pathetic expression which can ever creep into the face of a woman—the expression of one who wants so much to believe, but is tormented by some sinister doubt.

At twelve o'clock on the following morning, I called in, according to my usual custom when in the city, at that very superior bodega in the Rue de France for my *apéritif*. A beautifully dressed young woman, seated upon the next stool to the one I annexed, leaned towards me, and smiled. I remembered her at once as Mademoiselle Claire of the Chat Blanc.

"Monsieur enjoyed the dancing last night?" she asked inquisitively.

"Immensely," I answered. "I have always been a great admirer of Maurice and Sybil."

She indulged in a little grimace.

"Listen, my friend," she said, tapping my coat sleeve, "those days have gone by. Sybil does not exist any longer. She has been ill, and lost her looks. She has taken too much wine. She has no money to buy clothes. Even Maurice has lost some of his charm, but he can still dance. He is marvellous. Monsieur is a friend of these people, is it not so?"

I admitted the fact. She moved her stool a little nearer to mine. She was very expensively dressed; her pearls were magnificent; the perfume from the great bunch of violets she wore was pleasant. There were jewels on the collar of the little dog she held under her arm.

"If you are their friend," she continued, "you can do Maurice a great benefit. The *patron* of the Chat Blanc is my friend. Monsieur understands?"

"Perfectly."

"Now, I have made up my mind," she announced, with a slight hardening of the face, "that I will dance the Basque dance with Maurice. There is no one who dances like him, and he attracts me. It was only because of your urging that Sybil was allowed to dance last night. She shall not dance there again."

"But is that kind, Mademoiselle?" I ventured. "Besides, she is Maurice's friend."

Mademoiselle's little gesture was full of contempt.

"Zut! What does that matter?" she rejoined. "I tell you that she is too old and ugly to dance, and I have told Monsieur le Patron that she shall not dance any more at the Chat Blanc. If Maurice will not send her away, he shall go too. I have made up my mind, and what I say to the *patron* happens. Now, you are their friend. You should reason with Maurice. You should tell him what is the truth—that he loses even the little position he has there if he comes any longer with Mademoiselle Sybil. If, on the other hand, he is willing to dance with me, Monsieur le Patron shall give him three *milles* a week. Monsieur understands? It is one thing or the other."

"I think that it will be the other," I told her gravely.

"If so, then Maurice is a fool!" she scoffed.

“On the contrary,” I replied, finishing my vermouth, “I am beginning to discover that he is a gentleman. . . .”

Mademoiselle turned her shoulder upon me and favoured me with no more of her conversation. I returned to my hotel to find, somewhat to my surprise, Maurice awaiting me in the hall. He rose apologetically at my entrance.

“I wondered whether you could spare me a minute, Major Forester?” he asked.

I could scarcely keep from smiling when I thought of the old days when he sauntered through the lounge at the Hôtel de Paris, accepting salutes where he chose. Nevertheless, I liked him better now.

“Of course, Maurice,” I acquiesced. “Come along to the bar.”

I led the way, but he declined a drink. He seated himself in an easy-chair close to mine.

“I am in a very terrible difficulty, Major Forester,” he announced. “Last night, when we were leaving, the *patron* called me into his room. He presented me with an ultimatum. I am dismissed unless I consent to dance with Mademoiselle Claire.”

“And naturally,” I remarked a little tactlessly, “Mademoiselle Sybil objects.”

His eyes flashed.

“Objects! But do you suppose, sir, that I would put such an affront upon her?” he demanded indignantly. “She has been my partner for four years. We have had great success together. She has been ill; she has been a little foolish; she has lost temporarily something of her charm. That I will admit, but none of these things are any reason why she should be asked to accept an intolerable affront. It is not possible.”

“Then you have declined the *patron’s* suggestion?”

“He asked me to give my answer to-night. I should have given it to him on the spot, but I suddenly remembered that coming to the Chat Blanc this evening meant one more bottle of *vin ordinaire* and two sandwiches. We shall have those, and then we shall leave the place together—unless Monsieur le Patron changes his mind,” he concluded wistfully.

I considered the matter for a moment.

“Look here, Maurice,” I said, “I gather that you haven’t very much money?”

“We have nothing, sir,” he acknowledged simply. “I don’t know how we shall pay our bill at the hotel. I haven’t an idea how we shall get a railway ticket for anywhere.”

“Under the circumstances,” I suggested, “don’t you think that if you explained the whole matter to Sybil she might understand?”

He looked at me stonily.

“I would sooner die than do such a thing,” he retorted. “You are not quite so understanding, Major Forester, as I imagined. I should have thought you would have known that for me to breathe a word of such a thing would be like a stab into the heart.”

“But you must live,” I persisted.

He paraphrased—I am convinced unconsciously—a famous saying:

“Sometimes I doubt the necessity,” he replied.

I leaned back in my easy-chair, and smoked thoughtfully for a moment or two. It seemed such a queer little drama to stumble up against, such improbable characters, such vital human nature. And Maurice too! I thought of the days of his pearl studs, his jewelled cigarette cases, his motor car—the gift of a crazy client—the ovation he always received when he entered one of that select little group of restaurants. He was seated by my side now, looking very grim, yet with a pathetic twist to his lips. His linen was clean but a trifle frayed; his well-brushed blue serge suit was shiny at the seams; his patent shoes were cleaned with skill to conceal the cracks.

“Can you suggest any way in which I could help you, Maurice?” I asked at last. “I tell you frankly that I should like to. I’ve tried to give you the advice of a man of the world, but if you will allow me to say so, I respect you for having rejected it.”

There were tears in his eyes as he looked across at me.

“It makes me very glad to hear you say that, sir,” he acknowledged. “I felt that you must understand. In the olden days, when we were successful and popular, wherever we went, I was fond of Sybil—but there were others. Now she is, as you see, down on her luck. She has no one but me. I could not dream of deserting her.”

“But what is to be the end of it?” I asked him, as gently as I could. “You admit that you have no money. A temporary loan would be soon gone, and you would be no better off. How are you going to carry on?”

He rolled a cigarette, and smoked for a minute meditatively.

“I lived in the country once,” he confided. “My father was a land agent. He used to take me out shooting. I have always wondered—I have never ceased to wonder—what became of the old partridges and pheasants each year. They couldn’t all be killed, and you never saw them lying about. They just crawl away to some hole to die. I dare say it will be like that with us. I believe that Sybil would prefer it to my taking another dancing partner, and as she wishes so it will have to be.”

I made none of the obvious replies. I was studying his expression, comparing his present-day appearance with the appearance of the handsome, prosperous dancer, the Beau Brummel of the Riviera. He still had the slightly receding chin and sloping forehead which seem to be the physiognomic hallmarks of his profession, but there

were new lines in his face which made for strength. His sunken eyes may have lost some of the velvety charm his lady victims used to rave about, but there was something in them evolved by suffering—a light which had certainly never glowed there before. He was thinner, and his clothes hung around him baggily. I could well understand the shock to any of his old admirers who might meet him suddenly. I liked him better as he was.

“Shall we see you this evening, sir?” he asked, after I had forced him to drink a glass of *vin d’Oporto*.

“Certainly,” I promised.

He took his leave, and, acting upon a sudden impulse, I made my way to the shipping office where I had recently booked my cabin for a tour round the world, and had an interview with the manager. Afterwards, a little ruefully, I must confess, I returned to my rooms, and began to re-make my plans for the winter.

It was later than usual when I reached the Chat Blanc, but neither Maurice nor his partner were in their places. I made my way to their table. It had apparently not been occupied. Monsieur Basset came up to greet me with some reluctance.

“I was looking for Maurice and Miss Handcock,” I explained. “Are they not here?”

“Monsieur,” he said, “of all the ungrateful ones! I offered Maurice three *milles* a week to do his Basque dance with Mademoiselle Claire. He refused. That being so I had no alternative. I have shown them the door. They are not welcome here any more—except as guests,” he added, with an unpleasant little grin.

I took back my hat and stick from the page boy who was waiting also for my coat.

“Perhaps you can give me their address,” I demanded.

“Monsieur,” he began, “you are a valued patron. I beg that you will not take offence at an action which was forced upon me.”

“Monsieur Basset,” I replied, “it seems to me that you would have done better to have appreciated Maurice’s reasons for refusing your offer, and not to have listened to your lady friend.”

“But——” he protested.

“You can perhaps give me their address,” I repeated.

He shrugged his shoulders. I think he realised that there was nothing to be done with me, so he turned away.

“I have no idea where these people may be,” he declared insolently. “Monsieur can perhaps find out from some of the waiters.”

I left the room, ignoring a half quizzical, half triumphant greeting from Mademoiselle Claire. From the commissionaire, after some difficulty, I procured the address I required. A quarter of an hour later I was making my way up the bare, crazy stairs of a small hotel in the lowest quarter of the town. I felt ashamed, when at last I reached the apartment on the fourth floor, to knock at the door, but I summoned up courage and did so. There was a somewhat startled “*Entrez*” in response to my knock. I opened the door and closed it behind me. Maurice, coatless, was on his knees, holding a small saucepan over a gas fire. Sybil was seated upon a dilapidated cane chair, looking out of the uncurtained window. She had washed the rouge from her face, and more than ever I realised the pathos of her hunger-sharpened features, the sad drooping of the lips, the hopeless, almost sullen expression in her eyes as she gazed down upon the panoramic medley below. Maurice sprang up at my entrance, nearly upsetting the saucepan. Something that was almost a blush stole into his cheeks. The girl for a moment seemed inclined to treat me as an intruder. I thrust aside the idea of anything so small as an apology, drew a chair up with me, and seated myself between them.

“Listen, young people,” I began, “I feel that I can say what I like to you, because I am almost old enough to be your father, and it’s never any use shying at the truth. You are both up against it, and will do no good for yourselves in any ordinary fashion. Sybil needs a change before she will recover her health, and unless you get some nourishing food and have a holiday, before long you’ll be in trouble too, Maurice. Now, I’m going to make you a proposition.”

Despite themselves eagerness shone out of their faces. Maurice laid down the saucepan. Sybil was breathing quickly.

“I had made up my mind,” I went on, “to take a tour round the world in the *Merconia*, a steamer which leaves here next Thursday. I had paid for my passage, and everything was arranged. Now I find that it will be inconvenient for me to leave. I have changed my stateroom for two smaller ones, and I suggest that you two occupy them in my stead.”

“But, Major Forester,” Maurice gasped, “it would be wonderful, only——”

He hesitated.

“Oh, I know all about that,” I interrupted. “You see, your fares are paid right back to Marseilles. You won’t need to bother much about the excursions, and you will find the food on the ship excellent. I had reserved two hundred pounds for myself for tips, drinks and small expenses. That I save because your two rooms do not come to as much as the one I had selected, and the money is deposited to your credit with the purser. There is only one condition.”

“Condition!” Sybil faltered.

“It is not my business to pry into your secrets,” I said, smiling, “but to obtain your passports and travel comfortably you ought to pay a visit to the English clergyman here.”

The girl rose to her feet and came towards me with her arms outstretched, and I knew at that moment why the whole world had found her beautiful. I seemed to feel, too, that one day she would be beautiful again.

After all, my self-sacrifice cost me nothing, for immediately I had settled down in somewhat humble winter quarters at Vence, a relative died unexpectedly, and left me a legacy of two thousand pounds. I did not hesitate for one moment how to spend a portion of it, and I embarked upon an even longer cruise than the one I had first contemplated. It was eighteen months before I returned to England, and nearly two years before I stepped out of the Blue Train at Monte Carlo, into the sunshine of my beloved Riviera. I engaged rooms at my old hotel, greeted friends and acquaintances on every side, and then, after dinner, whilst wondering whether I should go to the Sporting Club, found myself suddenly confronted with a huge placard:

THE CARLTON
MAURICE AND SYBIL
back from their great success in
the Argentine
dance every night at
MIDNIGHT.

I gripped the arm of the friend with whom I had been walking.

“Are they the same dancers who were down here two or three years ago?” I asked.

He nodded.

“They had a great success then,” he remarked, “but they disappeared for a time. It seems they were touring in South America. They are better than ever now. If you thought of going, we’d better telephone for a table.”

I think my unexpected presence for a moment nearly spoilt their dance. They came on to the floor together—Maurice, handsomer even than in his palmy days, with an added attractiveness in his face, which every one talked about but no one could analyse, and Sybil, rejuvenated, with all the old charm, as fresh and dainty as ever. There was a tumult of applause at their entrance. The music had already started. Both were swaying to its rhythm when Maurice—no, I think it was Sybil first

—caught sight of me. Maurice had presence of mind enough to signal to the leader of the orchestra, whose music at once stopped. They both came across the floor to me.

“All owing to you, sir,” Maurice said simply.

Sybil only raised her fingers to my lips and smiled into my eyes as a woman smiles seldom in her lifetime.

“Afterwards!” she murmured.

Then they danced, and those who did not know me by sight were wondering who the middle-aged gentleman might be who had been so favoured.

CHAPTER IX WITH A DASH

I had very little warning of the impending cataclysm which was to disintegrate my orderly life. I had indeed barely done more than glance through my sister's letter dated from San Remo two days previously, when the concierge of the hotel where I am in the habit of staying at Monte Carlo, approached me respectfully. I fancied that there was a curious gleam in his eyes as he made his announcement.

"There is a young lady outside asking for you, Major Forester."

It seemed incredible that my niece should have arrived already, but I hastened out. I am glad to say that I have never looked with a censorious eye upon the extravagances of youth. The young woman with her short skirts, her lipstick, her cigarettes and cocktails may not have altogether met with my approval, but I have never been amongst the front ranks of her detractors. At the same time it was a shock to me to find sitting there in the person of my sister's daughter one of the most advanced, and, I must add, attractive types of the modern flapper which it would be possible to conceive. Her costume struck me as curious. She was wearing one of the fashionable type of pull-over hats, and a leather coat, which, however, was of no great length and inadequately concealed her long, silk-clad legs and patent leather shoes. She had just lit a cigarette, and, seated a little sideways, was superintending the unstrapping of a trunk from the rear of the car. At my approach she left the driving seat and stepped out on to the pavement to meet me.

"You dear thing!" she exclaimed, putting up her lips in most engaging fashion. "How sweet of you to have me!"

I must confess that I was taken aback. The greater part of my sister's letter was as yet unread.

"Is that your—er—trunk?" I inquired idiotically.

"Rather!" she answered. "It contains pretty well all I own in the world. They can take it up to my room any time. I sha'n't need to change for lunch."

"I must just speak to the manager," I said. "Come in with me, will you, Joan?"

She passed her arm affectionately through mine.

"I say, you got Mum's letter all right, didn't you?"

"To tell you the truth," I explained, "it arrived five minutes ago. I was just reading it."

"You don't know that I've come to live with you, and that I've been sent away from San Remo in disgrace, and all that sort of thing?" she exclaimed.

"I hadn't the faintest idea of anything of the sort," I assured her.

“If that isn’t just like Mummie,” Joan sighed. “Takes it into her head that I *must* be packed out of San Remo at a moment’s notice, and lands me on the first harmless person she can think of. I suppose you are harmless, aren’t you?”

I disengaged myself from her clasp. The manager of the hotel—an extremely quiet and respectable one, I might add—was on his way to greet us.

“I want a room for my niece,” I announced in my most dignified fashion, “—with bath.”

The manager bowed, glanced at Joan, and bowed again. For a moment he looked away into an unfathomable distance.

“Certainly, Major Forester,” he acquiesced. “On the same floor as your own, I imagine.”

“Not necessarily,” I answered. “Anywhere, so long as the room has a pleasant aspect and a bathroom.”

“I should like to be on the same floor as Major Forester,” Joan interposed, smiling at the manager. “I don’t like to be miles away from everywhere. You will find me a nice room, won’t you?”

She looked at the manager, and I knew very well that she would get what she wanted.

“Would you like to come upstairs and select for yourself?” he invited.

“I’ll leave it to you,” she decided. “Uncle,” she went on, “don’t you think a cocktail is indicated?”

I was on the point of summoning a passing waiter, but she checked me.

“Not here,” she said. “There’s a jolly good bar up on the hill there.”

“How do you know?”

“Oh, I’ve been here before. Come along, and I’ll drive you up. To tell you the truth, that’s why I kept the car.”

I stepped in by her side, and received an impression of being whirled through sunlit spaces, round a corner and up a hill, until finally we came to a standstill exactly opposite the Royalty Bar. Francis himself came hastening out to greet us. I should be expressing the situation mildly if I said that the general attitude of the little company of *apéritif* seekers, amongst whom were many of my acquaintances, was one of surprise, when we entered the place, Joan with her arm through mine. Francis led us to my favourite table, fortunately at that moment unoccupied.

“What sort of cocktail would you like, Joan?” I inquired—“a Bronx?”

She shook her head. Francis, suave and ingratiating, stooped down to receive her order.

“A Dry Martini—with a dash,” she added confidentially. “And a packet of

Goldflake.”

The light of complete understanding passed between the two. I gave my own order.

“A dash of what—Angostura?” I asked.

She patted my arm.

“Stupid man! Absinthe, of course. Haven’t you tried it? . . . Here, Francis!”

The latter returned hurriedly.

“Major Forester will try the same,” she directed.

Francis disappeared with a smile upon his lips. I leaned back and looked around, exchanging greetings with my friends. I was conscious of a general air of amusement tempered with a considerable amount of surprise. So far as I can remember, during the three years of my patronage of the place, the only ladies whom I have escorted there have been the wife of my old friend Admiral Conyers, a lady of sixty years of age, and Lady Craston, whose pretensions to good looks disappeared with the marriage of her granddaughter.

“I like this place,” my niece declared, spreading herself out and disclosing more than ever her silk-clad legs. “I think we are going to have a lovely time, Uncle, don’t you?”

“I am sure of it,” I mumbled. “If you will excuse me, I will finish your mother’s letter.”

I drew the closely written sheets from my pocket, and perused them. I gathered that Joan’s conduct in San Remo had been so atrocious that her mother considered an instant change advisable. At her wits’ end to know where to send her, she suddenly remembered that I was staying in Monte Carlo. She prayed me to give shelter to Joan for a week or so, until she could come over and explain. The great thing was that Joan must be got out of San Remo within twenty-four hours. I folded the letter, and put it in my pocket.

“You appear to have been giving your mother a certain amount of trouble,” I remarked.

She flicked the ash from her cigarette, and nodded tolerantly.

“I’m afraid they’re rather a rapid crowd there,” she admitted, “and you know how old-fashioned Mum is.”

“I’m considered to be a little that way myself,” I ventured.

“You won’t be any longer when I’ve finished my visit,” she assured me calmly. “You don’t mind having me, do you? I’ll be awfully good really so long as you always let me have my own way, and don’t grudge me the primary necessities of life.”

“As, for instance?”

“Oh, cocktails and cigarettes, and dinner not before half-past nine, and always lobster for lunch.”

I viewed with some dismay this sudden disruption of my usual habits, but on the whole I was surprised to find myself so resigned. She looked at me with a twinkling light in her brown eyes.

“So that’s all right!” she concluded, with a sigh of relief. “The next question is what I’m going to call you?”

“‘Uncle Andrew’ would appear to me suitable,” I suggested.

“Rotten!” she retorted. “I sha’n’t tell a soul you’re my uncle. You don’t look old enough for one thing, you’re much too nice-looking, and it wouldn’t be any fun at all. What’s your other name? Oh, I remember. David! I shall call you ‘David!’”

“But, my dear child,” I protested, “don’t you realise that you are—let me see, how old?”

“Eighteen.”

“And I am forty-four.”

“Just the right age,” she observed cheerfully. “You appear to me to have been leading too sedate a life, David. We must see to it.”

The cocktails arrived, were approved, and, notwithstanding a faint protest on my part, repeated. Some friends of mine passed to whom I presented my niece, with a slight emphasis upon the relationship. Joan behaved very charmingly, but I quite failed to appreciate the sly little smile which curved her lips at my mention of the relationship, and I had an uneasy feeling that my friends left me without entire conviction in their minds as to the *bona fide* nature of my introduction. I distinctly heard Sir George, whom I considered a friend of mine, remark, on his way down the steps.

“After all, Forester’s ten years younger than we are, and it’s Monte Carlo, you know—Monte Carlo!”

After a second somewhat similar experience, I gave up introducing Joan at all for the moment. The truth must certainly be known before long, for Joan’s mother—Lady Heveringham—was quite a distinguished personage in her way.

“Now I’ll drive you down to the Café de Paris,” Joan suggested, “and I’ll garage the car whilst you order luncheon. Lobster, for me, please, a baby lamb cutlet, and some peas. Nothing to drink, unless you’d like another cocktail.”

“Certainly not,” I declined hastily. “I very seldom take anything in the middle of the day.”

“We’ll see about a liqueur,” she said as she led me to the car.

We lunched out of doors, as Joan had suggested, and she ate everything that was placed before her, with hearty appetite, and, to my secret horror, commanded a *fin de maison* with her coffee.

“David, my dear,” she said, patting my hand, “I am sure we are going to be very happy.”

I should have withdrawn my hand at once, but, as a matter of fact, the touch of her slim, cool fingers was very pleasant, and I was anxious not to hurt her feelings. I saw another man whom I knew well look away with a smile.

“I’m afraid you will find it dull,” I warned her. “My friends are rather an elderly crowd. I don’t know any young people for you to dance or play round with.”

“But you dance, David, don’t you?”

“Er—a little.”

“And you play tennis?”

“Yes, I play tennis.”

“And golf?”

“And golf.”

“Why, David, dearest, I don’t want to know another soul,” she declared. “Besides,” she added, with a little sigh, “they’ll all be over from San Remo in a few hours’ time.”

“And who are ‘they’?”

Joan ejected the stump of cigarette from her holder, blew down it meditatively, selected another one, and fitted it in.

“Well, David, dear,” she admitted, “I’m afraid there are rather a lot of them. First of all, there’s the man I made my dancing partner, who’s really the cause of all this trouble.”

“And who is he?” I inquired.

“He has a funny name,” she replied thoughtfully. “Adrian Christianopolis.”

“A Greek?”

“Some people say that he is a Greek,” she confided, lighting her cigarette; “some people call him an Armenian; and others a Turk. Most of them—especially the men—insist upon it that he is an insufferable bounder.”

“What do you think of him?” I asked.

She looked at me with the most innocent light in the world shining in her beautiful eyes.

“I don’t know,” she answered. “He dances divinely.”

“H’m! I don’t fancy that I shall like him much,” I said. “Tell me about the

others.”

“Well, there is Philip Rothbury,” she mused. “He wouldn’t be so bad if he hadn’t got the crazy idea that he was terribly in love with me. Do you know, David,” she went on, “if there’s anything in the world I dislike in a man it’s sloppiness. You’re not likely to fall in love with me, are you, David?”

“Not the least in the world,” I assured her hastily. “Besides, I hope you won’t forget that I am your mother’s brother. And, whilst I am on the subject, I think it would be better if you called me ‘Uncle’ David.”

She shook her head.

“Not a chance!” she replied. “It would spoil it all, too. I told them in San Remo I was coming over to stay with a man. I said he was a little older than myself but I had loved him all my life. I am so glad you look as you do, David. You just carry out the idea. You don’t look a day older than thirty-eight and there is something Mephistophelian about the curve of your mouth.”

I opened my lips in indignant protest. Then I met her eyes. She was leaning back in her chair—not laughing, but smiling very quietly—and, before I knew what I was doing, I was smiling too.

“Of course,” I said, after I had taken a sip of the *fin de maison* which she had insisted upon my having, “I shall at once explain to any of your friends who may arrive, the exact nature of the relationship.”

“You won’t do anything of the sort,” she asserted, “and if you do they won’t believe you. Besides, what’s it matter about your being my mother’s brother? I don’t believe there’s anything in the prayer book shutting you out from my heart, because you’re my mother’s brother. I think I might get very fond of you, David.”

I changed my tactics. Protest I could see was only an incentive.

“I’m sure that I could easily adore you, Joan,” I whispered.

She smiled ecstatically.

“It’s experience that does it,” she declared. “Now, none of the boys can get just that note into their tone, and when they try to look like that—well, they make me froth at the mouth. You can hold my hand if you like, David.”

“This being a public place——” I began.

“Hold my hand, please,” she insisted.

I touched her fingers for a moment under the tablecloth, and was instantly conscious of the half reproachful, half smiling regard of the chief *maître d’hôtel*, one of my friends.

“Joan,” I said sternly, “you will be the death of my reputation.”

“David, dear,” she rejoined, “if you really meant to have a good time you ought

to have lost it ages ago.”

During the afternoon, I was allowed a couple of hours’ respite whilst Joan unpacked her clothes, and wrote some letters. About four o’clock, however, she sailed into my room—only a door or two away from her own—in a green silk negligee, which I had a horrible suspicion was practically the only garment she was wearing.

“My dear Joan!” I ventured.

She sat on the edge of my bed.

“David, dear, don’t be silly!” she begged. “Of course I shall come into your room whenever I want to. How nice it looks—a real man’s room. Such a good smell, too, of soap and shaving things. David, I want to know what we are going to do—what sort of clothes to put on? There’s a *thé dansant* at the Metropole. What about it?”

“Well, sooner or later,” I replied, “I suppose I shall have to prove my incapacity.”

She swung herself off the bed, came to where I was sitting, put her arm round my neck and deliberately kissed me. I was so startled that I dropped the book I had been reading.

“Aren’t you a dear, David!” she exclaimed. “I’ll be ready in ten minutes.”

She helped herself to a cigarette from my open box, and left my room humming an opera air, and, as I was painfully conscious—I had risen with some idea of opening the door—meeting at least half a dozen of my neighbours in the corridor.

At the Metropole—where, for some reason or other, we were given the best table—we danced for an hour and a quarter. I am really a very ordinary performer, but the child was so wonderful that it was easy to believe that she was telling the truth when she flattered me. At half-past six, she looked at her wrist watch.

“Time for our first cocktail,” she announced.

“Here?” I inquired.

“No, pay your bill—just wait whilst I run back to the hotel—and we’ll go and get my tickets for the club, and have them there.”

“But, my dear Joan,” I warned her gravely, “they won’t let you in there. You’re not old enough.”

She smiled as she watched me pick up my change.

“Wait,” she murmured.

We strolled back to the hotel, where she kept me waiting ten minutes. When she reappeared, somehow or other, although she was as attractive as ever, she seemed

slightly different—possibly owing to an altered arrangement of the hair. I led her to the Bureau of the *Salles Privées*. She smiled at the man at the desk, and he smiled back at her, as any one in the world would. In a moment or two, to my surprise, after a brief glance at her passport he was making out her card. She signed it. I watched her count the change from a *mille* note—she had insisted upon paying for herself—and we once more set out towards the Sporting Club.

“But how on earth did that come about?” I gasped.

“Never mind,” she replied.

The same performance was gone through at the Sporting Club. Afterwards we made our way upstairs into the little bar, where Joan insisted upon sitting upon a high stool with her arm through mine. She superintended the making of the cocktails, and there seemed to exist between her and Arnould that perfect freemasonry common between people of a similar bent. Later on we wandered through the Rooms, made a few bets, and, at half-past seven, found ourselves in easy-chairs in the bar again.

“I must know why those men issued you your ticket,” I told her.

She looked absently across at the wall.

“David, dear,” she said, “I’m afraid, if you have a fault—and I haven’t found one yet—that you are just a little what the old world used to call conscientious. Are you?”

“I hope so,” I answered.

“Then I’d rather not explain, if you don’t mind,” she begged.

“Don’t be silly,” I rejoined. “I may be conscientious, but you’re in without my aiding or abetting you.”

“If I tell you,” she pleaded, “you won’t do unpleasant things?”

“I promise.”

“You see, my sister Mary is twenty-one,” Joan explained, “and she’s the image of me—especially with my hair drawn down like this—so just when I’m in Monte Carlo I’m Mary. She doesn’t want her passport. To tell you the honest truth, I’ve been Mary before.”

Well, it wasn’t my affair, or if it was I didn’t feel in the least inclined to complain. On the other hand, it was rather pleasant to think that she might be my companion in this, my favourite lounging place.

“You’re the dearest thing on earth, David,” she whispered, boldly taking my hand in hers.

She beckoned to a *valet de pied*.

“Take this gentleman’s order,” she directed. “I am standing cocktails. Now, David,” she went on, “we’ve reached the very important question about what we’re

going to do to-night. I suggest a little dinner in a quiet place where I can really try you out. Then, after dinner, we dance a little, and after that we come back here and gamble for an hour. Supper at the Carlton, of course.”

“But, my child,” I protested, “do you know that I usually go to bed at twelve o’clock?”

“Terribly bad for you,” she retorted. “You’re lucky if you get to bed before three during the period of my disgrace. . . . Oh!”

I looked up, and I realised at once what had happened. A young man was approaching us—a perfectly dressed, olive-skinned, rather fat-faced young man, good-looking except that his eyes were set a trifle too close together, with masses of sleek, black hair, and a walk notably un-English. He bore down upon us.

“This is a great pleasure, to have found you, Miss Joan,” he said. “But what a desertion!”

Joan nodded at him in friendly fashion, but without over-much enthusiasm.

“I had no idea that you were coming to Monte,” she observed.

“I decided only at ten o’clock this morning, after I had visited the *Plage*,” was the suave reply. “Why did you leave all your friends so unexpectedly?”

“Because I was bored with them all,” she answered bluntly. “I thought I should like a change of life. Besides, I heard that a very dear friend of mine—Major Forester—was here, and I was dying to see him. David, this is Mr. Christianopolis—Major Forester.”

I contented myself with a nod and a perfunctory invitation to sit down, which the young man promptly accepted.

“Miss Heveringham is——” I began.

“You mustn’t let Mr. Christianopolis into my secret,” she interrupted. “Mr. Christianopolis knows a good deal about you already, although not by name. I am so honest,” she went on, with a little sigh, “I have always told him that there was some one I was very fond of coming soon to Monte Carlo.”

The perfect serenity of the young man’s expression was beginning to disappear. The half-masked scowl on his face made me dislike him, if possible, more than ever.

“You are staying at what hotel?” he inquired.

“I am staying with David,” Joan replied. “We are at the Hotel Maurice.”

“But, my dear Joan,” I exclaimed, a little shocked, “you ought to tell——”

“There’s nothing we need tell,” Joan interrupted, taking my case from my pocket and lighting a cigarette.

“Miss Heveringham,” the young man said desperately, “may I have a word with you alone?”

“If ever you’re fortunate enough to find me alone,” Joan assented. “As a matter of fact, I don’t often let David out of my sight. There are too many beautiful fairies about in this place.”

The young man was fuming. After all, although I disliked him, I thought the situation might possibly be relieved by my temporary absence. I rose to my feet.

“Your opportunity has arrived,” I told him. “There is a friend in the baccarat room I want to see. I shall find you presently, Joan.”

She made a little grimace at me.

“I shall wait here until you come back,” she promised.

I wandered through the Rooms, greeting a few acquaintances, and was standing by one of the roulette tables when I felt a touch upon my shoulder. I looked round and was confronted by a tall, very good-looking, sunburnt young man, whose face was somehow familiar to me.

“It is Major Forester, isn’t it?” he asked.

I admitted the fact.

“My name is Rothbury,” he went on eagerly—“Philip Rothbury. You knew my father, I think.”

“Quite well,” I told him, shaking hands—“and your uncle.”

“By the by,” he inquired, with elaborate nonchalance, “is your niece, Miss Heveringham, staying with you?”

“At the present moment,” I said, “she’s in the bar, talking to a young man of the name of Christianopolis.”

My companion’s face darkened.

“That infernal bounder!” he muttered.

“I’m inclined to agree with you,” I confessed. “Why don’t you go and break up their *tête-à-tête*?”

He accepted the suggestion, and disappeared. I found a seat and played *trente et quarante* for half an hour. Afterwards I strolled back to the bar. There was no sign of Philip Rothbury, but Christianopolis was still sitting talking to Joan. She welcomed me gaily, but I thought she looked a little tired. Christianopolis rose to his feet and deliberately, in my presence, leaned down and whispered in her ear. She answered him with her tone a little more raised than usual.

“Nothing in the world would induce me to dine with you to-night,” she replied. “You should have better taste than to ask me when my dear friend David is here.”

The young man’s lips moved, and I am perfectly certain that his unspoken words consigned me to the nethermost regions of hell.

“At the Carlton to-night, then?” he suggested.

She turned towards me.

“I have told Mr. Christianopolis that if he happens to be at the Carlton to-night I will dance with him twice,” she said. “Do you mind, David?”

“Of course not,” I answered.

He left us then, with a little bow. She looked after him, and there was something in her eyes which troubled me.

“I rather wish you had minded,” she sighed.

I tried hard to get Joan to allow me to invite Philip Rothbury, to whom I had taken a great fancy, to dine with us that night. She refused, however, firmly.

“Our first dinner together, David dear,” she protested—“I won’t have it spoiled. I know exactly how Philip would try to make love to me. I haven’t the faintest idea as to your methods.”

“You shameless little hussy!” I rejoined. “I tell you I am your uncle. I’m inclined to think you’re a wicked and troublesome child, and I am as likely to want to make love to you as I am to your mother—my own sister.”

She laughed in my face.

“We shall see,” she murmured.

I took her, as she desired, to a restaurant of an *intime* character, where the music consisted of a very small orchestra conducted by a wonderful violinist. The dancing space was limited but adequate, and, despite the fact that my niece made the most flagrant efforts to flirt with me, the evening was, I think, a success. I did my best to yield to her mood, and I am afraid I was the object of many commiserating comments at the supper tables of Monte Carlo that night.

“Don’t let’s go back to the Rooms at all,” Joan suggested when eleven o’clock came. “Let’s stay here and talk until it’s time to go to the Carlton. Perhaps he won’t come then.”

“But don’t you want him to come?” I asked. “I thought you’d promised to dance with him.”

Her eyes shone—falsely, as I well knew—into mine.

“I don’t want him to come,” she insisted.

“But you like dancing with him.”

“I like dancing with him better than anything in the world,” she admitted, with sudden emphasis. “Don’t you see, David dear, that’s just it. I wish I didn’t.”

“Why not?” I was constrained to ask.

“Because he’s a brute,” she answered simply.

That was all the mention that was made of Christianopolis, but on our way up to

the Carlton she suddenly put her arm round my neck and, in the most brazen way, kissed me.

“Joan!” I exclaimed. “My dear child!”

“Oh, shut up!” she insisted. “I want to kiss you David. Don’t you understand? It’s a safety valve and you are about the one man in the whole world I could kiss. Kiss me back again, please, and look as though you wanted to.”

I did the best I could to invent and deliver an embrace suitable to the moment and the circumstances. Joan laughed at me, but approved in modified fashion.

“With a little practice, David,” she confided as she held my fingers tightly on descending from the carriage, “I shall never want another man to kiss me.”

Joan was gayer even at the Carlton than she had been during dinner. She drank more champagne and, although I watched her very carefully, I was unable to see that it had the slightest deleterious effect upon her. We postponed supper until later, and danced. The usual crowd came streaming in about midnight, and I felt the little ripple of comments all round us.

“Joan dear,” I begged, “you must let me present you to some of these people as my niece. My character——”

“David dear,” she interrupted, “aren’t you content to lose your character for my sake?”

Between the appeal to my sense of humour and my affectionate regard for this amazing child I was helpless.

“But tell me why?” I pleaded.

Then for a moment she was almost serious.

“Because,” she whispered, “if Christianopolis really believes that I am in love with you—and I am—perhaps he will leave me alone.”

I think for a moment I must have looked almost angry.

“But, Joan dear, if you want him told to leave you alone, if you want him put where he belongs, that at least comes within the scope of my legitimate authority.”

She shook her head a little sadly.

“Words wouldn’t touch him,” she assured me. “There is something else, and he knows it.”

We were at the height of our gaiety when he came in. He was too discreet to attempt to join us at our table, but selected one for himself at the opposite end of the room. From the moment of his arrival there was a queer change in Joan. Her feet floated less lightly across the floor, and yet every now and then her little half-passionate kindnesses seemed more than ever real. It may have been my fancy, but I imagined that her fingers which were resting in mine grew cold when, after an

appropriate interval, the orchestra struck up a tune which was really one of the modern dances but had all the haunting melancholy of the old waltzes. Christianopolis came across the room, bowed formally, but a little cynically to me, and stood before Joan. Without a smile on her face, but perfectly acquiescent, she moved away with him.

There is something about dancing which I do not understand, and I don't attempt to describe. I only know that after they had danced for a short time there was a murmur of interest amongst most of the onlookers. Two of the real professional dancers came out to watch. I gathered from comments I heard that the dancing really was wonderful. I can quite imagine it, for the feet of neither seemed to touch the ground. They moved from corner to corner of the room, as it were, without volition. Joan's face had become pale. The light-hearted girl had vanished; it was the woman who danced. There was no shadow of unpleasantness in their contact—not the faintest suggestion of the lewdness which sometimes one sees in many public dancing places. He held her with a delicacy which I should have thought impossible, and if ever dancing could shoulder its way up amongst the arts, these two were easily the exponents. Yet, whereas Joan had danced with me with laughing eyes and parted lips, with the wholehearted gaiety and joy of a child, she danced now with a rapt devotion utterly inexplicable. There was no smile upon her lips, no joy in her eyes, but I who watched her knew that every fibre of her being was responding to some fierce emotion. They danced on, and again, until with a sudden sensation of relief I heard the customary signal from the orchestra for an exhibition number. They came back to my table, and parted without the exchange of a word. Joan sank into her place by my side, and Christianopolis, with a bow to both of us, took his leave. Yet, as he crossed the room, I fancied that there was something triumphant in his slow, perfectly balanced movements. I poured Joan out some champagne. She drank it greedily. I opened her vanity case, and with a quick smile of understanding she studied her reflection in the mirror.

“Isn't it terrible, David?” she whispered.

She looked at me with the strangest light in her eyes, and I knew that it was terrible. Then she glanced behind. The exhibition dance was about to commence, but there was a way round by the rear of the room, into the bar, from which there was an exit into the street.

“Pay your bill another time, David,” she prayed, “and let us go.”

And then we fled from the place like frightened children.

If any shred of reputation still remained to me at the hotel which had known me

and my regular ways for many years, it must have vanished that morning when, having parted from Joan half an hour previously, at four o'clock I heard the soft turning of the handle of my door, and she glided into the room. I looked at her in momentary horror. A touch of her old self brought the laughter into her eyes.

"You're perfectly respectable, David, in that ridiculous dressing gown of yours," she said, "and as for me—why, I haven't much on, I admit, but I am all covered. Please!"

She pushed me gently back into the easy-chair in which I had fortunately been enjoying one last cigarette before turning in. She seated herself upon the side of it. Her arms went round my neck.

"Oh, you dear David!" she murmured. "If I hadn't found you! Oh, if I hadn't found you!"

Her arms tightened. She kissed me with the sudden ardour of a child clinging to some protecting elder. I knew better than to interrupt her. I sat quite still, but I think she felt the shiver of anxiety which was creeping through me.

"David," she went on, "it must be you or no one else. Philip doesn't understand, although in his way he is a dear. I'm just an ordinary child, aren't I—girl—young woman, what you will—but I am mad. I've a little madness, and if you won't help me it's going to steal all through me. I sha'n't be what you'd want me to be any more. David!"

"Joan dear!" I whispered.

"I'm reasonable about everything else in life," she pleaded. "I hate Adrian Christianopolis. I know that he is what you and the right sort of men call a bounder. I know he's wrong, morally—every way. I could shriek at the idea of his kissing me, and yet when I dance with him—when he dances with me—it's heaven and hell mixed. I can't refuse him when he asks; when he leaves me I think of the next time. And it's what I told you just now—it's heaven and hell mixed—and I'd rather have it, it seems, than heaven itself. David?"

"Yes, child."

She kissed me again, on the eyes, and her lips were burning.

"David, can't you save me?"

"Of course I can," I assured her. "Easiest thing in the world! I'll see to it tomorrow."

She withdrew herself a little from me. Her lips came apart, her eyes were filled with a questioning light, but it seemed as though she forgot to speak. Then I kissed her tenderly, and, lifting her in my arms, placed her in my chair and stood up before the mantelpiece.

“Child,” I enjoined, passing the cigarettes, “smoke.”

She obeyed me. I struck a match, lit her cigarette, and then my own.

“Now listen,” I continued, “you’ll swear that there’s nothing about this man except his dancing?”

“Before God!” she sobbed. “I loathe and detest him. And, David,” she added, almost pitifully, “what is there in dancing that it should turn one into another being the way it does to me? When I dance with you or with Philip I’m just happy. That is how one should love it, and yet there’s something else—something which seems to come flaming up from hell in my blood when the music starts, and he dances with me.”

I poured myself out a whisky and soda. I really didn’t want it very much, but I did it for the sake of atmosphere.

“Supposing,” I asked, “I were to tell you that you were never to dance with him again, would it make you happy or unhappy?”

She flung out her arms to me.

“The happiest being in the world,” she declared.

“Then your troubles are over,” I assured her.

My reputation amongst certain sections of society in Monte Carlo will probably never again be thoroughly re-established after the events of the ensuing fortnight. Joan, in the absence of Christianopolis, becoming more light-hearted and daring every day, carried out the scheme of devilment upon which she had embarked to its furthest limits. Even when I made my most agonised efforts to introduce her to some of my friends as my niece, to speak impressively of the impending visit of her mother, my sister, she spoilt the whole effect by either assuming an air of bland surprise or indulging in a perfectly obvious grimace. I really believe that so far as the loiterers of the place were interested in my affairs at all, they became terribly interested as to the relationship between Joan and myself. To all my attempts at establishing her socially, Joan replied by some further piece of flagrant misbehaviour. She insisted upon lunching, dining and supping alone with me at different places every day. We were always to be found at the popular cocktail bar. The stream of young men who followed her from San Remo she treated in such a manner that one by one they thinned out and failed to materialise. Philip Rothbury alone, I was delighted to see, she tolerated, and he was sometimes permitted to join us. The thing which brought me real happiness, however, was the utter disappearance in a few days of every cloud from her young face, and the passing of that state of nervous unrest which had kept her glancing furtively towards the door whenever we were

dancing. Sooner or later, however, the inevitable was bound to happen. She and I were supping one night at the Carlton, with Philip Rothbury, who was attached to another party, occasionally intervening for a dance, when suddenly, during the pause, after an exhibition dance, Christianopolis came in. He was paler and pudgier than ever, and he leaned heavily upon two sticks. I saw Joan shiver for a single moment as she became aware of his arrival, but immediately afterwards the fear had gone. She looked at him in frank curiosity.

“Why, here’s Adrian!” she exclaimed. “I wonder what’s happened to him.”

He bowed to her, taking no notice of me, and established himself at a table just inside the door. She looked at him speculatively.

“Now I wonder——” she began.

I insisted upon dancing to keep her quiet. As soon as we returned to our places, Christianopolis rose and crossed the room towards us. She watched his approach without the slightest change of expression, without, in fact, any show of interest. He took her hand, still ignoring me so far as was possible.

“Hullo, you’ve been in the wars!” she exclaimed brightly.

He frowned.

“I met with an accident,” he explained. “May I join you?”

“I’m afraid we’ve only room for three at our table,” I intervened, “and the other place is engaged.”

He looked at Joan with an expression I had sometimes seen in his face when they had been dancing. Her eyes never flickered as she smiled back at him.

“Sorry, Adrian,” she said. “What hard luck for you, not being able to dance.”

He stood quite still for a moment, and I braced myself for the attack I was half expecting. The indifference of her tone must have been terribly galling. Then he turned away.

“I miss not being able to dance of course,” he admitted, “but my time will come again.”

She caught his venomous glance towards me as he turned away, and it seemed to bring illumination. She gripped my hand under the table. She ignored Philip, who was crossing the room towards us, coming to claim a dance.

“David,” she cried, “I’ve never been so excited in my life. Can’t you feel me—I’m trembling all over. Tell me the truth at once.”

I decided to treat the affair as lightly as possible.

“Men,” I pronounced grandiloquently, “have fought since time immemorial to save the girl they love from harmful contact.”

“You fought with him—you, David!” she exclaimed.

I looked across the room at his retreating figure.

“One couldn’t fight with a creature like that,” I replied. “We took him out into the country—he thought he was going to lunch with you—and we gave him the choice—Philip and I—of leaving the Principality or of—an accident. He didn’t believe us, and he chose the accident. I was something of a surgeon in my younger days,” I explained, “and knee caps were rather a speciality of mine. He’s all right, except that he can’t dance.”

“He can’t dance,” she repeated.

“And until you’re safely off my hands,” I concluded, “he never will be able to again.”

They were playing the Blues, and the lights had been lowered. She suddenly leaned towards me with all the old mischief in her eyes. Regardless of shocked faces at the next table, she kissed me. But it was Philip with whom she danced.

I shall be in my sister’s good books for the rest of my life. Here is a fragment of her last letter:

I shall never cease to look upon you, Andrew, as the greatest social diplomat I have ever encountered. How you got Joan to break with that detestable crowd—especially that awful Adrian Christianopolis—and marry that delightful boy Philip, I can’t imagine, but you did it where I failed. You know that Philip has come in for another six thousand a year, and that they say he is likely to be the youngest Cabinet Minister? Bless you, my dear Andrew. I shall always send to you when I am in trouble. . . .

On the other hand, even to the present day, half Monte Carlo believes me to be something of a roué, although there are a few who, impressed by my sister’s enthusiasm, look upon me as a very clever fellow. Only I myself, sometimes, when I take my cocktail alone up at the Bar on the hill, or listen to the music with rather a dull party at the Carlton, know the whole truth.

Which is that I am something of an old fool.

CHAPTER X

THE CHÂTEAU OF PHANTASIES

“You are nothing more or less than a snob,” my friend Denham declared, as we sat side by side on a bench watching the sunlight filter through the pine trees behind the first tee at Cagnes.

“Because I object to chars-à-banc?” I protested.

“Because you object to the principle which riding in a char-à-banc implies. No one could possibly object to a char-à-banc for any sane reason. They are better hung than a motor car, their seats are more luxurious, the cost is trifling. All that one loses is your cursed exclusiveness. You object to other people sharing the same privileges as yourself. You prefer the expense of a private automobile, which not all of us can afford, or else to remain at home when you might be exploring beautiful country rather than do so in company with your neighbours. I call that snobbishness.”

“Very well,” I agreed meekly, “take the seats, and I will come with you.”

On the whole I was glad that I had allowed my friend to persuade me. We had a fine day for our excursion, and we crept sluggishly but safely across some of the mountainous roads at the back of Nice, through the heart of that hilly but richly fertile country of old hill villages, of flower farms and tucked-away homesteads, from the gates of which the peasant folks stared at us, still with a touch of that dumb wonder which seems always lurking in the mind of the yokel who lives in the quiet places. Towards afternoon we came to a standstill halfway up a precipitous hill, and the driver of the car descended to effect some slight repairs. It was a picturesque, although a wild spot. On one side of us was a precipice; on the other a wood, cut through by one of those straight, formal drives, leading to a château, weather-stained, forbidding-looking, with its rows of narrow, empty windows. I pointed it out to the conductor of the char-à-banc.

“A lonely place for a large house,” I remarked. “Who lives there?”

To my surprise—for the French people of that order to-day are far from being a religious race—the man crossed himself.

“One believes,” he replied, “the Comte de Trébault. The house is never visited, though.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, puzzled.

“I have heard something of this,” my friend intervened from his place by my side. “So that is the Château Trébault! The Trébaults of hundreds of years ago were supposed to welcome their visitors with the *oubliette* and the dungeon. There are

legends about the present man. Is it not so?" he inquired of the conductor.

"The country people talk," the man acknowledged. "Their stories are wild, but the fact remains—there is no one who visits the Château Trébault."

He descended to help the driver of the char-à-banc with his task. I looked up the stony, winding road above, unprotected on each side, twisting and curving its way almost around the summit of one of the spurs of the mountain range which we had to cross before we dropped into the plain of the Mediterranean. Then I looked back at the Château, and a curious sensation came to me. There was no actual change in that long front of sightless windows, yet, whereas I had looked at them only a few moments before in dumb and passive curiosity, I was now suddenly and profoundly intrigued. The spirit of enterprise which in my younger days had led me into so many strange places seemed, without reason or incentive, rekindled. I felt that the apparent desertion of the house was a farce, that the broad, uninviting avenue, with the dank weeds and grass-grown borders, was in effect one of those passages opening out from the lives of all of us, at the far end of which shines the lamp of adventure. I rose from my seat and prepared to climb down.

"Where are you off to?" my friend Denham asked.

"I am going to speak to the driver of the char-à-banc," I replied.

Denham knew that I was something of a mechanic, and he let me go. It was not in my mind, however, to offer my help. I stood by the man's side for a moment, watching him lay out his tools.

"Shall we be long?" I asked.

"One cannot say, sir," he replied, a little surlily. "Half an hour at least. If one of you gentlemen would take the trouble, it would be a good thing to walk on to the next bend, and prevent anything coming round. They could not pass just here."

I glanced up the zigzag road which in the far distance seemed little more than a goat track. I fancied that I saw some disturbance upon the horizon—or was it merely a cloud of dust blown into a cyclone by the wind which was sobbing around us? One of the bystanders started off to the corner, but I turned away, approached the fine but rusty gates of the Château Trébault, shook the chain which locked them together, and finding it secure, stepped round the side through a gap in the prickly hedge, and started off up the deserted avenue. Even as I did so, I fancied that I heard a clamour of voices behind, but nevertheless I held on my way.

The gale, which had been blowing in great gusts from the mountains and booming through the valleys, seemed, even in this sheltered spot, to be spending itself in a sort of fantastic fury. Besides the black cypress trees on each side of me,

bending this way and that with a lack of unison which seemed somehow grotesque, there was a medley of other trees and shrubs, amongst which the wind was making havoc. Little twigs of dead wood were blown down upon my head, delicate leaves of oleander blossom floated in the air, sometimes caught up by eddies of wind until they sailed over the tops of the trees, sometimes falling like huge flakes of snow upon the avenue; and, all along, until I reached the great round opening with its dead fountain in the middle of a jungle of weedy grass, there was no sign that any human being had traversed its desolate way. The French are not used to neglecting any yard of tillable land, yet, as I came out into the open spaces surrounding the Château, on one side of me were uncared-for vineyards, where the vines, without pruning, had been allowed to run riot, and on the other side a wilderness of pasture land upon which no cattle had fed or reaping machine taken toll. The front of the house was longer and more imposing than I had imagined from the road. There must have been a dozen windows at least on each side of the huge front door, and on each of the corners of the building were the four Provençal towers. Upon the step in front of the door lay the remains of a rusty bell, dragged from its socket. I leaned forward and struck the panels with a walking stick which I was carrying. Thick though it must have been, I seemed to hear the echoes of my summons resounding in caverns of emptiness within.

“No one will come,” I said to myself. “There could be no one here alive.” Yet I struck again and again, until, much to my amazement—a little, also, to my fear!—I heard the sound of footsteps approaching the entrance—slow, solemn footsteps—the footsteps, so far as I could gather, of a heavy man.

I stepped a yard back into the windy twilight and waited. The footsteps ceased, a lock was turned, the door was thrown open. I found myself face to face with a man who, save for his beard and his worn clothes, might very well have been the butler of such a house. The very way in which he leaned deferentially forward was professional. He left it to me to speak.

“Is your master at home?” I asked.

“Monsieur le Comte is at home, but he does not receive,” was the stolid reply.

I produced a card.

“I am an English tourist,” I told the man, “stranded here by a mishap. I wondered whether it would be possible for me to see over the Château?”

“Monsieur will be pleased to step inside,” he invited.

I followed him into what seemed to be at first a chasm of twilight. Then, as my eyes became accustomed to the change, I saw that we had passed into a great hall, the size of which, considering the external architecture, was a surprise to me. It was

barely but in a way magnificently furnished. There were some oak chests of prodigious size and wonderfully carved against the white walls, ancient weapons, with two tattered banners, queer spaces where pictures had hung—all the remains of past magnificence. The atmosphere of the place seemed to me, coming from the stormy freshness outside, dank, chill as the air of a mausoleum. One could well believe that the door which had rolled open to admit me had been kept fast closed for a hundred years. The greater my surprise, therefore, when I was ushered into a room of no particular size, furnished still, it is true, in the fashion of generations ago, but with many evidences of modern civilisation. There was a reading lamp upon a small table, also newspapers, a box of cigarettes bearing the name of a famous maker, a copy of the *Revue du Monde*, and, unless my eyes deceived me, an English newspaper. The solitary occupant of the room was almost invisible in the depths of an easy-chair with protruding sides. He rose to his feet, however, at the first sound of the servant's voice, and stood confronting me—a slim, typical Frenchman of late middle age, dressed in dark shabby clothes, with worn, aristocratic features, deep-set eyes, and high forehead. There was nothing of welcome in his regard.

“This gentleman, Monsieur le Comte, asked if it were permitted to see over the house?”

The Comte de Trébault, as I judged him to be, looked at me with an air of well-bred surprise. I felt that I had been guilty of an impertinence.

“But what could there be about my house to interest Monsieur?” he demanded.

“I offer you a thousand apologies, sir,” I said as the man withdrew, closing the door behind him. “The fact of it is that I am a tourist and I have a natural fondness for old places, old furniture, old pictures. Your house looked as though it might well contain such treasures.”

“But my house is not a museum,” was the cold response. “If I possess treasures, that is—pardon me—my own affair. They are for the pleasure of my household and my friends.”

“I understood,” I explained, “that the house was uninhabited, or in the hands of a caretaker. Otherwise I should not have ventured.”

“They are foolish people who spread such rumours,” he observed.

“I can only offer you my apologies,” I concluded, turning towards the door.

His attitude suddenly changed. He held out his hand.

“Give yourself the trouble to pause for a moment, Monsieur,” he begged. “Since you are here you shall have your wish. You shall see the treasures of the House of Trébault.”

He lifted the lamp from the table, and led me from the room, pausing first in the centre of the great hall. By the light of the lamp, which he held over his head, I could see clearly now three empty spaces where some time or other huge pictures must have hung. Now only the black outline of where the frames had rested remained.

“The centre one you doubtless recognise from its description,” he said. “It is the ‘Andrea del Sarto’, stolen by mercenaries whilst on its way from Florence to the Court of King Francis. On the left—the smaller painting—is by an artist unknown. You yourself, however, being a connoisseur, will doubtless divine its history. On the right, the only Murillo which ever came into the possession of my family.”

I stared at the empty spaces, and I stared back at the tall, gaunt man who stood by my side. Not a muscle in his face moved. He pointed instead to seven vacant recesses against the wall.

“Those suits of armour,” he continued, “are pure Venetian, and are probably the finest examples of early fifteenth-century work in the world. Be so kind as to step this way.”

A little dazed, I followed my cicerone. He threw open an oak door which rolled back as though it had been the entrance to a cathedral, and we passed into a gallery which must have taken up the whole of one side of the Château. In the middle of the floor there were two long, glass-topped cabinets—cabinets of oak with quaintly turned legs—and as far as I could see, along each side of the wall were those empty spaces where pictures had hung from a great cornice of faded gilt. He turned me round for a moment to point to the huge open fireplace which took up the whole of the near end of the room. Here there were bricks missing, masonry displaced, and above, again the vacant space.

“The oak carving you see there,” he went on, “was all the work of one man—the monk Ducellini whom you will remember as having served under Michael Angelo. It carries the history of the world from the birth of Christ through troublous periods to the dawn of the Renaissance. The picture above is a genuine Leonardo da Vinci.”

He held up the lamp as though for me to better survey the gauntly empty space. I turned away and looked back at him. There were many things which I could have said, but it came into my mind that silence was best. I could scarcely decide whether I was being made the victim of the grimmest jest which had ever entered into the mind of man, or whether my guide was indeed a lunatic. He turned slowly away, and in that moment I heard a soft and strange sound behind. It might have been the wind, abating now, rustling amongst the leaves outside, only there was something gentler and more monotonous about it. And then, as my guide held the lamp still a little

higher, I saw, coming towards us, a girl plainly dressed in some dark-coloured gown, a girl who in that uncertain light, seemed to me as though she might have stepped down from one of the frames of those nonexistent masters. She had the tender smile of the Madonna herself, a sweet clearness of complexion which was almost unearthly. As she drew near and her eyes rested upon me, her forehead became faintly wrinkled. She was half apologetic, half wistful. She was, I thought, the most beautiful thing I had ever looked upon. My guide set down the lamp upon one of the ancient cases and turned to me.

“Sir,” he announced, with the air of one who has wearied of his task, “here is a guide who knows more than I. I beg you to excuse me.”

He turned and left us, and I looked at the newcomer, tongue-tied. For, matter-of-fact person though I am, I was not sure whether she was human.

“I fear, Monsieur,” she regretted, “that my father has been indulging in one of his usual grim jests. He has been taking you for a tour to see treasures which do not exist.”

“It was my own fault, Mademoiselle,” I acknowledged. “I had no right to intrude.”

“If it was the love of beautiful things which brought you, Monsieur,” she rejoined, “you had certainly a right to come, but, you see, everything that we once owned has gone. This is a house of emptiness.”

I shivered, for even as she spoke the atmosphere of that great room seemed to chill my blood. And then it suddenly went warm again, for my companion’s eyes were lit, and my heart began to beat fast. Never before had I stood near anything so beautiful.

“Mademoiselle,” I ventured, “I wish that there were indeed treasures here, that you might show them to me.”

She laughed softly, but she led me imperceptibly towards the door.

“There are no longer any treasures under this roof,” she repeated.

I checked her progress, slow though it was.

“Mademoiselle,” I said, and I found it hard to control my voice, “I speak, believe me, with all respect, I speak from my heart, with great humility—there is a treasure which still remains here greater than any masterpiece which has ever adorned these walls.”

My voice shook with passion. I was more in earnest than I had ever been in my life. The smile left her lips, but the gentle question in her eyes was even more beautiful.

“Are you trying to flatter me, sir?” she asked.

"I am trying to find words, Mademoiselle," I answered, "to tell you that you are more wonderful than anything I have ever dreamed of in life. If you send me away without a hope that we may meet again, you will make me the most miserable of men."

She leaned a little towards me. We were in the centre of the great hall, and the wind, whistling through the cracked glass of the windows, was playing havoc with her lamp. She laid her fingers upon my arm. Their touch was almost a caress.

"Then you must come back," she whispered, "for I would make no one miserable."

It seemed to me that I had closed my eyes in a wave of ecstasy, and I opened them to horror. For a moment or two I could make nothing of my surroundings. I was lying upon a rug by the side of the road, with my back to a low stone wall. Opposite me were four or five figures, all stretched out, motionless, their faces covered. Only a few yards away, strange and grotesque, was a huge misshapen mass of metal and wood and upholstery—an overturned char-à-banc, with the steam still hissing out from the smashed radiator and drifting away down the valley. In my ears was a subdued sound of sobbing, and here and there a shriek of pain. Two men, who might have been doctors, were hurrying about; one, with a woman in nun's habits, was bending over another prostrate figure close at hand. A little way down the road a *gendarme* was keeping back an ever increasing stream of carts and cars.

"What is it?" I gasped. "How did I come here?"

Then a voice answered me from underneath the great wide cap by my side, and I fancied that I must be back again in that mausoleum of a château.

"There has been an accident. Your char-à-banc was run into by another. It was a very bad accident. If you can keep quiet until the ambulances come——"

I tried to turn to see if the face, too, were the same, and for the time that was the end of me.

I was nursed back to convalescence by a very pleasant *infirmière*, but for all her wide cap, her voice was unattractive, and her pudgy cheeks, with their kindly eyes, held no spell. There was a slight injury to my head, and for a time I was forbidden questions. In due course, however—more rapidly than they had expected—convalescence came in earnest. Soon I was able to sit up. My first visitor was Denham, the man who had called me a snob because I disliked chars-à-banc! He was carrying his arm in a sling, but had otherwise escaped. We exchanged banalities for a few moments. Then, for the first time, now that my brain was clear, I permitted

myself to ask questions.

“Tell me what happened?” I begged.

“We were drawn up for some slight repair,” he recounted—“you remember that, don’t you?—by the side of the road. You decided to get out and see what was wrong. There was a blind corner about fifty yards up the hill, and round this came a new motor *diligence* from the other side, out of control. The brakes had given out; the driver was helpless. He simply sat there trying to steer his machine and shrieking. With our vehicle blocking the road, of course it was all up. I took a flying jump over the side, and just missed the collision. You were dashed against the char-à-banc when it crumpled up. We won’t talk about it too much. My nerves aren’t what they were. There were sixteen of us in the thing, you know, and eight were killed outright.”

“But I wasn’t anywhere near when the collision took place,” I protested.

“You certainly were,” Denham insisted. “You were stooping down talking to the mechanic, and the thing came too quickly for you to get out of the way. I was scrambling to my feet, and I saw you distinctly.”

Now, many things had seemed strange to me during these first days of my convalescence, and I had made up my mind to go quietly with my questions and speculations.

“Listen,” I said to Denham. “As a cross-examining barrister would put it, I suggest to you that I had left the char-à-banc, had entered the grounds of the Château by a gap near the gates, and was at least halfway down the avenue before the collision took place.”

Denham looked at me gravely.

“Forester,” he advised, “try and get that idea out of your head. We are all a little dazed even now, but your injuries should speak for themselves. You were unconscious for at least ten days after you were picked up, and not only I but every other one of the survivors saw you trying in vain to get out of the way of the *diligence*.”

I closed my eyes.

“Very well,” I yielded. “Tell me the English news.”

I have a reasonably strong will, and, notwithstanding all temptations, I asked my friend no more questions then or at any other time. I set myself to the task of getting well, and I succeeded beyond the expectations of every one. Soon I was permitted to sit out of doors, and, later on, to take short motor rides. Even then I did not hurry. I waited until I felt strength once more in my body, and myself a man again. Then I hired a motor car, and drove to the scene of the accident. I made my chauffeur pull

up opposite the gates. Here once more I was puzzled. The man when he saw me descend crossed himself.

“Monsieur will not enter there?” he begged quickly.

“I shall return in half an hour,” I told him. “I am going to have a look at the Château.”

I smiled as I stepped out. How much better I knew it all than those others, for there was the iron chain around the gates and there the gap by the side. I passed through it, and I walked down the avenue at a quicker pace than I had as yet permitted myself. It was a still, sunlit morning, and there was no longer the sobbing of the wind in the cypresses which stood out stiff and stark against the deep blue sky. There were wild flowers growing on each side—narcissi in profusion, and a mimosa tree, golden with blossom, hung over the choked path. The wayside grass which had seemed so dank to me was starred with anemones. There were cowslips which reminded me of home, and large marigolds. The front of the Château, however, was as grim as ever. I made my way to the door. I missed the rusty bell handle which I seemed to remember, but I knocked, as before, on the panels, and listened. I went on knocking—but I listened in vain. All that I heard was the hollow echo of my tapping. In time I desisted, and, standing back, made a tour of the place. The windows were too high up for me to see in, but nowhere was there any sign of a footmark or any trace of human habitation. The vineyards on the western side were a wilderness; the pasture land on the right, brilliant with flowers, but untenanted by cattle. The courtyard gates behind the Château were nailed together by a great plank of wood. There was not a window through which a man could climb, not a door which was not hermetically sealed. It was two o’clock when I walked down that avenue with all the joy of the sunlit afternoon quivering in my pulses, and it seemed to me that I was stepping towards a new world. It was four o’clock before I retraced my weary steps to find my chauffeur halfway down the avenue, looking fearfully towards the Château. He exclaimed with joy on seeing me.

“Ah, it is Monsieur who returns!” he cried. “Good!”

He evidently seemed to imagine that I had escaped some great danger. I followed him listlessly into the automobile.

“Stop at the nearest café,” I instructed him.

He obeyed. We found one about half a mile off, where I drank coffee and brandy, of which I was in need. It was merely a country *auberge*, but the proprietor had an intelligent face. I called him to my table.

“Do you know anything of the deserted Château down the hill?” I asked.

“There is little enough to know, Monsieur,” he replied. “It was once part of the

domain of the Seigneurs of Trébault, as Monsieur may have heard. For many years it has remained unoccupied.”

“No one has lived there lately?” I persisted.

“No one at all, Monsieur,” he assured me. “It is, as a matter of fact, unfurnished, stripped and gutted—only the walls remain. Monsieur is tired?”

I drank another brandy, and drove back to Nice. It was my heart that was tired, and my spirit that was afraid.

The months dragged on for me a little wearily. The season at Monte Carlo, which, in my quiet way, I always enjoy, drew towards its close, but before the end came I tired of it. One day, just before the hour for *déjeuner*, I drove up to one of my secret havens—a small, little-known pension not far from Vence, a long, low house, painted pink, wreathed in clematis and bougainvillæa, with great mimosa trees in the garden. It stands back from the main road, and there are beautiful things to look upon, and beautiful sounds to be heard. I presented myself to Madame, who greeted me warmly as an old client, and who herself escorted me to the little salon where luncheon was already being served. Then, as she was placing me at my table, one of those moments came in which the throb of the world seemed suddenly to cease. My hand gripped the back of my chair fiercely. Madame departed, unnoticed. I stood rigid. At the next table was a man whose back was towards me, and, facing him, unless I was going mad, was the châtelaine of the Château Trébault. The singing in my ears passed. The fragment of my life to which these things belonged had been so clear-cut and detached that the capacity for wonder with regard to them had become dulled. It was only the sight of her eyes, and that wonderful smile which had for the moment unnerved me. The smile remained—most amazing thing of all, there was recognition in her eyes. I let go the back of the chair, and found, to my immense relief, that I could stand upright. I moved to the table, and bowed. The man glanced up—the same man. The girl leaned forward.

“Monsieur has recovered?” she inquired.

“Perfectly,” I answered.

It seemed to me that she must know everything. Perhaps she did. Who knows? At any rate she knew the right thing to do, as she always has done—then and ever since.

“I can see,” she went on, “that you only half remember me. I was at a training home for nurses close to where your accident took place, and I hurried down with some of the others when we heard of it. It was I who was with you when you came back to consciousness.”

"I remember," I acknowledged. "And your——?"

"My father," she confided. "You have never met my father."

"My name is Forester," I told her—"Major Forester."

He bowed.

"My father, the Comte de Trébault," she announced, with a little gesture.

We shook hands as strangers.

"I owe so much to your daughter," I murmured.

He smiled, not unpleasantly.

"You are alone," he remarked. "Pray join us."

I sat at their table. We three lunched together as though it were the most natural thing in the world. With our coffee, I summoned up my courage, and alluded, as casually as possible to the Château.

"Your home is quite empty?" I ventured. "You never think of visiting it?"

"Never, Monsieur," he answered, with a touch of that former bitterness. "I have not crossed the threshold for twenty years."

"My father," the girl explained softly, "very much resented the sale of all our family treasures by my uncle, but it had to be—there were debts to be paid."

"Naturally," I concurred gravely.

After luncheon, Monsieur le Comte retired. He was an invalid, and needed much rest. I walked with Angèle in the gardens. I flatter myself that I have always been a philosopher. I do not seek to probe those mysteries which are in themselves insoluble. And, in any case, about the greatest mystery of all there was nothing terrifying. It was a vital and human thing—the love which revealed itself so amazingly that the very words I faltered when I took her into my arms that afternoon in Madame's arbour seemed unnecessary. It was as though somewhere else they had been already spoken.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *What Happened to Forester* by E. Phillips Oppenheim]