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THE POISONED PARADISE

A ROMANCE OF MONTE CARLO

BY

ROBERT W. SERVICE

**AUTHOR OF "THE TRAIL OF NINETY-EIGHT," "RHYMES OF
A ROLLING STONE," "THE PRETENDER," ETC.**

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THE POISONED PARADISE

PROLOGUE

The boy was sitting in a corner of the shabby room. The mother watched him from her pillow.

"What are you doing, dear?"

"Drawing, Mother Lovely."

"Strange! Always drawing. Did I ever tell you that your father was an artist?"

The boy looked at her thoughtfully. His eyes were like her own, dark and velvety; but his sunny hair contrasted with her black braids.

"No, Mother Lovely. Had I a father?"

"Yes, dearest. He died just before you were born. I came here hoping that his people, so rich, so proud, would be glad to see you. But, no, they cannot understand.... We'll go home together, you and I, to my home."

"Where is that, Mother?"

"Monaco, the great rock that rises from the sea, where my family has lived for generations. Listen, little son ... if I should not be able to go with you, you must go alone. You will find the house where lives my mother, a plain, quiet house with brown shutters near the Cathedral. In front four pepper trees shield it from the sun, and through the pines one can see the blue glimmer of the sea...."

"Is it beautiful, my mother?"

"Always beautiful. The people sing from very joy. In the garden of the Prince, just in front of our house, there is a broken pillar covered with ivy. Beside it is a spring where flowers bloom even in summer heat. It was there we used to meet, your father and I.... Ah! I have never regretted it, never...."

Her girlish face was as sweet as a flower, but her eyes held memories too tragic for tears.

Then the door opened and a woman entered with a masterful air.

"I'm preparin' yer potion, ma'am. The doctor said you was to take it at eight o'clock. Come on, sonny, it's bedtime. Ma wants to get a good long night."

The child looked imploringly at his mother. She shook her head.

"No, dearest, you must do what the lady tells you. Come, good-night."

She held him in her arms, kissing him again and again. "You, too, will be an artist ... but you must be brave, my little son; for you have a hard, hard life before you."

Then she let him go, but he turned at the door. "Good night, Mother Lovely."

"Good night, darling one. Think of what I told you,—of *home*...."

She was alone now. Closing her eyes she saw a little *U* shaped harbour shielded from the sea. It was as delicate as a pastel, a plaque of sapphire set in pearl. In the crystal air the red-roofed houses crowded close to it, the terraced town rose on tip-toe to peer at it. All was glitter and gleam and radiant beauty. Yet yonder in sombre contrast rose the Rock, monstrous, moody, mediæval.

Once more she climbed the long steep hill; she crossed the sunny square in front of the palace; she passed into the cool gloom of the narrow streets. Then at last she stood before the low brown house with its tiny porch and its four pepper trees....

Home.... Home. Would she ever see it again?

Moaning, she turned her face to the wall.

BOOK ONE

The Story of Margot

CHAPTER ONE

THE OUTCAST

1.

"That you, Margot?"

"Yes, Mother."

"For God's sake close the door. You don't think I break my back gathering wood that you may warm the wide world."

There was a scuffle of sabots anxiously retreating.

"Margot!"

"Yes, Mother."

"You're not going away again, are you?"

"I..."

"Come here, little toad. I've something to say to you."

Submissively from the shadow of the doorway slipped a girl. She had twin braids of pale gold hair, and between them like a wedge, her face showed waxen with cold.

"'Fraid I'll eat you?" snapped the woman. "Come here, near to me. Brought home any money?"

"No, Mother."

"But I told you to ask."

"I did not dare. Madame will not pay in advance. The last time I asked her she almost sent me away."

"*Nom de Dieu!* Couldn't you give her some story? Your little sister's sick. There's no food in the house. Your poor mother's ... Ugh! What a fool I have for a daughter. So all you've brought back's an empty stomach. Oh, I could strike you, I could."

She suited the gesture to the threat, and the girl arched her slender arms to stave off the blow. But the woman dropped her hands disgustedly.

"Bah! what's the use. If I could only make you cry there'd be some relish in it. But no! I beat you till my arms ache and never a whimper. That's your stubborn nature. You'll do nothing to please me. Oh, you're a stubborn little devil, still as a mouse, obstinate as a mule. There's something in you, daughter, I can't get at. But I will. I'll thrash it out of you. You wait. Not to-night. I'm too tired to-night...."

From the tumbler at her elbow she took a gulp of cider and brandy, then turned broodingly to the fire. The sickly flames betrayed the wretchedness of the room, the gaunt rafters, the floor of beaten earth. On a deal table lay a clasp knife, and beside it a loaf of bread. The girl eyed the bread avidly. Then her hand, red and claw-cold, stole to the knife, while her gaze rested fearfully on her mother. But the woman no longer heeded.

"What a life!" she was muttering. "What a home! And to think I'd have been rolling in my auto, and crackling in silk and satin, if I hadn't been a fool. That's my weak point.... I always wanted to be respectable, to be married—all that sentimental rot. Well, I've made my bed and I've got to lie on it. But it's hell...."

She stared dismally at her draggled skirts, her coarsely stockinged feet, her wooden shoes so warped and worn. Seeing her absorbed, the girl hacked off a piece of bread and fell to wolfing it. The woman went on, her face harsh and haggard in the light of the fire:

"There was the American. Mad about me, he was. If I'd played my cards right he'd have married me. What a time he gave me, Paris, Venice, Monte Carlo.... Oh, Monte Carlo! But he had to go back home at last. His wife! Told me to wait and he'd get a divorce. Gave me all the money he had. Nearly five hundred pounds. Believe me, I was pretty in them days."

As if for confirmation, she stroked her hollow cheeks. Tears of self-pity welled in her weary eyes.

"Ah! if I'd known, I would have waited. But there was Pierre plaguing me to marry him. Told me he'd loved me since we'd worked together in that hotel in Brighton; me as bar-maid, him as head-waiter. Mighty nice he used to look too in his dress suit. He said he'd been left some money and wanted to go back to the little town where he was born and buy a pub. So we was married, once in England and once in France. God! I was particular in them days."

She laughed bitterly, and took another gulp of the mixture in her glass. Her eyes went glassy. Her fingers clutched unseen things. She maundered on.

"Yes, I was happy there. It was all so new to me. Then we began to get ambitious. The landlord of the big hotel died suddenly. It was a great chance for Pierre, but he had not money enough to take it. There was where I came in. I gave him my five hundred pounds. Told him an aunt had left it to me. He believed me. We bought the hotel and everything seemed to go well. Yes, them were the happy days."

A fit of coughing interrupted her. When it was over she took another drink.

"I don't know how Pierre got to know about the American. He was away a month and when he came back he was changed. He explained nothing, but he treated me like dirt. It was that made me take to the drink."

She was silent awhile. Then ...

"He didn't seem to care about the business any more and I was drinking too much to care; so we went from bad to worse. We lost the hotel and went back to the *buvette*. Then we lost that too, and he had to take a waiter's place. By this time the drink was master of me. I tried to give it up but it was no use. When Cécile was born I thought I'd be able to stop, but I was worse than ever. If he'd only tried to help me! But no, he hated me; and I began to hate him too. We fought day and night, like cat and dog. Well, it's a long, long story, and here's the end."

She threw a withered branch of gorse on the fire. It blazed up gold as its own May-day bloom. The girl had climbed on a bench by the high bed and was bending fondly over.

"Margot!" screamed the woman.

The girl started. In the sudden flare, her face was an ashen mask of fear.

"What are you doing there?"

"I'm just looking at Cécile, Mother."

"Come away at once. Haven't I told you a hundred times not to go near her? I know you with your sneaking ways. You want to steal her away from me. She's the only one I've got left, and I want her to myself,—all, all. If ever you go near her, I'll kill you. See!"

A fit of coughing choked her utterance. Again the girl stole to the door.

"Margot!"

"Yes, Mother."

"Fetch the bottle of brandy from the cupboard."

The woman poured herself a stiff glass and downed it in a gulp.

"Come here, you little imp; I want to look at you."

She drew the shrinking girl to her. Her lips twitched with spite.

"His eyes, his mouth, his chin. The very image of him. And he says you're not his daughter. Ah! that was the knife in me."

"Do you hear, girl? Your father says you're not his daughter."

She laughed harshly, scornfully.

"You're so much his daughter that I hate you, hate you!"

The girl had begun to struggle, but the woman was holding her with spiteful strength.

"Let me tell you something. He came to-day and told me he was going away for ever. He tried to take Cécile, but I fought for her, fought like a wild cat to hold her. You understand?"

The girl winced in her savage grip.

"Hear that. You've no father. He disowns you. And let me tell you something more,—you've no mother.... I disown you, too. After to-night I never want to see you again. You're the dead image of him and I hate him too much. Now go!"

She hurled the girl from her and took another gulp of the neat brandy. The glass dropped from her hand. She sagged forward.

Except for the crackle of the burning twigs all was quiet. The girl gathered a hurried armful of clothes. She was glad to go, but for Cécile!

She stole over to the bed where her sister lay sleeping. She saw a cluster of golden curls, a wan little face with lips parted and lashes that seemed to cast a shadow. Bending down, she kissed the white cheek. The heavy lashes stirred, the big blue eyes opened, the child's silken arm stole around her neck.

"You've come home, Margot?"

"Yes, but I'm going away again."

"Don't go, Margot. Don't leave me. I'm afraid of Mother. Stay with me. Stay with your little Cécile."

"No, I can't. Kiss me, dear."

The child held her so tightly it was difficult to free herself. Then the mother turned. She shrieked in sudden fury, and the girl in her terror made a leap for the door. But the latch jammed; and, the while she was fumbling with it, the woman made a rush for her.

The girl screamed with fright. The woman, in her haste, stumbled, caught herself, and with a foul oath snatched the knife from the table....

That was Margot's last memory of her mother,—a harridan hurling curses at her and threatening her with a naked knife....

Sobbing with terror, she stumbled over the stone sill of the doorway and gained the sanctuary of the night.

2.

The night had on her robe of carnival, and her spangled skirts made glorious the sky. The girl halted by the wayside, where a line of clipped oaks blotted themselves against the stars. She did not cry, for she had lost the habit of tears, but drew long sobbing breaths.

The night wore drearily on, the stars seemed to glitter in cruel unconcern. The girl dozed and dreamed a little....

She was a child of four, the happiest and best dressed in all the village. She had robes of lace, and silk ribbands, and shoes of satin. Her mother cared for her like a little princess, and her father carried her proudly in his arms. Every one said she was spoiled. She had more toys than all the other children put together. But the most precious of all was a doll as big as a real baby, a doll that opened and shut its eyes, and had jointed arms and legs. She had a dozen dresses for this doll, and spent hours and hours caring for it....

She was a girl of ten. She wore a long white robe and a veil over her head. Some said she looked like a fairy, some an angel. It was her first Communion, and of a score of girls she was the prettiest by far. She it was who headed the

shining procession through the long grey street of the village. The way was strewn with lily leaves, and child-voices blended sweetly in the June sunshine....

That was her last memory of happiness. Her father suddenly changed. Where she had known only caresses, harsh words and bitter looks were now her portion. The home once so joyful, was the scene of sordid wrangling. She was allowed to go about shabby and dirty, and became nothing but a slipshod drudge.

Her father never struck her, but her mother beat her cruelly. It was a relief when she was apprenticed to the local dress-maker and spent her day away from the misery of home. But oh, the nights when she ate her slovenly supper and waited for the inevitable out-break! When it came and the storm raged at its height, her father would retreat with Cécile to the cottage of her grandmother and leave her to bear the brunt of her mother's drunken spite. How often had she been thrashed, how often torn from her bed, and flung half clad into the night! In the old barn there was a corner where she had many a time crouched and shivered until dawn. Ah, what bitter memories! Would any amount of happiness ever efface them?

So half brooding, half dreaming, the night passed away. She opened her eyes wide and found she had gained a ridge not far from a forest. She looked down a billowy slope of tree-tops to the misty level of the plain. It was a grim grey world; but even as she gazed, a silver wire seemed to be drawn along the horizon. The stillness was intense, a listening, waiting stillness; from the other side of the sky some god seemed to be pouring over the cloud-fleece a solution of light.

Then as she looked she saw that the sinister quality of the light had gone. The silver wire had broadened to a glint of pearl; slowly it glowed to a pink as delicate as that of sea-shells. The pink deepened to a rose, kindled and spread. Waves of colour rippled up the sky, brightening with every wave. Shade succeeded shade. Rich crimson battled with cerise and rose with coral pink. Then suddenly came a leap of gold, the gold of daffodils. It brimmed into a dazzling flood. It welled and glowed and spread; and before its radiant lucidity the orgy of colour melted away. Then into that indomitable light,—a primrose rim, a golden segment, the sun was launched in all its glory.

The sunshine and the song of birds gave her courage. The world began to glitter. Warbling notes came from the bushes, and dew-drops spangled the thread of gossamer. In this world, so fresh, so fair, the happenings of the night before seemed to her an evil dream.

The few peasants she passed gazed at her curiously. Over her shoulder was slung her bundle, and her pale, peaked face between its twin braids of bright hair had all the entreaty of a beaten dog.

As she trudged wearily on she came to a glade, flooded with sunshine and perfumed with pine. Bees droned in the wild thyme, from the fork of a tree a squirrel scolded, on a hollow oak nearby a wood-pecker drummed sonorously. And in the midst of this scene of peace an old man was painting.

He was not a nice old man. His skin was white, the dead white of an onion, and the girl noted that flies swarmed round and round him. They settled on his blouse and walked over his beard but he took no notice of them. He seemed to attract flies as carrion attracts them. He gave the girl a contemptuous look.

"Well, what d'ye think of my picture?"

"It's very pretty, sir."

"Pretty be damned. Never tell an artist his work's pretty."

The girl was turning away when his voice arrested her.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Why? Haven't you got a home?"

"No, sir."

He turned round and looked at her hard. He seemed to reflect.

"Wouldn't you like to go to Paris?"

The girl started. Paris! It was the most beautiful, the most wonderful city in the world. It had been one of her dreams that some day she might visit it.

"Yes, sir," she answered.

"Then, why not?"

"I have no money."

"Is that the only reason?"

"I have no friends there."

"You would make friends in time. Why not go?"

"Oh, no, sir. I should be afraid. Maybe, I could not find work."

"Humph! Perhaps, I could help you to find work. Come here."

Timidly she drew near. She did not like him, but she felt she must obey. The flies were on his shoulders in a grey cloud. He had a very small mouth, with lips that were shiny. He moistened these very often with his tongue. In his ears were wads of pink cotton wool. He put out a puffy, yellow hand and touched her. He tilted back her sharp chin. He held one of the thick braids of her shiny hair.

"Bah! you won't be much of a model for the figure. But I might make something of your head. Wait till I finish my work, and I'll see what I can do for you."

There was such an air of command in his tone that again she felt she must obey. So she sat down on her bundle and waited patiently. He worked without heeding her, until a little before noon, when he rose and gathered together his materials.

"Come now. I'll go with you to the station."

Doglike she followed at his heels. The village was about two miles away. He bought her some bread and chocolate and a bottle of cheap wine.

"You're as hungry as a young wolf, eh! Well, you can eat on the train. Come quickly or you will miss it."

She went with him to the station. There he gave her a third class ticket for Paris and a sealed letter.

"Go to the address on the envelope. Go direct. My housekeeper will make you comfortable."

Then the train arrived and he looked at her with eyes that shone curiously.

"You will help Madame Mangepain with the housework till I come. After that we will see."

As the train moved off she saw him standing on the platform, licking his lips and surrounded by a swarm of flies.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MAN ON WHOM FLIES SETTLED

Two o'clock in the morning at the Gare du Montparnasse. The girl was dazed and weary. She sat on her bundle in the stale greyness of the station, waiting anxiously for the dawn. About six o'clock she ventured forth, and holding her precious envelope in her hand inquired her way at the corner of every street.

A morning of exquisite metal, vivid, spacious, resplendent. As she crossed the Seine by the Pont Royal, the sky was golden and against it gloomed the twin towers of Notre Dame. The palaces of the Louvre swam in lovely light and the Gardens of the Tuileries seemed washed in yellow wine. Up the long rise of the Champs-Élysées, the Arc de Triomphe was superbly radiant, its turquoise heart stillettoed by the glittering lunge of the Luxor Column.

The girl gazed with awestruck eyes. As she thought of the sunrise in the forest the violence of the change dulled her brain. The city amazed and appalled her; but, impelled by fear, she came at length to the heights of Montmartre. There before a gloomy house in the Rue Lepic she paused, her heart beating thickly.

She knocked at the heavy oak-door, timidly at first, then loudly. She had a sudden fear that there might be no one there. As she was wondering what she should do she heard slow, shuffling footsteps, and a withdrawal of bolts, then the door opened a little. An old woman regarded her angrily. She was bent almost double, and held her head sideways. Her face was hard and sour. She snarled:

"What are you making all this row for? Couldn't you have the patience to wait till I got down?"

The girl presented her letter. The old woman regarded it suspiciously.

"Who gave you this?"

"The old man who paints in the forest."

"Ah! Monsieur Frossard. Well, you can't expect me to read it without my glasses. Wait there."

She closed the door, leaving the girl on the step; but soon she came back, and her face was grimmer than ever.

"Another of 'em. Well, I suppose I must take you in. He's quite the philanthropist, Monsieur Frossard. He! He!"

The old woman preceeded her down a long corridor, her back bent and her feet splayed out. They mounted a broad flight of stairs, then a narrow one.

"There! that's your room, and lucky you are to have it. I'll warrant a pig-stye is more in your line. You are a poor bit of skin and bone anyway. Leave your bundle on the bed and come with me to the kitchen."

The girl soon fell into the ways of the household. She rose at five and prepared the coffee. She scrubbed and rubbed, washed and swept. She did everything but the cooking and the marketing. The old woman seldom spoke to her, and forbade her to put a foot out-of-doors.

The house was a private one, with a large studio facing the north, and a small, weedy garden shut in by high walls. The girl was allowed to go into the garden, but its damp melancholy oppressed her. Some headless statues leaned against the mouldering wall. It was very quiet. She felt as if she were in a prison.

One Sunday morning Monsieur Frossard arrived. For days before they had been making preparations, dusting statuettes and bric-à-brac, sweeping in unwonted nooks and corners. The old woman sidled everywhere like a crab, with her neck twisted awry, her bent back and large splay feet in felt slippers. She kept Margot at work, constantly impressing on her the necessity of pleasing the Master. So much did she harp on this that the girl looked forward to the old man's return almost with dread.

On his arrival he went to his room and retired into his great four-poster bed. The old woman attended to him, carrying him specially prepared dishes, and dusty bottles of wine.

That evening she said to the girl: "Margot, put on a clean apron and take this plate of peaches up to the Master."

Tremblingly the girl obeyed. Monsieur Frossard was propped up in bed, a skull cap on his head, and a cigar in his mouth. Around him was the debris of his evening meal, the carcass of a lobster, some bones of frog-legs, and a half finished bottle of champagne. As she approached she was conscious of a strange odour of decay. The old man looked at her, licking his little slimy lips while a score of flies buzzed and settled around him. The pink cotton wool was still in his ears. She wondered if there was any connection between the cotton wool and the flies. An odd revulsion seized her, yet she continued to approach with the fruit.

"*Tiens!* it's the little girl I found in the forest. What's your name?"

"Margot, Sir."

"Come here, Margot, close to me. Let me offer you a peach."

The girl, standing with her head bent, refused.

"Ah! you are too timid. We must cure you of that."

He put out one of his pudgy hands and took hold of a long bright strand of her hair. The girl raised her startled blue eyes. The hand on her shining hair made her think of a toad. She shuddered. The old man's face changed; it became hard and cruel.

"Go away," he said harshly. "I will see you to-morrow."

Next morning Madame Mangepain said to her:

"The Master wants to see you in the studio."

The girl went reluctantly. The studio had always awed her. It was so huge, so rich. There were costly rugs on the floor and lovely pictures on the wall. The paintings all bore the signature of Abel Frossard, and ranged from nudes to landscapes.

The painter, in his velvet cap and dressing gown, was sitting before a fresh canvas. He turned heavily and beckoned her to enter. His manner was bland, even ingratiating.

"Well, Margot, you are commencing this morning your new career, that of a model."

"Yes, sir," said the girl meekly.

"You'd better say 'Yes, Master.'"

"Yes, Master."

"Now as a model, you may be a success or you may be a failure. I will do my best to make you a success, but it will largely depend on yourself. There's many a woman to-day with her limousine and her appartement in the Champs-Élysées who began life as a model. On the other hand, if you are a failure there is only the street for you, the hospital, prison, death ... you understand."

"Yes, Master."

"Ah, good! By the way, why were you afraid of me last night?"

The girl did not answer. She was looking at a fly that was crawling on the pink cotton wool in his ear.

"You mustn't be afraid. You'll never make a success as a model if you are afraid. Now to work."

He motioned her to a dais, on which stood a chair that seemed all curves.

"Sit there and loosen your hair."

The girl obeyed. It fell in a sheen of gold around her. He handed her a brush.

"Brush it out so that it is like an aura."

She did not understand, but brushed and brushed, with long, sweeping strokes. The old man had forgotten he was anything but a painter.

"Fine," he said enthusiastically. "Now raise your head and look at the statuette above the book case. There! That's good. Just hold the position. I will make a preliminary study to-day."

The girl sat quite still, and the old man painted intently. She posed until luncheon, which she ate with Madame Mangepain in the kitchen, and at two o'clock returned to the studio and resumed the pose. At five o'clock the old man laid down his brush and rubbed his hands.

"There! I've finished. Come and see it."

She looked at the beautiful bit of brush work. She could not believe that this ethereal girl-face with the eyes so thrillingly blue and the nimbus of bright gold hair was herself. The old man observed her awe with satisfaction.

"You like it, eh? Yes, it's good. A bit idealized. Well, it's nothing to what I will do before I finish. I'll make Chabas look to his laurels yet. Ah! your hair! it's what inspires me. Tadé Stycka has no better model. I'll make your hair famous."

Turning her to admire it the more, he parted it behind; then suddenly the girl felt his lips pressed to the back of her neck. She started as if a serpent had stung her and put her hand to the place. Again a shudder passed over her. For a moment a strange look came into his eyes, then they went cold again, and he laughed reassuringly.

"Ha! Ha! you mustn't mind me. It's purely paternal. It won't do you any harm. Now go and get a good supper. I'll want you to-morrow. Don't look at me in such a frightened way. I'm not an ogre. I won't eat you."

The next day she posed for him again, but this time he did not attempt to kiss her. He was very authoritative.

"Pull up your sleeves," he said sharply.

She obeyed. He looked derisively at her skinny arms.

"Now, open your dress and show me your shoulders. Coil up your hair on your head first."

Again she obeyed. When he was like this she was not afraid of him. It was as if there were two men in him, the artist and the satyr. He was all artist as he continued:

"Humph! You'll never do. You're nothing but bones and green shadows."

He threw down his palette and walked heavily about the room.

"Too bad you're so thin. I feel I could do big things with you. But I must, I must! We'll fatten you up if it takes a year. Listen, I'm going away to-morrow to Morocco. I'll be gone a month. In that time I want you to get fat. Do nothing, eat lots, read, amuse yourself. Turn your angles into curves. You hear?"

"Yes, Master."

"Now, don't forget. If you're not round and smooth by the time I come back, I will have no more use for you. Then it's the street. You know what that means. Go!"

She went, and later on she heard him instructing the housekeeper.

"I'm going to-morrow, Madame Mangepain, to Morocco, and I want that girl to be plumped up. Fatten her as you would a chicken. She's going to be my favourite model. I can do great things with her. Great things! Let her do no work. Wait on her. Feed her dainty dishes. Buy her fine clothes, silks and that sort of thing. Books too. Don't let her move about too much. Remember, it's for my sake not hers. I rely on you, Madame Mangepain. And I say, address her as mademoiselle."

He left next morning and Margot felt a huge sense of relief. It was as if something corrupt had gone out of the house. She could not get over this feeling of *pourriture* even when she was posing for him in the big studio. Perhaps his breath was so fetid, that it pervaded every room he entered.

When he had gone, her life changed completely. Madame Mangepain said to her at supper:

"Don't get up to-morrow morning. I'll bring you your breakfast in bed."

"Oh, no, madame."

"I tell you I will. It's the Master's orders. I've been told to serve you and I will ... mademoiselle."

"Oh, please don't call me mademoiselle."

"It's the Master's orders."

The next morning the girl remained in bed until the old woman sidled in with a tray of *café au lait*, *croissants* and fine butter.

"Now stay in bed till I come back."

The girl heard her go out, locking the door. She returned an hour later carrying a large parcel containing a kimono of mauve silk, fine lace underwear, silk stockings, and velvet shoes.

"There! Put these on. It's the Master's orders. And I'll go and prepare your bath."

It must be said that Madame Mangepain entered on her undertaking with zeal if not with enthusiasm. She taught the girl the elegancies of the toilette, the care of her skin, how to point and polish her nails and to bring to perfection her teeth and her hair. She had quite a battery of bottles and brushes, of oils and paints and perfumes. Margot spent every morning in the white-tiled bathroom, meticulously following the régime that the old woman demanded of her.

For luncheon, each day she was given dainty dishes such as she had never dreamed of; then, wrapt in the mauve kimono and stretched out on the great divan in the studio amid a pile of cushions, she would read one of the luridly covered novels the old woman bought for her. Among them were *Chéri-Bebé*, *Dracula* and *Les deux Gosses*. These books absorbed her, made her forget her strange surroundings, which otherwise filled her with a vague fear. Sometimes she even thought of escape, when she sat on fine afternoons in the wild unweeded garden amid the headless statues. By climbing upon one of them she could have gained the top of the wall and freedom. But after that ... what? The streets! She had a horror of the outer world which the old woman never lost an opportunity of developing. According to Madame Mangepain Paris was a merciless ogre, demanding its daily tribute of a thousand girls such as she, crushing and devouring them.

One day as she peered through a window into the street, she saw a girl about her age in a violet blouse with black, oily hair banded on her forehead, and at her side, a pale stunted youth with a reckless mouth and eyes cold as those of a snake. They seemed to be having words. Suddenly the youth struck the girl, knocking her down; then snatched a cheap trinket from her throat, and with a final vicious kick, went off laughing cynically. This typical scene of apaché life made a deep impression on her.

"It's all like that," she thought,— "the life out there, It's what will happen to me."

"Ah, I'll make a beauty of you yet," said Madame Mangepain at the end of the second week. "Monsieur Frossard won't know you when he comes back."

And indeed the girl was amazed at the change in herself. Her skin had become smooth and velvety, her limbs round and firm. Her face, too, had changed. It had retained its quality of childishness, but had lost its cowed and shrinking look. Hints of sweetness and charm revealed themselves. If only she could get away, find decent work, escape from the sinister old man into whose clutches she had fallen. Every day the dread of his return grew upon her.

Then one night Monsieur Frossard came back.

When she brought Margot her coffee next morning Madame Mangepain said to her:

"Get up and make yourself as beautiful as you can. Monsieur Frossard wants to see you in the studio. Be sure you are a credit to me."

The old woman went so far as to superintend her toilette, putting a faint flush of rouge high on her cheeks, and brushing

her hair like spun gold down over the mauve kimono. But nothing could mask the wretchedness in the depths of the girl's eyes.

As she stood in the doorway of the studio Monsieur Frossard turned ponderously.

"*Entrez, voyons.* Don't stand there like a Christian martyr going to the stake. Come here."

With eyes cast down she obeyed. He pulled up the sleeve of her kimono and looked at her arm with a critical, dispassionate gaze.

"*Ah, bon.* Now do up your hair in the glass and bare your shoulders. I'm going to do a bust of you to-day."

Again she obeyed, his eyes following her eagerly.

"Sit on the model's chair. Bare your breast more. What are you afraid of, you little fool? Remember, I'm an artist. I've been itching to paint you, itching. I've thought of you all the time I've been away. I have a dozen ideas. I'm going to make you famous."

A passion almost cruel in its intensity seemed to seize him. Imperiously he made her hold the pose and painted with swift sure strokes. He stopped reluctantly for lunch and bade her hurry and again take the pose. He worked until the light failed, then laid aside his brush with a regretful sigh.

"*Voila!* Come and look at this."

Again the girl marvelled at what she saw. These curves of milky shoulders, that slim, silky beauty of neck and throat, the shell-like ear, the faintly hollow cheek with its suggestion of pathetic sweetness, and above all the superb mass of hair, —here glinting with the brightness of stubble in September sunshine, there richly gold as the ripened grain. Could this really be she? Frossard might be a devil, but he painted like an angel.

"I'm tired now," he said, "I want to rest until dinner. You'll take dinner with me in the studio. We'll celebrate."

She heard him with a heaviness of heart. All his artistic fire had left him and he seemed to be very old. More than ever she was conscious of his odour, and the flies that followed him everywhere. The joy the sight of her picture had given her was extinguished. She went away quickly.

Madame Mangepain served them a dinner that excelled anything the girl had ever conceived. Margot ate scarcely at all. Frossard, however, made up for her lack of appetite. He filled himself with delicious food, washed down with draughts of Beaune from a dusty bottle. He lingered long over the dessert, talking to her of his travels in Morocco, and looking for all the world, like a bloated, heavy-eyed pasha.

"Have one of these cigarettes," he said. "I get them specially in Cairo."

The girl refused.

"Then, you must have a glass of this champagne. It's quite harmless. You can dip one of those biscuits in it."

He bade her finish the champagne. It was the first she had ever tasted and it made her dizzy. The old man seemed to have grown very vivacious. He was taking glass after glass, and talking more and more excitedly. Suddenly he reached out and took hold of her.

Then fear seized her. She struggled to escape, but he held her tight. All at once she felt his shiny little lips on her neck, cold as the mouth of the fish called a sucker. She had just been reading "*Dracula*," a story about vampires, and the idea flashed into her mind that this old man was going to bite her neck and suck her blood. She screamed.

He was panting, and a wild light was in his eyes. "It's no use to squeal. Madame Mangepain has gone out. You are all alone in the house with me."

Terror gave her strength. With a wrench and a twist she broke away, leaving the mauve kimono in his hands. She ran to the door of the studio; but before she reached it he was after her. He had her again in his arms. Great strength seemed suddenly to come to him. His eyes glared, his breath came with a hiss.

"Ah! you won't escape. I'll have you. Ach! you struggle, you little vixen! But your resistance only maddens me. It's no use, you're mine, mine."

Fighting with all the force that was in her, she was borne backward, and thrown heavily on the divan. She saw his face bending over her, his eyes alight, the saliva drooling from his mouth. Once more she struggled but he held her with a grip of steel. She felt herself grow faint. Again and again she shrieked. Oh God! Would no one come to her aid?

She felt her strength leaving her. All she could see were his eyes, flaming with cruel lust. How she hated those eyes. She would destroy them, put out their light, if it cost the last effort of her life. Wrenching her arms free she caught his head at the temples, and with a fierce thrust pushed her small, pointed thumbs into the gloating eyes. With an oath the man pulled himself free and struck her down. Then he threw himself on the couch, screaming, screaming.

She ran to the front door but it was locked. She rushed up to her room and bolted herself in. She lay on her bed sobbing hysterically. She heard the sound of hurried feet, much coming and going. In the silence that followed Madame Mangepain knocked at her door.

"Open, you little viper."

The face of Madame Mangepain was cold and deadly in its fury. "You've done it now. You've finished the Master. The doctor says he'll never see again. He'll be blind, do you hear; blind. A great artist, a genius worth a dozen little trollops like you. Now go, and an old woman's curse go with you!"

With that Madame Mangepain took her by the shoulders and threw her into the street. She heard the door bang behind her. She was alone in Paris.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BISTRO ON THE RUE DE BELVILLE

The crash of the closing door struck a note of terror in the girl's heart. It was long after midnight, and she was at the mercy of this sinister city. She tripped over a box of ash-pan refuse that stood on the edge of the pavement; from it ran two large rats. Afraid to be longer in the unlighted street she made her way down to the Boulevard de Clichy.

On the Butte another hectic night had ended. In the cafés the waiters were stacking the tables; the theatres were dark and silent, the girls of the pavement loitering homeward with their men. Only from the rakehell restaurants of the Place Pigalle did there issue sounds of revelry. It was Montmartre of the profligate, of the apaché. Under the greenish glare of the electric light the girl cowered, a tiny black shadow in a world of sinister shadows. Then sinking down on one of the benches she gave herself up to despair.

Now and again a man addressed her; but she kept her face hidden in her arched arms and did not answer. She trembled at every footstep; the hours seemed endless; she longed for the dawn.

Chilled through she rose and walked on. Two gendarmes looked curiously at her. She was afraid they would arrest her, and quickened her steps. She kept moving until she was exhausted, then she sank down on another bench.

Stale and jaded, like a drab after a night of excess the dawn came in. The sallow light seemed to shudder up the sky. Already the city gave signs of awakening to another day. The milk-merchants opened their doors; boys on bicycles delivered bundles of newspapers; the bakers took down their shutters. From where she sat, Margot watched a number of work-girls buy fresh rolls, then go to a little bar across the way, and eat their *déjeuner* of bread and coffee. Soon bells sounded from neighbouring factories, and the girls hurried away.

From the little bar came a woman. At first Margot thought she was a dwarf, but a second glance showed her to be a hunchback. She was very clean and tidy. Her face had that look of patient suffering so often seen on the faces of hunchbacks. It was a very kind, sweet face, but with a certain shrewdness. She nodded to Margot in a friendly way.

"Well, dearie, things going well?"

The girl looked at her with sad eyes.

"Ah! I see,—in the soup. Well, it arrives to all the world. One day up, another down. Come and give me a hand with my shutters. *Sapristi!* what it is not to have a man in the business."

Margot helped the woman to take down the shutters. Over the shop was painted the sign:

A LA MÈRE TRANQUILLE,

and this sign was repeated on the window and the door. Inside there was a circular bar lined with zinc; and around it half a dozen marble-topped tables.

"Now, come in, dearie," said the little hunchback. "I'm just going to sit down to breakfast, and you are going to join me."

With that she took the girl by the arm and led her behind the bar. They had fresh rolls and butter, and hot fragrant coffee. The girl devoured the food as if famished and the woman watched her curiously.

"You certainly are hungry, my child," she observed. "It's good to see you eat. You look tired too, as if you had been out all night. From the country, aren't you?"

Encouraged by the little woman's sympathy the girl told her story. When she had finished the Mère Tranquille looked at her thoughtfully.

"Just so," she said, "a poor, pretty girl alone in Paris is about as safe as a young lamb lost among wolves. You'll get

devoured, my dear, as sure as sure. Look here, I can see you're an honest girl. I tell you what. I need some one to help me here. Come and stay with me for a while,—at least till you find something better. You will live with me and help me in the bar. You shall be at no expense and you can make four or five francs a day in tips. Will you come?"

"Oh, madame, you don't know how gladly! Let me begin work now."

"No, you're too tired. You want a good long rest. Come with me."

In the little room behind the bar, the Mère Tranquille arranged a folding bed, and soon the girl was sleeping soundly.

Thus there began for Margot a life that was strangely interesting. Except at rush hours the little place was very quiet, and the work not hard. She quickly got over her first timidity with the customers and learned to turn a deaf ear to their rather crude pleasantries. There was, too, a certain reserve in her manner that made her more respected than popular. The little hunchback gave out that Margot was her niece from the country, and her stiffness was not resented. Most of the customers were working people, but there was also a certain backwash of the underworld. Above the bar was one of those hotels that have no name. By night its glowing transparency winked and signalled to the amorous adventurer; by day it was haunted by yawning girls in greasy dressing gowns, and by dark cynical men. Towards evening these girls "put on their beauty," and unbelievably transformed, sallied forth; while the men played cards in cafés and awaited their return.

It was one of these men who took a great fancy to Margot and tried to dominate her. He was familiarly known as Popol, and openly boasted that he had already three girls earning money for him. He, indeed, aspired to be a sort of leader among his fellows, a Napoleon of the bullies. His ambition was fostered by the fact that he was born in the slums of Agaccio, and bore a certain physical resemblance to the Great Corsican. He was a stout, stocky fellow, with a large head, clean shaven, regular features and a certain cold impressiveness of manner. There, however, the resemblance ended; for Popol had close-set eyes as cold and deadly as those of a rattlesnake, a mouth that twisted cynically, and a nose that had been broken in a fight.

Popol never quarrelled openly with any one; he had never been known to draw a knife, yet other men were afraid of him, and those who offended him met with unexpected misfortunes. It was even said he was a spy of the police and did detective work of the dirtier kind. He had brains, a cunning and subtlety that made him a power amid his fellows.

With his cynical conception of all women he thought Margot would be flattered by his favours. One day in the street he barred her way, accosting her with some foul banter. She tried to push past him, and escape. He laughed sneeringly, then, gripping her arms, tried to kiss her. Filled with a loathing she could not control, she struck him full in the face. Popol swore vilely and released her.

It was with ashen cheeks and wildly beating heart that she regained the little bar. The Mère Tranquille looked troubled when she heard the story, but pretended to laugh it off.

"Don't be alarmed, *chérie*; I can defend you against a dozen of these swine. Just treat them like the dirt they are. Ah! if only I could sell out and retire to the country! Since my husband died, the business is not what it used to be. I got an offer last week of fifteen thousand francs for the good will, but I am holding out for twenty. That's what we gave.... It's curious how we got the money...."

The Mère Tranquille paused reminiscently, then continued:

"It was at Monte Carlo, where we went for our honeymoon. Josef would play at the Casino, and on the second day he came to me: 'I've lost everything but that,' he said, pressing a hundred franc bill into my hand.

"'A nice state of affairs,' I cried indignantly. 'It's just enough to take us back to Paris third class.'

"'It's not to take us back to Paris,' he told me. 'It's make or break. I want you to play with it. Perhaps, you'll change the luck.'

"I knew what he meant and I never have forgiven him for it. You know, my dear, that any one deformed as I am, is said to always win at games of chance. Indeed, when we had stood around the tables I had noticed people brush up against me and touch my back in passing. Well, I was so angry with Josef I snatched the money from him.

"'I'll show you,' I thought. 'This money will go after the other. If I don't lose it, it won't be my fault.'

"With that I threw it on the first vacant place on the table nearest my hand. It happened to be rouge. I wanted to see that money swept away. There were tears in my eyes, tears of rage. What do you think! Rouge came. I left everything on the table. Again rouge came. Josef wanted to take up half the winnings:

"No," I said vindictively; 'let it all go.'

"Again rouge came. There were now eight hundred francs on the table.

"Take it up," whispered Josef frantically; 'It's more than I lost.' But I answered: 'No, it's my money. It stays there.' For the thought of his exploiting my deformity still rankled. Well, again I won. This time Josef was crazy. He tried to take up the money himself, but I appealed to the croupiers. The *chef de table* said: 'The money is madame's. I saw her put it down. Monsieur has no right to touch it.'

"Josef was foaming. He said, 'But madame is my wife. What's hers is mine.' The *chef* shrugged his shoulders; 'Maybe,' he said, 'that is the law in France, but here you are in the Casino of Monte Carlo, and that money is madame's.'

"By this time the wheel had spun again. Again rouge. I had three thousand two hundred francs on the table. The crowd began to gather and every one to take sides, some with my husband, some with me. Meantime the stake remained. Once more the ball spun round. Rouge!

"I had now six thousand four hundred francs on the table, four hundred more than the maximum; and I refused to touch it. I threw the four hundred on the next division of the table which happened to be impair. Rouge—impair came up. I simply could not lose, however hard I tried. People were coming from other tables to watch us. Josef had gone white as a sheet and was speechless. He seemed paralyzed. I had now twelve thousand eight hundred. I could see the croupiers were pleased that I was winning, for that sort of thing is a great advertisement for the Casino. I shifted my eight hundred to the division higher up,—manque, I think, and put the six bills of a thousand on impair. I had now six thousand on rouge; six thousand on impair and eight hundred on manque. Once more the ball spun. This time I myself was quite excited. I felt my heart beat. The place began to swim. Then like a person in a dream, I heard the croupier say:

"Twenty-seven, rouge, impair and passe.'

"The spell was broken; I had lost the eight hundred I had put on manque but I had won the other two. Twenty-four thousand francs were mine in the space of ten minutes. I simply fainted...."

"Did you like Monte Carlo?" asked Margot.

"I did and didn't. It's a dangerous place, a wicked place. But, so beautiful! After that experience we came away. Josef was sick of it and swore he would never gamble again. We bought this café and here I have been for fifteen years."

"It seems to me I should like to go there," said the girl dreamily.

"Don't ever go. It's no place for poor people. And yet I have heard there are lots of women who make a living there."

The subject dropped, but Margot was strangely interested and again and again referred to it. Monte Carlo seemed to her like some strange exquisite jewel glittering in a setting of sky, sea and mountain. It held her imagination. It became part of her dreams.

The next time she met Popol her heart beat painfully; but there was nothing in his face to inspire fear. He was polite, almost ingratiating.

"Mademoiselle, I apologize for my rudeness the other day. As a peace offering let me beg your acceptance of this...."

He held out a silver bag, which no doubt he had taken from one of his wretched girls. Margot shook her head.

"No, it's not necessary. I'll excuse you if you wish, but I don't want to accept any present."

"No? Then will mademoiselle do me the honour to dine with me this evening?"

"No, I cannot. I am not free."

"Oh, I will beg madame, your aunt, to release you."

"Thank you; but you must excuse me. I do not want to dine with any one."

He repeated this offer several times. He had never failed with a girl before and his vanity was stung. From coaxings he came to threats.

"I'll get you yet, you little devil, you," he told her. "Even if I have to kidnap you, I'll get you yet."

There was a deadly certitude about Popol that made his threats impressive. Her fear of him became such an obsession that she would not go outside after dark. She told the Mère Tranquille she wanted to leave the quarter, but the hunchback laughed away her fears.

"Wait a little longer, my dear. I expect to sell the business any day. Then we'll have a villa in the country. We will grow our own salads and receive the rector in the *salon*. None will dream we ever lived in this *pourriture* of Paris."

"You will take me with you, madame?"

"Yes, you shall be my adopted daughter. Then I will marry you to the village butcher and you shall have a lovely little daughter called Denise, after me."

The girl made a grimace. "I don't want to marry a butcher."

"Fastidious one! Whom do you want to marry?"

"A poet."

"Sentimental little fool! I suppose you're thinking of that Florent Garnier who comes here and spends so much time staring at you."

"Oh, madame! He never looks at me!"

"You think so. Sly one! Why, my dear, he's head over heels in love with you. A good-for-nothing socialist, too. Take my advice, Poulette, love's all very well, but it's money that counts in the long run."

Margot had indeed an unexpected ally in Florent Garnier. He was tall, strong, and dark, a carpenter by trade. Every day he took his after-dinner coffee in the bar. There he would sit quietly reading a book and smoking cigarettes. One day he said to her:

"Listen, Margot. If that dog of a Popol tries to molest you, let me know. I'll do him up; make a hospital case of him. See!"

"Oh, no! I wouldn't like you to have any trouble on my account."

"Trouble! An exquisite pleasure. Look here, Margot. ... Won't you come with me to the cinema some night?"

"No, thank you. I never go out with any one."

"I know you don't. That's why I ask you. Well, I won't press you. You may change your mind. In any case, I'm watching, and if you need a protector I'm here."

The girl was touched, but at the same time embarrassed. She did not care enough for Garnier to be more than a comrade to him, and something told her this would be difficult. He could not comprehend that coldness of temperament, which was her English heritage, and made her able to be friendly with a man while keeping a barrier between them. Garnier was from the south, romantic, hot-blooded. He would never be able to understand. She decided to keep him at a distance, though she liked him immensely.

The conflict between him and Popol came sooner than she expected. There was a big strike of the carpenters, and Florent Garnier was an executive. Though he was very busy addressing meetings and spent most of his time at the *Bourse du Travail*, nevertheless he often came into the bar to rest for half an hour over a cup of coffee.

It was on an afternoon in early Spring. Madame had gone out and Margot was alone behind the bar. In a dusky corner Florent Garnier sat silent. He looked tired and worried. The strike was not going well. The patrons were getting outside labour; something had to be done.

Everything was bright and shining. The zinc counter was polished to look like silver, the glasses to resemble crystal. Outside there was a flutter of green leaves and the chirping of sparrows. It was a year since Margot had come to Paris. On the whole it had been a happy year. As an education it had been priceless. Now she knew the city and its perils and was armoured against its temptations. She was equipped to fight the battle. She was feeling unusually gay and sang as she waited for customers.

Popol entered. "Ha! mademoiselle. You are alone. You may give me a *picon citron*."

While she was pouring it out he caught her hand. Angrily she wrenched it away.

"Ah! my pretty one," he sneered. "When are you going to be my sweetheart?"

The exclamation of disgust was no sooner out of her mouth than Florent Garnier was on his feet. He came forward deliberately, and lifting the glass dashed the dark liquor in Popol's face.

For a moment Popol drew back. He wiped his eyes, and glared with surprise and rage; he fumbled at his belt, and made a swift dart at Garnier. But the powerful artizan was prepared. Swinging a chair round his head he brought it crashing down. Popol crumpled up and lay still.

"Did you see him?" said Garnier coolly. "The dog had a knife in his hand; he would have stuck me. He has got his medicine. Leave him alone. He'll come round. I'll take his knife though."

When Popol got up, he did not seem much the worse; but his yellow face was convulsed and he was as vindictive as poison.

"I'll fix you yet," he cried. "I'll pay you both with interest, you and your lover. And before many days are over. Look out!"

"Did you hear him?" said Garnier when Popol had gone.

"Yes. He frightens me terribly."

"You needn't fear. You heard him call me your lover. Listen, Margot ... let me be your lover, your husband. You need some one to protect you. I tell you we'll be happy ..."

"I know, Florent. I've thought of it a lot, but I can't.—I like you.—There's none I like so well—But I don't love you. Wait awhile. I'll try to love you. I really will...."

Garnier went sadly away, and some days passed without his returning. Margot became anxious. Then one afternoon Popol entered. Fortunately the Mère Tranquille was in the bar with her.

"Ha! Ha!" said Popol. "He's been arrested, that pig of a sweetheart of yours. Interfering with the strikebreakers. It's to me he owes it, too. He'll get a year sure. And I haven't finished yet. It's your turn next time."

"Get out of this," cried madame, "or I'll smash your face with a bottle." She brandished one ready to throw, and Popol with another exultant laugh backed out of the door.

"You mustn't be afraid of him," said the Mère Tranquille.

"I am,—dreadfully. I want to go away. I really do."

"I tell you he shan't harm a hair of your head."

"It isn't only that, madame. You've been so good to me.... I'll never forget it, but I feel I have been here long enough. I don't like it,—the drinking, the men,—I want to be quiet. Before I came to Paris I was learning dress-making. I want to go back to that, to live in a world of women, and make a living by my needle."

"I quite understand," said the Mère Tranquille. "Listen, my little Margot. I've really come to love you like a daughter. You've changed so wonderfully since you came here. You've learnt to laugh, to sing. I've seen the woman dawning in you.... It's finished, I've sold out at last. I'm taking a little cottage in Normandy and you're coming with me. I'm lonely. I want you. You shall be my daughter."

"Can it be true?"

"Yes. In another month it will all be arranged. Then no more Paris. The blessed, green country, peace, comfort. I want you to take care of me. I have been tired lately,—my heart. In another month,—say you'll come, Margot?"

"It seems like a dream."

"You'll come?"

"Yes, yes! Would that it were to-morrow."

The two mingled their tears of happiness and from that day spent their time in making plans for the future. The cottage was to have a great garden, with apple and pear trees. They would keep rabbits and chickens. How blessed the country seemed; how hateful the city!

"Margot," said the Mère Tranquille one day. "Go out this afternoon and buy some clothes for the country. Here! take this bill of a hundred francs. Just think of it! In another week we'll be there."

The girl did think of it and it filled her with happiness. Yet all the time she was going the round of the big shops she had a curious foreboding that was realized as she returned to the shabby street. Something was wrong, the little bar was closed, and a crowd hung around the door.

"What's the matter?"

A gendarme looked at her indifferently.

"It's the patronne. She dropped dead quite suddenly. Her heart they say...."

As she stared in a dazed fashion at the crowd, she saw the yellow face of Popol. Terror filled her and she shrank away. Slipping into her room by the back door, she bundled her few things into a bag and stealthily left the house.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BATTLE OF LIFE

She found a little room in that quarter of Paris known as the *Nation*. It was bright and high, and open to the sky. During the year she had worked in the bar she had saved a few hundred francs, and had no immediate anxiety about the future. She decided that for a month she would rest and make some new underlinen, of which she was sadly in need.

It was a very happy month for her. She was fond of solitude and loved to dream. Sometimes she passed the long afternoons in the Parc de Vincennes close to the water. As she sewed she would watch the children at their play. A sweet emotion thrilled her. She pretended that she was preparing her trousseau. Who was bridegroom to be? Ah! she could not imagine.

All along her street were makers of furniture, and the sight of their workshops made her think of Florent Garnier. Poor fellow! He had been given six months. She had read all about it in "*Humanité*."

In these long sunny days she often wondered and worried about Cécile. At last she wrote to her grandmother. The old woman, who could not use a pen, replied through a neighbour that her mother had gone to London taking the little girl with her. That settled the matter. Margot gave up all hope of seeing her sister again.

As the weeks passed, and her nerves were tranquilized by the sweetness of her life, she began to lose her fear of Popol. He became more and more an evil dream. Once even she mustered up courage enough to go back to the little bar. A fat red-faced man served her with a *petit noir*. He did not recognize her, and a new sense of security filled her.

Then one day as she sat sewing in the Place de la Nation close to the fountain, she had a violent fright. Suddenly a voice behind her rose to an exultant cry:

"Well! Well! Here you are. I've found you at last."

She turned sharply. A man was looking at her in an ecstasy of admiration. He was a tubby, rosy little man, distinguished only by a waxed moustache and a white waistcoat. He was waltzing around her, and rubbing his hands excitedly. Yet she was convinced she had never seen him before.

"Sit still, sit still, mademoiselle," he cried. "*Sapristi!* I've been looking all over Paris for you. Allow me to introduce myself."

Instead of a card he handed her a small bottle. It contained a pink liquid, and on its label she read wonderingly:

Bruneau's Brilliant Balm.

"That's it," said the little man delightedly. "'B.B.B.' Hit 'em hard with the 'B.' I'm Bruneau. Its my invention. The finest hair lotion in the world."

"But I don't want it," protested Margot.

"No, but it wants you. I want you. Got to have you. I want you to advertise the Balm. Sit with your back to the window; hair down, all shining and brushed out. Bottles of the Balm arranged all about you. Crowds in front of the window all the time. My place is on the Rue de Rivoli. Come on, let's come to terms."

"But, I don't want to do that."

"My dear, there's nothing to do. You just sit there from ten till twelve and from two till five. You can sew, you can read if you like. No one will see your face. You can forget there's a crowd watching you. It's a soft thing, and I'll pay you better than if you were doing real work. Come now, twenty francs a day. You really have no right to refuse."

"No," she thought, "I have no right to refuse." Then aloud, "Very well, I'll try it."

The following day she went to the hair-dresser's shop and put herself in the delighted hands of Monsieur Bruneau. The little man considered himself an artist, as every man should, however humble his vocation. He arranged Margot's hair with reverence, washing, perfuming, and brushing it until it was like a mantle of spun gold.

When she took her place in the window, he placed a small mirror so that she could see all the faces in the crowd without being seen herself. This amused her. She never wearied of watching the thousands of admiring eyes she saw reflected daily in the mirror. It gave her a sense of pride, of elation. Over her was placed a placard which read:

**The most beautiful hair in Paris.
The result of using
Bruneau's Brilliant Balm.**

As the days went by the little man with the waistcoat became more and more enraptured. The Balm was selling so fast that he could not have it bottled quickly enough. He was obliged to extend his laboratory, as he called the back shop where it was prepared, and employ a traveller selling it to the wholesale trade. He had also an advertising contract with the newspapers. Then quite suddenly he lost his demonstrator.

Margot was gazing idly at her little mirror, when she saw a face there that seemed to stop the beating of her heart. It was a hairless yellow face, with rattlesnake eyes. It was a cruel, cunning face set in a malignant grin, the face of the hunter who has tracked his prey—Popol!

As she left the shop he was waiting for her and walked along with her.

"Aren't you going to take me home with you?" he asked.

She stopped. "Are you ever going to leave me alone?"

"No," he sneered, "I've been to too much trouble to find you. Listen, little one. I want you. I've always wanted you since you stood me off. Now I'm going to have you. No use your struggling. Popol always gets what he wants. If I can't get you by fair means, I'll get you by foul. With my pals I'll carry you off some night. You are all alone now, no one to defend you. If you make any trouble, I'll simply kill you."

"Will you leave me? If you don't stop talking to me, I'll appeal to this *sergent de ville*."

She went up to the policeman; he listened to her, twisting a huge moustache that sprouted from a very red face.

"Don't worry, mademoiselle," he said finally, "the monsieur only wants to be amiable." Yet, he waved a warning hand at Popol.

Popol crossed to the other side of the street and Margot hurried on. But no matter how fast she walked, how many sharp turns she took or how many side streets she entered, Popol was always there. How could she get rid of him? Just as she was at her wit's end she found herself at an entrance of the Métro. Quick as a flash she darted down the steps.

A train was at the station and she jumped into a first class carriage. The sliding door closed; she had given him the slip.

But at the next station he got into her coach. He had caught the last of the second class carriages. He grinned at her from the other side of the compartment, but did not speak. She despaired of being able to shake him off; she was helpless.

When they stopped at the next station she was standing close to the door; near her was a white-haired old gentleman with the Legion of Honour in his button hole. As the train was starting again, she suddenly cried:

"*Mon Dieu!* it's my station. Let me get off."

The automatic doors were already closing but the old man held them back. "Quick, madame." She slipped between them and they shut behind her like a trap. She was safe on the platform. She saw Popol make frantic efforts to get off and an irate official who was only too glad of an opportunity to assert his authority, push him back. As the train glided into the

tunnel she had a parting glimpse of his face snarling with rage.

She took a return train and hurried home. She could not go back to Bruneau's, she decided, but must seek other work. The next morning she did not stir from the house, and about midday the little hair-dresser called, anxiety written on his face. He begged, he coaxed; but to all his entreaties she was deaf; he went away disconsolate.

She had been working for nearly two months and had saved over five hundred francs. She could afford to wait a few days before looking for something else to do. She felt very happy, very safe up her six flights of stairs. Very much like a bird, so near the sky! She sang in the sunshine. Taking her work she seated herself at the window and looked down into the street. Then quickly she shrank back. There on the opposite pavement was Popol. He was looking up and had seen her. Fool that she was to think she could evade him. Of course he had got her address at the hair-dresser's. There was no escaping him. At least she would make another attempt. That night, seeing that the coast was clear, she hurried to the Gare de Lyon and took a ticket for a station selected at random. It turned out to be a remote village in the Jura.

Every morning she awakened to the mellow sound of cow-bells, and standing at her window breathed the pure, delicious air. Beyond the mountain was Switzerland. She longed to go further, to travel. If ever she had money enough she would go to the south, to the sunshine, to Monte Carlo. She would try her luck. Perhaps she would be as successful as the Mère Tranquille had been. When her money came to an end, she returned to Paris with memories of huge green valleys, of crystal brooks, and of deep solemn pine woods.

The next year was a very hard and checkered one. She first got a place in the workshop of a big dress-maker,—Plumeau's. She had not been there long when one evening Monsieur Plumeau called her into his private office. He was a white-haired old man, very well-dressed. He told her politely that it was the privilege of his prettiest employées to dine with him occasionally. He called the directress.

"Select for Mademoiselle a robe that suits her," he then said to the girl. "We will have dinner to-night at the Café de Paris." He seemed to take it for granted she would accept, and was quite amazed when she walked out with head held high. He shrugged his shoulders.

"So much the worse," he said. "Dismiss her."

Margot was given an envelope with her week's pay and told to look for another place.

It was more difficult to find this time, for she had no reference from Plumeau's. She was forced finally to seek employment in a great barrack-like building that employed three thousand girls. It was the workshop of one of the great stores on the Boulevard Haussmann, and was conducted with military severity. Her hours were from eight in the morning until a quarter past six in the evening. The work was hard and monotonous; the pay just enough to cover her simple living expenses.

For long months she slaved with her needle, never getting ahead. She became shabby, tired, faint-hearted. When her holiday of ten days came around she had not enough money to go away and spent the time in her room. There were girls around her coquettishly dressed, with men who waited for them every evening. That was all right; nobody minded a girl having an *ami* who helped her. There were some, however, more elegantly clad who were considered scarcely respectable. Of such a one it was whispered: "*Elle fait sa tappe sur le Boulevard.*" Margot made no friends amongst the other girls and was always alone.

So passed a year; then to her delight she got a position with a milliner on the Boulevard Saint Michel. Over the door was the name, "Folette." Everybody stopped to look at the window, her hats were so dainty, so daring. She was renowned for her *chic*, and even sober men whose interests were far removed from feminine millinery, stopped and stared at her latest creations. Below the shop was the workshop. The girls sat on either side of a long table with boxes of feathers, ribbands, flowers beside them. They sewed, pieced, and basted, chattering happily the while. From time to time Madame Folette would descend to criticise and give suggestions; she encouraged them to develop their own ideas, to be creative.

The girl had been there eighteen months, when, one day, Madame Folette descended to the *atelier*.

"Margot, I want to speak to you."

"Yes, madame."

"How would you like to serve in the shop? I want a saleswoman to assist me. You have learnt all there is to learn in the making of hats. You should now learn to sell them."

"Madame is too kind."

"Not at all. I have chosen you, because you are the prettiest girl in the *atelier*. You have the most beautiful hair I ever saw. You will buy a nice-fitting black-silk dress, black-silk stockings and little slippers of black patent leather. Black will show off your soft complexion and your pale-gold hair."

Margot hastened to express her joy and the change was made. By day she dusted and arranged the stock and waited on the customers in the white panelled little shop usually flooded with sunshine. She was very happy. At night she returned to her tiny room under the mansarde of a house on the Boulevard du Montparnasse. Her window opened on a small balcony where she grew sweet peas and nasturtiums. She had a gay canary that came out of its cage and hopped on her finger. She cooked dainty dishes in snowy enamel ware. It was quite a radiant little interior.

She was more than usually happy one Sunday, and sang as she dressed. She had an engagement with a girl called Jeanne, who was *premier* at the *atelier* of Madame Folette. The two had decided to take a little shop on the Boulevard below, and start in business for themselves, Jeanne was a steady, clever girl who thoroughly understood the running of a workshop. She was to make the hats, Margot to sell them. They had savings enough to start. Margot was thinking over their plans and singing happily when the laundress arrived with her week's washing. As she took it from the parcel she noticed an odour of phenol.

"What a horrid smell," she thought. Then she changed the sheets on her bed, and went off forgetting all about it.

The week passed as usual, but towards its end Margot began to feel strangely tired. She struggled with her growing fatigue for two days, then Madame Folette said to her:

"Margot, you're looking ghastly. What's the matter?"

"I don't know, madame. I am so cold I shiver all the time."

"You had better go home and go to bed."

"Very well, madame. No doubt I will be better to-morrow."

On the morrow Margot was worse, and within two days she had to ask the concierge to call the doctor. He looked a little puzzled when he examined her, but prescribed a treatment, and said he would call again later. On his third visit a curious red rash covered her.

"Hum!" he said, "I'm afraid it's scarlet fever."

On his next visit he was still more puzzled and asked her many searching questions. He went away looking very serious indeed. All that day Margot waited, anxious and unhappy. The red spots developed in the strangest manner. When the doctor returned late at night and saw them something like a shudder passed over him. He drew on his gloves hastily.

"There's nothing to do, mademoiselle. I am going to the Institute Pasteur. They will send an ambulance first thing in the morning. You are lucky that I can get you in. You will get better attention there than anywhere else."

"What's the matter?"

"You mustn't worry. It is most unfortunate. It must have been those clothes from the laundry. I am going straight to the police. Please wait patiently till the ambulance comes. Don't be alarmed."

"But, doctor, tell me, for the love of God! What have I got?"

He looked around as if to be sure there were no listeners, then said slowly:

"My poor girl, I may be mistaken but I think it's ..."

She gazed at him with eyes that were strained with horror.

"Oh, no, doctor, don't tell me it's *that* ..." she gasped.

But the physician had gone and she fell back on her bed. She was dazed. It was unthinkable. Then as her mind began to grasp the truth, despair fell on her.

"Oh, it's cruel," she moaned. "I have worked so hard and kept honest, yet everything goes against me. I ask so little, yet always when I am about to better myself, something terrible happens. Oh, Life, Life! You're hard on me ... you're hurting me so...."

What was the use of struggling? She would let herself die. If only she had some veronal she would take a fatal dose....

"But, no," she cried, courage coming back to her. "I've fought all along and I'll die fighting. I'll laugh to the end.... I will be the victor...."

Worn out she sank into a troubled sleep.

When she woke it was to hear her little clock strike two. How long the night was! Would the dawn never come? The dawn with the ambulance! What was that about an ambulance? No, it was all a dream, an evil dream—what the doctor had told her. She would sleep again. She was so tired, so tired....

Was that something moving out in the hall? The house was very quiet. What strange fancies she had. She must be going mad.... Was that fancy again?—that noise outside? And there ... her door was opening very softly. No, she was not mad. It was really moving. With straining eyes she watched.... A dark form filled the doorway, and a man's figure slipped into the room. She stifled a scream of terror.

Her chamber was lit by a small night-lamp turned very low, but she knew only too well that large yellow, hairless face. Popol! This was another of these evil dreams. Then she heard him speak.

"Well, my pretty one, at last."

He looked at her, his face full of gloating triumph. He locked the door, and gave a chuckling laugh.

"Now I've got you, my chicken. Ha! Ha! no one gets away from Popol. He's sure, is Popol. Once he gets on the trail he never gives up. It's been a long trail, my beauty, but now ..."

Suddenly his voice grew thick with fury.

"Now I'll teach you who's your master. You'll be glad to kiss my dirty boots before I've done with you. Ah, you needn't squeal for help. No one will hear you; I've planned well. I have taken the room next to yours. Been there since Saturday. There are no other neighbours, and the people in the flat below are in the country. You are absolutely at my mercy,—in my power."

He was in no hurry. From behind his ear he took a cigarette and lit it at the little night-lamp. The girl watched him, fascinated as a bird is by a snake. He enjoyed her terror, and prolonged it. Then passion seized him. He gripped her by the arm. At last she found her voice.

"No, no," she gasped. "Spare me. Have pity. I will give you all the money I have. Here! Take this!"

From under her pillow she drew her purse and thrust it at him. He snatched it with a laugh, looked inside, and put it carefully in his pocket.

"That's all right," he jeered; "I expect you'll make lots more for me in days to come. Yes, I'll have your money, and, by God, I'll have you too...."

With a leap he had her in his powerful grip and the struggle began. He held her arms so that she could not move them, and pressed his coarse lips to her face. At their touch madness seized her. She bit fiercely into the flabby fold of his cheek. With a snarl of pain he released her.

"You little devil, I'll kill you for this."

Once more he sprang at her, held her down. She felt her strength leave her. She could resist no more. She was fainting....

Then suddenly she remembered....

"Stop!" she cried; "Stop for your own sake! Can't you see I'm ill? Can't you see what is the matter?"

Something in her voice arrested him. He drew back. There was a long tense pause. Slowly he turned up the light. Then ... he grew limp with terror. He looked closely and shrank back.

"No, no," he gasped hoarsely. "Not that?"

"Yes, that!" she screamed. "And now you'll have it too. Oh, brute, brute! You can kill me if you like. I have had my revenge. They're coming with the ambulance, coming even now. You hear, it's the *smallpox*, you dog! The smallpox...."

But Popol did not want to kill her. Gazing at her with horror-stricken eyes he backed to the door.

"Yes," she exulted, "You can kiss me now. It will make more sure, or rather see.... I am coming to kiss you."

She made a move as if to rise and follow him but he did not wait. He reeled through the door, pulling it to behind him. She heard him stumbling down the dark narrow stairs, blubbering like a child.

"Oh, it's awful," he cried. "I can't stand it. I'm not a sound man. It will kill me. It will kill me."

And Popol was right. It did.

CHAPTER FIVE

PHANTOM FORTUNE

1.

As she shrank back into the remote corner of the first class compartment, Margot sighed profoundly. She had been thinking of the strange events of the past month and of the bewildering turn in her fortunes.

When she had been released from the hospital, some three months before, she was still very weak. During her illness a religious sisterhood had nursed her with devotion; a famous physician had personally attended her; a great Institute had exhausted its skill in her behalf. She was a record case, they said,—not a trace of the disease showed. She wanted to return to Folette's and begin work at once, but Madame would not hear of it. "No, my dear, you're too shaky. You need a good long rest in the country, two months at least. If you have no money I will lend you some."

So Margot borrowed five hundred francs and went to Barbizon. There in a cottage on the edge of the forest, she slowly regained her strength. Then she returned to Paris.

One afternoon, a few days before she had arranged to return to the *modiste's*, she decided she would like to visit the grave of the Mère Tranquille. Once more she sought the little bar on the Rue du Belville. As she entered she had a curious feeling that she had never been away; the fat red-faced man was still reading a paper behind the zinc counter. When she asked where her old friend was buried, he put down his paper and stared at her.

"You don't happen to be the girl who worked here?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Margot Leblanc?"

"The same, I assure you."

The fat man brought down his fist with a thump on the counter.

"*Sapristi!* Why, every one thinks you are dead. The lawyers sought you high and low; you seemed to have vanished off the earth. Didn't you know the old woman left you a heritage?"

"No. Is it true?"

"Assuredly. Not much; but to a girl like you, it will be very welcome. Here, I'll give you the address of the lawyers and you can go and see them at once."

She lost no time. The result was that in due course she received her legacy. After settling all expenses and paying every debt, she found herself the possessor of a little over three thousand francs. Never before had she owned anything like such an amount. To her it seemed riches. At first she thought she would carry out her plan of taking a little shop with Jeanne. But the winter was coming on, the cold, grey, cruel winter; time enough for the little shop in the spring. A sudden distaste for Paris possessed her. Then one day as she was passing the window of a tourist agency she stopped to stare at a vivid poster depicting a sea of turquoise blue, a terraced town that seemed carved from ivory, a background of amethystine mountain, palms, pigeons, gorgeous flowers. Underneath was the name—*Monte Carlo*. It came like an inspiration; she would go there. With a sense of great daring she packed her basket-valise, said good-bye to Madame Folette and Jeanne, and took the train.

2.

As she sat alone in the corner of her compartment, these events passed through her mind and she sighed deeply. She felt very lonely, rather frightened. She blamed herself for having bought a first class ticket at Marseilles, but the journey in the crowded second-class from Paris had so fatigued her that she had decided to be extravagant.

Even in her jaded state the scenery seemed to her to be of dreamlike beauty. It was not until Nice had been reached that its too exorbitant claims on her admiration began to weary her. They must be very close now. It was long, that journey, especially when one has been so ill. She must tidy up a bit. She rose and began to arrange her hair, that stupid hair of which she had so much. It tumbled turbulently down and she had to take out all her hair-pins and let it fall around her like a golden shower. As she looked up apprehensively, she saw a young man staring at her from the corridor. She was vexed. She caught the mutinous tresses hurriedly and bunched them around her head. When she had finished with her pins and combs, she looked around again. The young man had gone.

She liked the *Pension* which had been recommended to her, because every one left her alone. The first day she gave to exploring the gardens and getting her bearings; the second she presented herself at the Casino and asked for a card. Fortunately, she had been warned that on no account must she divulge the fact that she worked. It is significant that a woman who earns her living honestly is refused admission to the Casino while a prostitute is welcomed. The administration knows that the small wage earner brings little grist to their mill, while the demi-mondaine plays their game. Margot filled in her application with the usual phrase: "*Sans occupation.*"

Although she had made up her mind to gamble she was more than prudent. For the first week she did nothing but watch the tables with concentrated attention; then she bought a note-book with shiny covers and began to take down numbers. She would stand by a table for two or three hours, until her column of figures was quite a long one. Then, finding a quiet seat in the Café de Paris, she would sip a cup of chocolate and study them. She felt encouraged by the fact that a number of women, with negligible capital, were undoubtedly making a living at the Casino. Shabby, anxious creatures she saw them hovering like hawks over the tables, waiting to get in on "a safe thing," and going away finally with a few pieces of gain. They had lived thus for years.

"Surely," she thought, "with two thousand francs of capital, I can win a louis a day."

The next step was to make up her mind how she would play. She must adopt a method, and concentrate on it. After long reflection she decided that the most cautious way of playing was to stake on two of the three dozens. In this way she would only have one dozen against her. From the examination of her figures, and the columns of permanencies published in a paper whose colour was the green of hope, she found that the first dozen seemed to come a little less frequently than the other two, and that it had a greater tendency to repeat. Here was a hint for her. She would wait until the first dozen had asserted itself strongly, then, as it were, retired exhausted. She would put five francs on the second and five francs on the third dozen. She would be covering thus twenty-four of the thirty-six numbers. If either of her two dozens won, she would receive fifteen francs, a gain of five francs. As soon as she had won four times, and had made a louis, she would stop. She furthermore decided that she would always play a flat stake, and would never make a progression. In the long run a progression was always fatal. If she lost a louis on any one day, she would stop for that day and not court disaster by trying to retrieve her losses.

As she pressed through the crowd and put her first stake on the table, she felt her heart beat wildly. She thought every one was watching her.

"Here is a new one," she imagined them saying. "Another poor little chicken come to be plucked. Look how her hand trembles as she puts her two white counters on the table. One would imagine she was playing for thousands."

But after all every one was absorbed in the game, and no one paid any attention to her. The ball spun around. She had won.

"Ah!" she thought, "it is always specially arranged that the beginner wins."

And she played again with more confidence. The player has the advantage over the bank in that he may select his moment of play. (Unfortunately he generally selects the wrong moment.) Margot waited for what seemed to her a favourable moment and staked again. Again she won. Her second and third coups were equally successful. She was strangely elated, far more so than the extent of her gain really warranted. She had been excited and anxious before, now a happy reaction set in. She changed the white counters she had gained for a twenty franc bill, which she regarded with a rare pleasure. How strange to make money so easily! Playing as prudently as this it did not seem possible to lose. Just think! if she had only played with louis-stakes instead of five franc ones.... Or even with hundred franc placques.... A sudden vision of fortune dazzled her. "If ..." Ah! that pregnant "if" that gamblers use in victory and defeat. The tragedy of that "if." The virus was already in her veins, and she went home to dream of whirring roulette wheels and the smiles of fortune.

She awaited the second day with a passion of eagerness. But alas! things did not go so well. When she had made three wins she had a loss. With chagrin she watched her two pieces swept away. She was now only one ahead. She won her next three coups, however, and retired with her louis of gain.

The third day she had a hard fight. It was as if the Casino had said: "Tut! Tut! we must not let this slip of a girl get our money so easily. We must begin to baulk her a bit."

She played all morning and afternoon, winning and losing, and winning again. Try as she would, she could not get them to give her a louis. At seven o'clock she retired from the fight, only a poor five francs the winner. She was fearfully tired, her head ached, and the smile of fortune seemed transformed into the wryest of grins.

The fourth day she had no trouble and her confidence came back. But the fifth ... the first dozen came up seven times running and broke to the third. By all the laws of average it was due to rest a bit and allow the equilibrium to establish itself. It was, therefore, with a confidence almost insolent, that the girl staked on the second and third dozen. She was so sure of winning that she felt as if the money were already in her hands, and did not even wait to watch the spinning wheel. She had reached down to secure her winnings when to her surprise she saw both her stakes being raked in. The number two had declared itself.

Next time it would come right, and again she staked on the second and third dozen. She waited almost listlessly. To her dismay she saw her stakes swept off a second time. There must be a mistake.... No, the ball was resting in the slot marked twelve.

She sat down on one of the leather-padded lounges. It was not the money she had lost that worried her, but the fact that her system had proven untrustworthy. She hated to be beaten like that. A mixture of resentment and anger dominated her, —a mood most dangerous to a gambler. She rose, and going back to the table put one louis on the second dozen and another on the third. She won. She had regained all that she had lost.

She did not play any more that day. She went to the Café de Paris, and, having ordered a jug of chocolate, sat down to think. It was evident that to gain four straight wins every day, was too great a strain on her system. Well, then, instead of playing four coups with five francs each time, why not play a single coup with a louis for the stake? In this way she would not tire herself out with long play, nor exhaust her luck. Accordingly the next day she began playing on these lines.

For a time all went well. She found that with average luck she won three times out of four. Then a spell of bad luck set in, and in spite of the care with which she played she found her gains were reduced to two out of three. This left her no profit. She must do something to raise her average. She thought the matter over. If she had to have a certain proportion of losses, why not let them be fictitious ones? Why not let her losses be made with imaginary stakes and her gains with real ones? She made up her mind that, playing with her usual care, she would wait until she had lost twice in her head, before playing on the table a third time for a win. It needed lots of patience; often she had to wait for two hours before her chance came, but with this method she won three times out of four. However to develop a system in theory and put it into practice are two very different things. To play a system one must be as emotionless as a machine; systems make no allowance for human passion and impulse, and this she soon found to her cost.

It happened one day that, when she went to the Rooms in the afternoon, she staked as usual a louis on the second and another on the third dozen, after having watched the wheel for awhile. The number eleven came up. Now according to her system she should have called her day a loss and gone home. But on this particular afternoon her mood was mutinous. She determined to try again. She re-staked in the same fashion, and the eleven repeated. She was furious with herself for being so weak and foolish. It would take her four days to regain her losses. It was too tedious, too discouraging. Well, it could not be helped now. She walked to the door, but just as she reached it she hesitated. Her irritation grew. No, she would *not* let them beat her. Going back to the table she fumbled in her bag and drew forth two notes of a hundred francs each. She handed them to the croupier.

"Second and third dozen, please."

She was strangely calm now, but she could not bear to see the ball spin. She turned and went to another table, pretending to watch the play there. She forbade herself to look back, then when she heard the ball drop, she glanced round. The croupiers were cleaning up the tables, but the rake swung clear of the hundred francs she had put on the middle dozen. She had won.

Again she snatched victory from defeat. She had retrieved her losses and had a louis to boot. But strange to say she felt no elation. She had been reckless and risked two hundred francs. It must not happen again, she told herself.

It was soon evident that if her average wins were three out of four, with a stake of two louis, and she made only one coup, her gains would only aggregate five francs a day. That would never do. After much reflection and analysis of her figures, she decided to play with plaques of a hundred francs each. In this way she would gain a hundred francs every four days; and even, if she allowed five francs for a possible zero every time she played, she would still make her louis a day. This was the plan she finally adopted. Her system, in short, was to play only a flat stake, never a progression. She played only one coup a day, stopping if she lost, and took two fictitious losses before actually playing on the table. She played a hundred francs on the second, and a hundred francs on the third dozen after an exhausted run of the first dozen. She put five francs on zero.

It was very much like hard work, and needed both patience and judgment, but it was possible for her to go on playing this system for six months without mishap, and in the end just about even up.

3.

One day as she was eating a hurried luncheon she noticed a young man reading by the window. His hair was ash blonde, brushed glossily back, his face thin, sensitive, and browned by the sun. When he smiled at Terese, the waitress, his teeth were milk-white, and very regular. His eyes should have been blue, but were of a dark, velvety brown. An extraordinary good-looking boy, she thought, with an air of refinement, of race. He looked up and caught her eye; immediately she looked down.

She had seen him before, she fancied, but where? Then she remembered the young man who had stared at her in the train. It was strange she should meet him again.

She saw him often afterwards in the gardens, walking hatless, with his head held high. He never went to the Casino, and seemed very gay and happy. It was easy to see he was well off, and had not a care in the world. Once he passed her as she was on her way to her room, but shyness came over her and she did not glance at him. He looked so proud; he must be at least the son of an English lord. Why then should she, daughter of a French head-waiter and an English bar-maid, be even on bowing terms with him?

Then something happened that quite drove him out of her thoughts. For ten days she had been playing her system without even a loss, gaining nearly a thousand francs. Her winnings so far had more than paid her modest expenses. When she entered the Casino on Christmas morning she had four bills of a thousand francs each in her bag. She had also a letter from Jeanne. Jeanne knew of such a nice little shop on the Boulevard Raspail. It would be empty by the January term and, if Margot was willing, they would each put in two thousand francs and take it. Jeanne wanted an answer at once. Margot was very happy. She would tell Jeanne to take the shop, and she herself would return to Paris shortly after the beginning of the new year. She was sorry to think of leaving Monte Carlo, and to give up roulette; the keen shifts and stresses of the game intrigued her and she loved that moment of emotion just before the ball dropped. Then the thought came to her: Why not experience a moment of more intense emotion than she had ever known? She had a thousand francs of the bank's money that she did not absolutely need. Why not risk it? If she could win with bills of a hundred, why not with notes of a thousand? She watched the table until the opportunity came. She placed five hundred francs on the second dozen, and five hundred on the third, then with an air of unconcern fell to regarding one of the pictures on the wall. It was a painting of Watteau-like delicacy, representing autumn; falling leaves, gallants and ladies of the court....

"Rien ne va plus."

Would the ball never drop? She heard it knocking about among the diamond-shaped brass projections. Then silence, and ... zero.

Oh, what a fool she had been! For the first time in weeks she had forgotten to cover zero. And for the first time in weeks she had encountered it. She hated the calm croupier who raked in her thousand francs. There was something so ruthless, so inexorable in the way he did it. A dull rage filled her. She seemed to be impelled by something stronger than herself. She took from her bag a second note of a thousand francs and played it as before. No, she would not stake on zero. The chances of it repeating were a thousand to one.... *Zero!* again!

It could not be possible! As she saw another thousand swept away she felt physically sick. She sat down on a lounge, dazed, stunned. The impassive croupiers seemed suddenly to become mocking satyrs, the great gilded hall, pitiless, cruel. She watched a little hunch-backed croupier spin the wheel by its brass handle; he flipped the ivory sphere in the other direction in a careless, casual manner. The girl started up. It was as if she were an automaton, moved by some force outside of her will. Taking a third thousand franc bill from her bag, she staked it in the same way as before. No use to stake on zero this time. The chance of its coming up a third time was a million to one. She saw the ball go scuttling among the brass knobs; she heard a great murmur from the gazing crowd; all eyes turned admiringly to the little hunchback who tried to look as if he had done it on purpose.... ZERO!

She walked away. A bitter recklessness had seized her. She took out her remaining thousand franc bill. She would risk it anywhere, anyhow. A red haired man was coming in at the door. That was an inspiration. She would play on the red and leave it for a *paroli*. She went over to the nearest croupier and handed him her bill.

"Rouge, please."

But the croupier misunderstood. He put the bill on black, looking at her for approval. After all, what did it matter? Let it remain on black. She nodded and black it was. Once more the ball whizzed dizzily round and dropped into its slot. Rouge.

She had lost. In less than four minutes she had lost four thousand francs. She pulled down her veil and walked out of the gambling rooms. Her legs were weak under her and she felt faint. She sat down on a bench in the atrium. It could not be true! She must have dreamt it. She opened her hand-bag of shabby black leather and searched feverishly. All she found was about thirty francs.

She was broke.

CHAPTER SIX

DERELICT

1.

Then began the great struggle of Margot Leblanc to regain the money she had lost. It was a pitiable, pathetic struggle, full of desperate hope. Starting with ten francs, she sought to win back the two thousand needed to buy the shop with Jeanne. She kept her room at the pension, but gave up taking her meals there. Instead she had a cup of coffee and a roll in a cheap café in the Condamine. She would do without sleep, she told herself; she would be shabby and shiver with cold ... but she would win back that money!

Every morning she took her place among that weird and shabby mob of women who storm the Casino doors at opening time, and scramble for places at the tables, hoping to sell them in the afternoon to some prosperous player. The Casino, which had been the cause of their ruin, lets them thus eke out a miserable existence. Threadbare creatures with vulturish faces, they hang over the tables, quick-clawed to clutch up the stakes of the unwary.

Margot was glad of every opportunity to make a little money by selling her place. It meant the price of a square meal: spaghetti, and salad and cheese, in a cheap Italian restaurant in Beausoleil. Otherwise, when an increasing dizziness warned her that she had not yet broken her fast, she had to seek a quiet corner of the gardens, and lunch on a bit of chocolate and some bread. Then she would hurry back to the Casino, fearful that in her absence a chance had come up to make a few francs.

It was a weary, anxious existence. Sometimes indeed she got down to her last five francs before a sudden turn of luck exalted her again to the heights of hope. The effect on her nerves was terrible. Her nights became haunted. Roulette wheels whirled before her closed eyes and she often dreamed of a mighty one that turned into a great whirlpool, in which she and all the other players were spinning around helplessly. And always, just as she was being sucked down into the vortex, she awoke.

2.

One evening as she sat in a corner of the gardens, silent and absorbed, a man approached her. He was dark and weedy, and his eyebrows twitched up and down continually. She recognized him as one of her fellow-lodgers at the pension, and she had heard him addressed as Monsieur Martel. After looking sharply at her, he took a seat by her side.

"Had any luck lately?" he asked with that freemasonry of gamblers that permits of a promiscuous conversation.

Silently she shook her head.

He lighted a cigarette. "It's a cruel game," he observed. "God help the poor pikers who haven't enough capital to defend themselves. I had a hard fight to-day. I was obliged to play a martingale up to five thousand francs, all to win a wretched louis. But I got out all right. I imagine you have not been very successful yourself lately. I have seen you losing."

She nodded. He drew comfortably nearer.

"Well, that's too bad. By the way, if I can be of any help to you, give you any advice ... I have a considerable knowledge of the game...."

She laughed bitterly. "I, too, Monsieur, have a considerable knowledge of the game. But there ... that is all the capital I have in the world, ten francs."

She held out two white chips in her shabby, gloved hand. He noted the smallness of the hand, and the glimpse of milk-white wrist between the glove and the threadbare jacket. He drew nearer still.

"Ah! it's hopeless," he said, "when one gets down so low. Why not let me make you a loan? I shall never miss it. You can repay me out of your winnings. Let me lend you a trifle, say five hundred."

She looked at him steadily for a moment. "But I have no security to give you," she said at last.

He laughed easily. "Oh, that doesn't matter. Of course, we are speaking as one Monte Carloite to another. We understand each other. If I am nice to you, you will be nice to me. My room at the pension is number fourteen. If you come down and see me this evening I have no doubt we can arrange matters."

She rose. In the shadow he could not see the loathing in her eyes. These men ... they were all alike. Beasts! She left him without a word.

He waited in his room that night, wondering if she would come. She did not. He went off to the Casino laughing comfortably. Life was a great game.

"If it isn't to-night," he said to himself, "it will be to-morrow or the day after. A little more hunger, a little more despair. I have but to wait. She will come to me. If she doesn't, what matter? There are lots of others."

3.

Some days later she sat in her room staring at her face in the cheap mirror. There were dark circles around her weary eyes. Her cheeks were thinned to pathetic hollows, her mouth drooped with despair and defeat. The Casino had beaten her. She was sick, weak, nervously unstrung. Try as she would she could not get back her old healthy view of life; that was the worst of it. Gambling had poisoned the very blood in her veins.

She had no money to take her back to Paris, even if she were willing to go, and she felt she would rather die than write and ask for help. Then to take up the burden of labour again, the life of struggle without hope and with misery to crown it all, ... Ah! she knew it so well. She had seen too many of her comrades fight and fall. Must she too work as they worked, until her strength was exhausted and she perished in poverty?

There was death, of course! Only last week a young girl, after pawning all her trinkets, shot herself under the railway bridge. She would do better than that; she had some little white powders.

Then there was the compromise. Why not? Who under the circumstances would dare to tell her that death was better than dishonour? And yet ... she hated to think of doing it. She preferred to steal. Funny, wasn't it? Her sense of morality was curious. She would rather be a thief than a harlot.

But she had no chance to be a thief. It would have to be the other thing. Rising she put rouge on her ghastly cheeks then rubbed it off again. No, not just yet! She would ask the young man for the five hundred francs. If he demanded the *quid pro quo* she would beg him to wait until to-morrow. Then she would go to the Casino and risk all. If she won she would return him his money, and say she had changed her mind. If she lost ... well, there was the white powder....

She would ask him at once. How dark and silent the house was. Room fourteen was on the floor below. Softly she crept down the shabby stairs. She had to put on her cloak; she shivered so.

That was his door. She hesitated, inclined to turn back. Perhaps he had gone out. Her heart was beating horribly and the hand she put out trembled. She knocked. There was no answer. Softly she tried the handle of the door.

END OF BOOK ONE

BOOK TWO

The Story of Hugh

CHAPTER ONE

THE UNHAPPIEST LAD IN LONDON

1.

The woman he used to call Aunty kept a rooming house on Balmoral Circus, and the boy's earliest memories were of domestic drudgery. He cleaned boots until nearly midnight, smudging with grimy knuckles his sleepy eyes. He slept in a cupboard at the rear of the hall, along with dirty brushes, smelly dusters and lymphatic cock-roaches. As he grew taller he learned to make beds and to take care of the rooms. Aunty nagged at him continually and he had to dodge occasional blows.

She was an unwieldy woman with a tart tongue and tight varnished hair. Every afternoon she would put on a battered bonnet and go forth for what she called "a breff of fresh air." She would return about five, smelling of gin and very affable. He preferred her cuffs to her kisses.

Uncle would come home at a quarter past six. He was a French-cleaner, a monosyllabic man who loved his pipe. One evening he broke his stoic silence.

"Missis, it's time that boy 'ad some schoolin'."

"Schoolin'! the ideer! And tell me 'oo's goin' to do the work of this 'ouse while he's wastin' 'is time over a lot o' useless 'istry an' jography?"

"I tell you, missis, he's got to have some eddication. He's goin' on for nine now and knows next to nothin'."

"Well, you know wot it means. It means payin' some lazy slut of a 'ouse-maid sixteen bob a month."

"Well, and why can't you pay it out of that five 'undred pounds 'is mother gave you to look after 'im?"

"'Eaven 'ear the man! And 'aven't I looked after 'im! 'Aven't I earned all she gave me? 'Aven't I bin a second muvver to 'im? Didn't I nurse 'er like a sister, and 'er dyin' of consumption? There ain't many 'as would 'ave done wot I did."

The difficulty of his education, however, was solved by the second-floor back, Miss Pingley, who undertook to give him lessons for two hours every day. She was the cousin of a clergyman and excessively genteel, so that his manners improved under her care.

Once he began to read his imagination was awakened. More than ever he hated the sordid life around him. He began to think seriously of running away, and would no doubt have done so, had not Uncle again intervened. One evening the silent man laid down his pipe.

"I've got a job for the boy, Missis. He begins work on Monday."

"Wot!"

"I say get a gel for the work. That lad's goin' into business on Monday."

"Well, I never!"

"Yes, Gummage and Meek, the cheese people. You 'ear, Hugh?"

"Yes, Uncle. Thank you, Uncle."

Aunty began to make a fuss, but Uncle promptly told her to shut up. As for the boy the thought of getting away from dust pans and slop pails was like heaven to him; so the following Monday, with beating heart, he presented himself at the office of Gummage and Meek.

2.

Mr. Ainger, the cashier, sat on his high stool, and looked down at a slim lad, twisting a shabby cap. Mr. Ainger was a tall man of about fifty, his hair grey, his face fine and distinguished. It was said that in his spare time he wrote.

"Well, my boy," he said kindly, "what do you call yourself?"

"Hugh Kildair."

The gaze of Mr. Ainger became interested. He noted the dark eyes that contrasted so effectively with the light wavy hair, the sensitive features, the fine face stamped with race. Centuries of selection, he thought, had gone to the making of that face.

"A romantic name. So, my boy, you are making a start with us. I don't know that it's what you would choose if you had any say in the matter. Probably, you'd rather have been a corsair or a cowboy. I know I would at your age. However, very few of us are lucky enough to do the things we'd like to do. Life's a rotten muddle, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, my young friend, I do not know if the horizon of your ambition is bounded by cheese, if it inspires you with passion, with enthusiasm. Still you might have made a worse choice. You might have been in oils and varnishes, for instance, or soap. Imagine handling those compared with that exquisite ivory curd—transmuted by bovine magic from the dew and daisies of the field. I tell you there's romance in cheese; there's even poetry. I'm sure a most charming book could be written about it. Pardon me, but you're not by any chance thinking of writing a book about cheese, are you?"

"No, sir."

"Glad to hear it. Now I think of it I might as well do it myself,—a whimsical Belloc-sort of book with glimpses of many lands. But there. Let us return to the subject of your future. All I can say is: Do your best; we'll do the rest. Now go; and believe me, our discriminating gaze is upon you".

In the years that followed, although he saw little of Mr. Ainger, he was conscious of a protective and sympathetic eye. As for the work he did not dislike it. It was pleasant in the cool gloom of the warehouse where cheeses of all shapes and colours made strange lights and shadows. He had more liberty too, than he would have had in the office. He was able to make pen and ink sketches of his companions in his spare moments. At the end of every month he handed over his pay to Aunty who returned him a trifle for pocket-money.

At the beginning of his fifth year his salary was raised to fifty pounds. On the day he received his first instalment he did not return to Balmoral Circus. Instead he went to a small room in Hammersmith, carrying his few belongings in a cricket bag. He then wrote to Aunty, saying he was "on his own," and he would never see her again.

At last, at last he was free.

3.

How hard that first winter was! Fifty pounds went much further in those days than it does now, but even then he had to go without many needful things. An overcoat, for one. You can picture him a tall, thin pale youth, with a woollen comforter and a shabby suit far too small for him. He was often cold and hungry. A cough bothered him.

One day Mr. Ainger came down to see him.

"Hullo, young man. You haven't written that book yet?"

"No, sir."

"I am surprised. Assailed as you are by a dozen pungent odours do you not realize that under the cork-trees of Corsica the goats browse on the wild thyme in order that those shelves may be replenished with green veined Roquefort; that cattle bells jingle in the high vivid valleys of the Jura to make for us those grind-stone like masses of cavernous Gruyère; sitting here are you not conscious of a rhythm running through it all, of a dignity, even of an epic—cheese?"

"Well," he went on, "I've come to hale you from all this source of inspiration to a more sordid environment. There's a

spare stool in the counting-house I think you might ornament."

"I'll be glad of a change, sir."

"Good. By the way, where are you living?"

"Hammersmith, sir."

"Ah, indeed, I have a cottage on the river. You must come and see me."

A fortnight later he took Hugh to his little villa. It was the only real home the lad had even seen, and was a revelation to him. Mrs. Ainger was the first sweet woman he had ever met, and he immediately worshipped her. There were two fine boys and a most fascinating library.

The Aingers had a great influence on Hugh's development. Through them he met a number of nice fellows and instinctively picked up their manners. He played football, cricket, and tennis,—at which games he was swift and graceful, but somewhat lacking in stamina. He studied French, and Mr. Ainger was at great pains to see that he had a good accent. But best of all, he was able to attend an art school in the evenings and satisfy a growing passion for painting.

Then the war broke out. He went to France with the First Hundred Thousand. In the wet and cold of the trenches he contracted pneumonia and his recovery was slow. As soon as he was well again, he was transferred to the transport service and drove a camion in the last great struggle. When he was demobilized he returned to the office at a comfortable salary.

Everything looked well now, everything but his health. He suffered from a chronic cold and was nearly always tired.

Then one raw day in early Spring he saw a poor woman throw her child over the Embankment.

"She was quite close to me," he told Mr. Ainger afterwards, "so of course I went in. It was instinctive. Any other chap would have done the same."

"Well, I grabbed the kid and the kid grabbed me, and there I was treading water desperately. But it was hard to keep afloat; and I thought we must both go down. I remember I felt sorry for the little beast. I didn't care a hang for myself. Then just as I was about to give up, they lifted us into a boat. There was a crowd and cheering, but I was too sick to care. Some one took me home in a taxi and my landlady put me to bed."

The chill that resulted affected his lungs. All winter he had fits of coughing that made him faint from sheer exhaustion. He awoke at night bathed in cold sweat. In the morning he was ghastly, and rose only by a dogged effort. One forenoon, after a hard fit of coughing Mr. Ainger said to him:

"Cold doesn't seem to improve."

"No, sir."

"By the way, ever had any lung trouble in your family?"

"Yes, sir. My mother, I've been told, died of it."

"Look here, take the afternoon off and see our doctor."

The doctor was a little bald, rosy man. He looked up at Hugh's nigh six feet of gaunt weariness.

"You're not fit to be out, sir. Go home at once. I'll see you there."

So Hugh went to his bed, and remained in it all summer.

4.

One day in late October he lay on his bed staring drearily at the soiled ceiling, and wondering if in all London there was a lad more unhappy than he.

"A lunger," he thought bitterly. "Rotten timber! A burden to myself and others. Soon I must take up the fight again and I'm tired, tired. I want to rest, do nothing for a year or two. Well, I won't give in. I'll put up a good scrap yet. I'll——"

Here a knock came at the door. It was the little doctor cheery and twinkling.

"Hullo! How's the health to-day?"

"Better, doctor; I'll soon be able to go back to the office."

The doctor laughed: "If you remain in London another six months you'll be a dead man."

"What would you have me do?"

"Go away. Live in a warm climate. Egypt, Algeria, the Riviera."

"And if I go away how long will I live?"

"Oh, probably sixty years."

"Quite a difference. Well, doctor, I expect I'll have to stick it out here. You see, I've no money, no friends. Even now I'm living on the charity of the firm. They've been awfully decent, but I can't expect them to go on much longer."

"Have you no relatives?"

"None that I know of. I'm absolutely alone in the world."

"Well, well! We'll see about it. Surely something can be done. Don't get down-hearted. Everything will come out all right."

The little doctor went away, and Hugh continued to stare at the soiled ceiling. There came to him a desperate vision of palms and sunshine. But that was not for him. He must stay in this raw bleak London and perish as many a young chap had perished....

Next morning came another knock at the door. It was Mr. Ainger.

"Well, my lad, how are you feeling?"

"A little better. I hope I'll soon be able to get back to my ledger."

"Nonsense, my boy! You'll never come back. You're expected to hand in your resignation. The doctor holds out no hope. You can't go on drawing on your salary indefinitely."

Hugh swallowed hard. "No, that's right. You've treated me square. I can't complain."

"Complain, I should say not; look here...."

With that Mr. Ainger took from his pocket a sheaf of crisp Bank of England notes and began to spread them out on the bed.

"Twelve of them. Ten pounds each. All yours. We collected sixty pounds in the office and the firm doubled it. And now you're going to eternal sunshine, to blue skies, to a land where people are merry and sing the whole day long. You've escaped the slimy clutch of commerce. Gad! I envy you!"

"Do you really, sir?"

"Yes. I wanted to live in Italy, Greece, Spain; to roam, to be a vagabond, to be free. But I married, had children, became a slave chained to the oar. One thing though,—my boys will never be square pegs in round holes. They'll have the chance I never had."

"Perhaps it's not too late."

"No, perhaps not. Perhaps some day I'll join you down there. Perhaps when I get things settled, I'll live under those careless skies where living is rapture. I'll get back my own soul. I'll write that book, I've tried all my life to write."

Perhaps ... it's my dream, my dream...."

Mr. Ainger turned abruptly and went out, leaving Hugh staring incredulously at the counterpane of notes that covered his bed.



CHAPTER TWO

THE CALL OF THE BLOOD

1.

Pines packed the vast valley, climbing raggedly to the pale grey peaks. Sometimes the mountains swooped down in gulch and butte of fantastic beauty. The pines were pale green in the sunshine, the soil strangely red. There was a curious dryness, a hard brilliance about it all.

As Hugh looked from the train window he had a feeling of home-coming. It was as if his ancestors had lived in this land; as if in no other could he thrive so well.

"I'm feeling heaps better," he thought. "Only let me get six months in these jolly old pine forests, living like a wood-cutter. The life of nature, that's what I need to make a new man of me. Ah! this is my country. I'm here now; and here I'll stay."

Looking at that sky so invincibly blue, that soil so subjugated by the sun, it seemed hard to believe that elsewhere there could be fog and cold and sleet. Here the sunshine was of so conquering a quality, it was difficult to think of sullen lands that could resist it.

Again Hugh felt that sense of familiarity: "I'm a son of the sun," he exulted; "a child of the sun-land."

So absorbed was he that a rasping voice at his side almost startled him.

"The verdure here is profligate, ain't it?"

The speaker was a rusty, creaky man smoking a rank cigar. He had a bony nose, and a ragged moustache. He wore a dusty bowler hat and a coat with a collar of hard-bitten musk-rat.

"The pines do seem to thrive," said Hugh.

"Pines is very tendatious," observed the shabby man. "Very saloobrious too."

"Indeed," said Hugh. "Are you a health-seeker?"

"No, sir. Not 'ealth,—wealth. I'm a man with a system, I am. The finest system on the Riviera."

"I wish mine was. It's rather dicky."

"Oh, I wasn't referrin' to my corporationus system. It's my system at roulette. Allow me...."

He handed Hugh a rather soiled card on which was engraved:

<p>PROFESSOR ROBERT BENDER, ROULETTE EXPERT, INVENTOR OF BENDER'S VOISIN SYSTEM <i>Author of "How to live at the Cost of the Casino."</i></p>

"Yes," supplemented the shabby man importantly. "You see before you one of the greatest livin' authorities on roulette. I've studied it now for twenty years. They all consult old Bob. Many a gentleman I've 'elped to fortune. 'Avin' no capital myself, I'm obliged to let others 'ave the benefit of my experience."

"And your system?" queried Hugh politely.

"Well, sir, it's based on the fact that the old croupiers 'ave a 'abit of throwin' the ball in a hotomatic way, so that they 'ave spells when they throw into the same section of the wheel. Of course, it calls for judgment and observation."

"Luck, too, I should imagine."

"Not so much. Luck is a thing we scientific roulette players try not to recognize. We aim to beat chance by calculation."

"Is it really true," said Hugh, "that one can live at the cost of the Casino?"

"Certainly. Thousands are doin' it this very day. Why, I can go in any time and make a couple of louis."

"I wish I could."

"So you can, sir, with a little experience. You're goin' to Monte?"

"No, Menton."

"Ah, that's a pity. Menton's too full of English, too deadly dull. Monte's a sporty little gem, the most beautiful spot on earth—and the wickedest."

"That sounds interesting."

"Interestin' ... I should say so. There's no square mile on God's globe so packed with drama. There's no theatre a patch on that Casino. You'd better get off at Monte, sir, and let me put you on to my system. Sixteen hundred francs capital is all you need, and I guarantees you a daily profit of from twenty to eighty per cent."

Hugh thought of the poor two thousand francs that was to last him for six months.

"I'll think over it. Meantime I've arranged to go to Menton."

"Well, we'll surely see you at the tables before long. By the way, sir, you see that gentleman with the white spats? He's a English gentleman, a Mister Jarvie Tope. Very nice man, but he's got a system that's no good. Don't let him fool you with it."

"Thank you," said Hugh, "I'll be careful."

The pine-lands had given way to vinelands, the peaks to plains. The vines pushed jagged forks through the red soil; the olive groves wimpled in the wind. The goats and donkeys scarcely raised their heads to gaze at the insolent train. Hugh was in such a deep reverie that he did not notice the approach of Mr. Jarvie Tope.

Mr. Tope was a little rosy man, round and bland with waxed grey moustaches. He was well groomed, and seemed on the most excellent terms with life.

"Ha, ha!" he squeaked as he drew near to Hugh, "Old Bob Bender's been warning you against me, I could see it in his eye, the rascal. Told you, no doubt, I'd try to put you on to my system. Couldn't, if I would. I've come over to play for a syndicate."

"Indeed. What sort of a system is yours?"

"Well, it's based on the idea that the same phenomenon cannot occur on the same spot at the same moment to-day that it occurred at the same spot on the same day last year. I have my phenomena carefully recorded and when the times comes I bet on them. The probabilities are millions in my favour."

"There seems to be a lot of systems."

"No end of 'em. We all think ours is the best and the other fellows' no good. With a bit of luck all are good, but you need a lot of capital to defend yourself, and you must be content with a very moderate return. And after all none are infallible. That's what we're all seeking, a formula that's infallible. So far no one has found it, but still we seek and hope.... You see that old fellow at the end of the corridor?"

"The venerable old chap with the white beard?"

"Yes, I call him Walt Whitman. Well, he's a man over seventy, going to Monte Carlo for the first time, a professor from the Sorbonne, Durand by name. They say he has worked on his system for twenty years, and is bringing the savings of a lifetime to test it. Ah! we'll see what we shall see. Fine looking old chap, isn't he?"

"Very striking,—like a Hebrew prophet."

"He has books and books of figures and calculations. What his system is no one knows. I've seen a heap of them come like conquerors and go away broken on the wheel."

"You know the place well?"

"I should think so. Never missed a season for twenty years. Coming here has got to be a habit with me. In summer I have a cottage in Kent where I grow roses; in winter an apartment in Monte where I play roulette. Oh, I'm a great boy, you don't know me."

Mr. Tope laughed in jolly appreciation of himself.

"Well, I suppose I'm crazy like the rest of 'em. We're all crazy there. The Casino is a great lunatic asylum. We wander about as if we were free, but we're not. Inevitably our feet carry us back. Don't let it get you, young man. Avoid Monte as you would the plague.... By the way there's the first call for lunch. I'm going to have a wash first. See you later."

2.

Hugh followed a line of passengers to the dining car. He had found a place and was looking at the menu card when the waiter ushered a lady into the opposite seat. He looked up and then as quickly away. For even in that casual glimpse he was aware that his vis-à-vis was most alarmingly attractive.

Now Hugh was an unusually shy young man, and in the ordinary course of events would have eaten his meal in silence, and gone away without a word. To his amazement, he heard a firm, clear voice addressing him:

"Don't you remember me?"

Suddenly he found himself gazing into a pair of smiling brown eyes; but even as he looked the smile died in their amber depths. In its place was embarrassment; a frown puckered the delicately pencilled eyebrows. Again the clear voice spoke almost with reproach.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, but you are ridiculously like a friend of mine,—Paul Vulning."

"Indeed, that's curious."

"Yes, too absurd. For now I look, you're quite a bit different. Paul must be five years older than you, but he looks ten. The dear boy doesn't take the care of himself he ought. A sad scapegrace."

She regarded him again, then laughed joyously.

"Why, here we are, two perfect strangers talking together like old pals. What must you think of me? Because of your likeness to Paul I feel as if I'd known you for ages. What's your name?"

"Hugh Kildair."

"Sounds deliciously Scotch. But you're English, aren't you?"

"I've lived all my life in England."

"Indeed! So have I. But never again. The English are so cold. They don't understand temperament. Even before my husband died and we lost all our money, I was quite fed up with it. Now I spend the winter in Monte and the summer in Aix."

The waiter interrupted her with the wine card. She looked rather disdainfully down the list and chose the most expensive. Then she scanned Hugh appraisingly. His new grey suit sat well. His collar and tie were of the right sort. He looked clean, correct; a public school man. The lady seemed satisfied.

"You're a nice boy," she said happily. "I'm Mrs. Belmire. Every one in Monte knows me. You're going to Monte, of course?"

Hugh hesitated. "No, I'm rather seedy. I'm going to Menton to rest up."

"Menton. Why! you'll be bored to death there! Nothing but old tabbies who go to each others' teas and talk gossip. Oh, you'll hate it. Get off at Monte. Promise me you will."

She was really a beautiful woman. Everything about her was so exquisitely correct. Her complexion had the delicacy of porcelain; her henna-coloured hair looked as if it had just come from the hands of the coiffeur; her eyes had passion in their tarn-brown depths. As her hand touched his he felt that he would have got off at Hades to please her.

"Seems a good idea; I might as well rest there."

"Topping! it's decided then. You'll come and see me. I suppose you'll stay at the 'Paris.' I wouldn't though. They'll charge you two hundred francs a night for a room. Oh, yes, my dear boy, you're going to say their charges are their charges, but you don't know Monte. Unless you're odiously oofy, don't go to the Paris. It's simply infested with 'rastas' and *nouveaux riches*. Some of the hotels on the hill are really quite nice, and you'll meet the right sort of people there. You see, I'm taking a motherly interest in you. I don't want to see you foolishly extravagant. Above all, don't throw your money away recklessly at the Casino. If you must play let me be your adviser. Let me give you the benefit of my experience."

"That's awfully nice of you."

"Not at all. I've helped heaps of men. I can't afford to play myself, but I enjoy seeing others win. Have a cigarette?"

He took one from a gold case, and they puffed between courses. She sipped only a little of the wine, and the bottle was half full when the waiter whisked it away. She ordered a *fine champagne* with her coffee, and graciously allowed Hugh to pay the bill. As she rose to leave she gave his hand a little squeeze.

"There! I've enjoyed my lunch so much! Remember me; Mrs. Belmire. And don't forget to get off at Monte."

The paying of the bill had a sobering effect on him.

"After all," he thought, "if she knew I was a nobody with only two thousand francs in the world she wouldn't wipe her shoes on me. As for meeting her in Monte, this decides me. I'll steer clear of the place."

3.

The scenery was as lovely as a painted panel. Between umbrella pines he saw the majestic sway of the sea. Snowy villas peeped from sombre cyprus groves. The palms were pale gold in the wistful sunshine. Magic names glorified the common-place looking stations.—San Raphael, Agay, Nice. In the setting sun the way seemed to be growing more and more wonderful, as if working up to a climax of beauty. Every moment moved him to fresh rapture. And to think that this loveliness had been here all the time and he had not known! How could people continue to exist in that grim grey London? Was there such a place as this, or was he dreaming it? Would he ever go back again to fog and grime? No, never, never....

Villefranche, Beaulieu, Eze ... the light had faded, yet still he stared at the shadows through the darkened pane. He was aware suddenly that the glass was reflecting mirror-like the compartment behind him. At first he thought it was empty, then he heard a sigh and saw it was occupied by a slim slip of a girl. She was sitting in the corner, very quiet, very anxious. She was dressed in deep black, and her white, rather haggard face had a kind of pathetic appeal. He noted all this without any particular interest. Then suddenly she took off her hat and he saw that she had the most wonderful hair in the world.

She rose to arrange it before the small mirror above her seat. With a brusque movement she withdrew two combs and let it ripple down in a rain of gold. It reached below her waist. It covered her like a cape, it shimmered in the lamp light, it seemed as luminous as a flame. At the sight of such glory Hugh turned and stared.

Then the girl noticed him and flushed with shame. She clutched her bright tresses to her head and swiftly rearranged them. She turned her back....

Monte Carlo.

They were getting in now. The train seemed to plunge into a dazzle of light; then the darkness of another tunnel; then a long green station. On the lamps so meanly printed, he could see the magic name that opens wide the portals of romance. Surely it should be blazoned in fiery capitals on the heights of heaven! This then was the spot of which people talk and dream, that masterpiece of nature and art which never disenchant, which is adorable even in its cruelty. Fatal, fascinating name,—Monte Carlo.

It was the climax of the beautiful journey. The train disgorged nearly all its passengers as if this place like a magnet was drawing them out. He saw Bob Bender, and Jarvie Tope. He watched old Professor Durand looking curiously about him, and a white-haired porter taking the baggage of Mrs. Belmire. He felt alone, abandoned.

As the train lingered, loth to leave this charmed spot, Hugh felt a sudden desire to get off. He saw the fair-haired girl struggling with a basket valise. With a sudden impulse he gathered together his own luggage and prepared to descend, but the train was already in motion.

"Just as well. Now for Menton."

Then behold! the train halted again and backed to the station.

"Fate!" said Hugh and jumped off. He passed through a long baggage room into a courtyard where there were a line of luxurious hotel omnibuses and porters in livery. The court was backed by a wall of rock that rose to the heights of a glorious garden. Palms speared the silvery arc-lights. Masses of geraniums stained the face of the rock. On the winding steps that led to the garden a nude statue of a woman was set in a niche amid ferns and water lilies, and a diamond spray of water.

On the long hill to the right was a line of fiacres. He saw the fair haired girl hand her bag to one of the drivers.

"Pension Paoli," she said.

Hugh watched her drive away; then he, too, hailed a fiacre. The dark driver bent to him with smiling politeness.

"Where to, monsieur?"

Hugh thought for a moment. As he stood there he had a strange thrill of wonder and of joy. He seemed to breathe an enchanted air; the silver lights amid the trees were those of fairyland; he felt as if he were hesitating on the very threshold of romance.

"Pension Paoli," he answered.

CHAPTER THREE

THE POISONED PARADISE

1.

An amiable, early morning sun was irradiating that great theatre which is Monte Carlo, and a regiment of stage hands were preparing the scene for another day. Hawk-eyed bands of them with brush and pan were grooming the cleanest streets in the world, pouncing triumphantly on burnt matches and unsightly cigarette ends. Other bands invaded the beautiful gardens, trimming each blade of grass to the same size and meticulously barbering each bud and flower. They moved with nonchalant grace, these brown-skinned Monegascons, as became the servitors of that great, benevolent institution, the Casino.

As Hugh passed through the gardens, breathing the perfumed air, a great delight glowed in him. His first impression was of the theatric quality of the place, its note of unreality. It was a fit setting for the pleasure-seeking hordes, for the legions of luxury, for these dreaming of fortune and those dead to hope. He never lost his sense of its unreality, of its being a stage scene, on which was played a daily drama in three acts: Morning, Afternoon, and Evening.

Passing between the Casino and the Hotel de Paris, he descended in the direction of the Condamine. At the top of a long hill, a little way past the post office, he paused with a joy that thrilled him to ecstasy....

He saw a little U shaped harbour shielded from the sea. It was as delicate as a pastel, a placque of sapphire set in pearl. In the crystal air the red-roofed houses crowded close to it. The terraced town rose on tip-toe to peer at it. It was all glitter and gleam, and radiant beauty. And yonder in sombre contrast rose the Rock monstrous, mediæval,—so scornful of that hectic modernity across the bay....

He climbed the long steep hill, crossed the sunny square in front of the palace and plunged into the cool gloom of the narrow streets. Wandering idly along he came to a low brown house with a tiny porch, and four pepper-trees in front. He looked at it carelessly enough, then turned and wandered into the garden of the Prince. He gazed curiously at a broken pillar covered with ivy. There was a spring sunk deep in the rock; the flowers bloomed there; and bees and butterflies made the nook gay and tuneful. He found a bench that overlooked the glimmering sea and rested awhile.

As he sat pensively dreaming, two pale ghosts may have been watching him; a man strong and tall, a girl sweet and fragrant as a flower. Perhaps wrapt in that great love to which he owed his being, they were drawing near to him with wistful pain, with adoring tenderness. Who knows?...

Filled with a strange melancholy Hugh rose and went his unheeding way. Again he looked carelessly at the house in which his mother was born, in which *her* mother still lived....

But he remembered nothing. He did not know. He never knew....

2.

The chief recommendation of the Pension Paoli was its cheapness. For twenty francs a day Hugh had his board and a chamber that overlooked the red roofs and the blue sea beyond. He had a tiny balcony, too, and in the lazy, limpid days he cultivated a cheerful lethargy.

It was one of those Bohemian establishments peculiar to the Principality. People came and went without exciting interest. The *clientele* was imperturbably cosmopolitan, the cuisine piquantly Italian. At the table d'hôte one heard half a dozen tongues and no one was concerned about the respectability of his neighbour. Every one seemed to gamble, and to think of little but the Casino.

Hugh's first evening was typical. He was trying to go to sleep, when about midnight some one entered the next room. He heard the sound of money being emptied on the table, counted, then a sigh of satisfaction. Every night this happened, only some nights there was no money and curses took the place of content. On such nights he would say to himself, "The Twitcher's been loosing."

The Twitcher was a tall weedy man, who, owing to some nervous malady, had a trick of raising and lowering his eyebrows. He had a friend whom Hugh called the Sword Swallower, on account of his way of eating ravioli. The S. S. was small and brisk, with tiny, cropped head, and a large but carefully groomed moustache. His trousers were striped and of the same width all the way down.

The S. S. and the Twitcher were allies and united in a dislike for a third man, whom Hugh dubbed the Rat. This was a sturdy, bandy-legged fellow with a bulging jaw, a broken nose and close-set, beady eyes. His skin had a curious pallor, a prison pallor, Hugh thought. He decided that the Rat had just finished doing time and was now spending the swag.

One day he overheard a conversation between the Twitcher and the Sword Swallower which referred to the Rat.

"Yes," said the Twitcher, "the fellow's as crooked as a ram's horn. I saw him do it again."

"Do what?"

"He puts a louis on one of the dozens then watches the ball. Just as it drops he shifts his stake to the winning dozen. He is quick as a flash and nine times out of ten the croupier doesn't notice it. So he gets paid."

"He's a shady one. If you leave your money in the table at night, be sure to lock your door."

"I've never done so yet, but in future I'll be more careful."

At this moment the Rat entered and greeted them with a twinkle in his beady eyes.

"Well," he said briskly, "I've just made my 'day,'—five louis. Now I can rest."

"You're easily satisfied," said the Twitcher; "If I don't clear twenty, I think I'm out of luck."

"Not me," said the Sword Swallower. "If I can make the bank cough up a couple of louis I quit. But I never fail."

"What's your system?" demanded the Rat.

"Oh, I play for *a paroli*. And yours?"

"I always play between the dozens," answered the Rat; "it's the safest."

"Yes," said the Twitcher. "You play a safe game all right. As for me, give me the *traversals*...."

Here the conversation became too technical for Hugh to follow. Presently the Twitcher said to the S. S.:

"Come on. Let's go and scratch."

As they went away, the Rat installed himself in a comfortable chair and called for a *Dubonnet*. Then he lit a cigarette from a yellow packet, blew the smoke blissfully through his nostrils, sipped his *apéritif*, and seemed content with all the world.

"A sinister chap," Hugh thought, and ceased to look at him. Suddenly he heard a gasp of dismay.

The Rat was staring out of the window, his sallow face livid, his hands clutching the table edge. Then he dived through the little door at the back of the restaurant and disappeared. Astonished, Hugh followed the direction of the man's gaze. All he saw was a mild old priest peering rather curiously at the house. Hugh watched wonderingly; but the priest, after lingering a little, went slowly away, and the Rat did not finish his *apéritif*.

Among the other boarders were two Swedish women, mother and daughter. The mother was short and fat, and the daughter, tall and thin; but both were blonde and had shiny, red faces. They dressed in black satin, with gold chains round their necks and diamond rings on every available finger. They ate gluttonously, and spoke a harsh, gabbling tongue. Although they were evidently rich, they gambled greedily for five-franc pieces.

Occasionally Hugh saw the girl with the bright, heaping hair. Sometimes at meals he would see her slip into a remote corner, quiet as a mouse. She looked at no one, kept her head down, ate very little and stole out again as softly as she had come.

One day he questioned Terese, the waitress, about her.

"Ah," said Terese, "you're asking me something. All I can tell you is that her name on the register is Margot Leblanc. She's a queer one. Never speaks to a soul. She spends her time between the church and the Casino, between praying and gambling. I can't make her out."

Hugh's curiosity was aroused. But the girl's manner discouraged any attempt at acquaintance. Once when he chanced to encounter her on the stair, his polite greeting was met by such a sullen silence that his interest in her faded.

3.

His health was improving daily. It seemed quite wonderful. Instead of watching the tennis-players, he wanted to join them. The distance of his walks lengthened. He joined the little English library and changed his books frequently. On the heights above the town, sitting under an olive tree with the vast shimmer of the sea below him, he read through long sunny hours. Sometimes he got out his box of water colours, and made some sketches.

At half past nine every morning he sauntered down the palm-lined avenue that descends to the Casino. Even at that hour it was packed with luxurious motors, and he christened it "Limousine Lane." Dozens of gardeners were valeting the lawns on either hand to an unheard of greenness and trimness. The air was always delicious.

At the foot of "Limousine Lane" was the "Cheese," a round grassy mound diagrammed with flowers. It was shaded by four proud palms and a great rubber tree. Around it were seats for spectators. Lounging there Hugh saw the world of fashion parade. Women exquisitely dressed, and men immaculate sauntered past like actors on a stage. They mounted the seven carpeted steps of the Casino, paused for a moment as if conscious that every detail of their costumes was perfect; then turned and were swallowed by the Temple of Chance.

While Hugh never wearied of this constant swirl of elegance, his main interest was in the swinging doors of the Casino itself. He never tired of watching the players come and go. One day Bob Bender came down the steps looking rustier and more mildewed than ever. He recognized Hugh.

"What, sir,—not playing yet?"

"No, I have no money to lose. Are you doing all right?"

The old gambler shook his head in a melancholy way.

"Not exactly. I'm transversing a bad time. I was expecting a gentleman from America who wanted me to play for him, but he is delayed,—a Mr. Fetterstein. Maybe you've heard of him?"

"No."

"Well, his not comin' has deranged me. I've been playin' a little game of my own but I 'aven't got capital enough. This mornin' I came up against zero three times. A man can't do anything against that. Now I'm off to get a bite of lunch. Maybe things will come my way this afternoon."

He shambled off. Before going to his own luncheon Hugh strolled around the gardens. Nurses were watching beautiful, well-behaved children. The round pond mirrored the palms and pink geraniums; the little stream was fringed by ferns and flowers and starred with water-lilies. The green sweep of the sward was like a carpet, set with strange exotic trees, agave and cactus and dwarf oranges. Midway there was a little artificial ford, with gold fishes glancing in the lazy ripples.

Yet there were jarring notes in this harmony. An old man for instance who sat on a bench reading discarded journals. He wore eye-glasses and had an air of dignity quite at variance with his rags. His boots were altogether disreputable and his coat would have disgraced a decent ash-bin. Yet it was easy to see that he had been a person of education and refinement who had lost a fortune at the tables. Hugh took a seat beside him.

"Well," said the old fellow, "what do you think of it?"

"It's beautiful," said Hugh with fervour.

The other looked at him sarcastically.

"Beautiful, yes ... and it's to me and the likes of me you owe it; we pay for it; we keep it up. Take a good gaze at me, young chap, and you'll enjoy it all the more." He laughed so disagreeably that Hugh rose and left him. But the gardens did not seem as lovely as before.

4.

Hugh's favourite walk was along the highroad that led to the Tête du Chien. It crossed a dizzy bridge over a deep gorge in which the washerwomen hung their linen to dry. At the mouth of this gorge, framed in the arches of the railway bridge, was a tiny chapel, and behind it, like a slab of lapis lazuli, the harbour. Climbing still higher the road passed the Persian villa and reached the top of the hill. Almost directly below were the red roofs of the Condamine.

Continuing still further the road swung into a great curve high above Monaco, disclosing both the Rock and the sweet serenity of the sea. Terrace upon terrace of olive trees rose to the base of the mountain.

Hugh was walking along this road one morning, admiring the beauty that surrounded him, when suddenly he glanced down. In the dust at his feet, fresh and glistening, was a crimson patch. "Curious," he thought; "those marks look as if a heavy body had fallen here." He examined the stone-wall and found a slight spatter of blood. A little further on, he picked up something that made him look very thoughtful, a bit of bony fibre, to which adhered a few dark hairs. Strange! He looked downwards, and saw that he stood just above the Cemetery of Monaco. He found the path and slowly descended.

He searched for some time for the suicide's section of the cemetery which he had been told was cunningly concealed. A great high wall separated the lower from the upper graveyard, and built half the way up the face of it, was another wall, the space between the two forming a narrow shelf. There was no access to this shelf except through a broken place in the balustrade of the stairway just large enough to pass a coffin. As he looked down from the upper wall, Hugh saw that the whole length of the shelf was closely packed with nameless graves. In one place where the earth had been thrown carelessly up a rusty shovel leaned against the wall. The air had the smell of a charnel pit.

He climbed the hill again. The place where he had seen the blood was now quite clean. There was no trace of any disturbance. Some one had come in his absence and tidied things up. The sky had suddenly grown grey, grey too and sinister the mountains. He had an uneasy sense that somewhere in the olive trees unseen eyes were watching him; that he was being spied on and shadowed.

5.

Another day when he took this solitary walk, twilight was gathering and the roofs of the Condamine were softened to a coral mist. The space between the rock of Monaco and the Tête du Chien was filled with sunset afterglow as a cup is filled with wine. The olive trees lately twinkling in the sunshine were now mysteriously still.

When Hugh came to the highest point overlooking the town, he stopped to rest. The rock of Monaco rose like a monster from the sea, and was as dim and silent as a tomb. He could distinguish the courtyard of the Palace, greyly alight, and a black stencilling of windows. A solitary lamp revealed a turret and an ancient archway, all else was gloom. In its austere mediaeval strength the rock seemed the abode of mystery and silence.

And Monte Carlo! Looking towards it Hugh could see nothing but light. The mountains were pricked with patterns of light, the great hotels were packed with light. And all seemed to concentrate in one dazzling centre, the source from which this luxury of light flowed,—the Casino.

Then he noticed that on a bench near him was a stooping figure. To his surprise he recognized it as that of Professor Durand. The old man was clutching in his hands a number of the Revue of Monte Carlo with its columns of permanencies.

"What a pity!" thought Hugh. "So fine, so venerable a head bent over those wretched figures. This man who might be taken for a preacher, a prophet,—a slave to this vulgar vice, puzzling over systems, trying to outwit the Goddess Chance. *Le calcul peut vaincre le jeu* ... that is the lying phrase that lures them. Fools!"

Then he turned for the Professor was addressing him. Hugh saw a flashing eye, a noble brow.

"Young man, you will excuse me, but I claim the privilege of age. At the Sorbonne I have lectured to thousands like you. I speak because I noted in your passing glance something of disdain."

Hugh made a gesture of protest.

"No, I do not blame you. You see me with these numbers. But you misjudge me.... Listen...."

The old man seemed to grow taller. He stretched his hand to where the Casino glittered like a crown of gems.

"I am eighty years old to-day. I have a feeling that I shall never see another birthday. But there is one thing I hope to do before I die ... *to ruin that accursed place.*"

Hugh stared at him.

"I speak for the good of humanity, I speak because of the evil it has done in the past, the harm it can do in years to come. I speak in behalf of its thousand of blasted homes, its broken hearts, its shameful graves. Ah! you only see the beautiful surface. You do not see below. But I do. And to my eyes yonder rock on which it stands, is built of human skulls, the waves that lap it are tears and blood. Look at the loveliness of earth and sky, the purple mountain rising from the silver sea, the dreamlike peace, the soft and gentle air. No painted picture was ever half so beautiful. How happy all might be here! A paradise, a human paradise; but because of that place, a poisoned paradise."

Hugh stared harder. The old man's voice was tense with passion.

"You think I am a fanatic, a madman. Wait and see. I am going to destroy that place. For years I have worked on my great plan. It is the crown of my life. In a few weeks I will begin to play. I shall win and win. By mathematics I will frustrate chance. I will compel them to close their doors, for my system is invincible. God has given me this task to do, and I will complete it before I die. Into my hands He has delivered them. I am His instrument of vengeance. Let them beware!"

In a magnificent gesture he shook his clenched fists at the Casino. When Hugh left him he was still standing like a prophet on the heights, staring down on his poisoned paradise.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE GIRL WHO WAS ALWAYS ALONE

1.

Christmas had come and gone, a strange, unreal Christmas, with none of those rigors and austerities that Hugh had been accustomed to associate with the season. The long stretch of garden in front of the Casino was enamelled with patterns of pink, purple and milky cyclamen, as brilliant as banners against the green; the ribbon-like paths were terra-cotta; and the usual indolent gardeners were shaving and shampooing the velvety lawns.

Hugh was feeling elaborately well. In the last two months a great change had come over him. His pale face had taken on a healthy tan; its hollows had disappeared. A new force, a new courage possessed him; he looked a lithe, swift youth, as clean as fire.

It was then with a joyous sense of recovered manhood that he took the early train one morning for La Turbie, and started to walk to Menton. As he swung along the High Corniche it seemed as if he was looking over the nose of an aeroplane. The brilliant panorama of shore and sea expanded before his gaze. He saw the Rock rising like a huge hump from the water, the crowded red roofs of the Principality, the dainty hoop of the harbour. His gaze shifted to the dazzling curve of the coast, the pretentious Casino, Cap Martin with its gleam of modern villas in ancient olive groves. A desire to paint this beauty kindled and glowed within him.

He climbed to the ruins of the old castle of Roquebrune and gazed through a round window onto a dizzy gulf of sea and sky. His reverie was disturbed by a sound of voices and as he descended to the courtyard he saw a woman standing by the battlements, looking out into the great, shining space. She was tall and graceful, dressed in a jersey costume of primrose silk. It was Mrs. Belmire.

As if she had known he was there, she stretched her hand backwards, without turning her head.

"Come here," she commanded.

Hugh obeyed. He took the outstretched hand and was drawn gently to her side.

"Isn't it lovely," she sighed.

He felt her hand tighten in his. He had a sudden desire to kiss her lovely neck. Slowly she turned towards him, then stepped back and stamped her foot in vexation.

"Oh, it's *you*!" she cried. "Well, of all the—I thought it was Mr. Fetterstein."

But quickly she recovered herself.

"I've a bone to pick with you, naughty young man. Why have you never come to see me?"

Hugh had no excuse ready.

"I had made up my mind not to speak to you again. But there! Good nature was always my weakness. Promise me to come soon and I'll forgive you."

While Hugh was promising another man joined them. Mrs. Belmire turned to the newcomer radiantly.

"Mr. Fetterstein; I want to introduce Mr. Kildair; a young countryman of mine."

Mr. Fetterstein did not look enthusiastic, but mustered a show of cordiality.

"Pleased to meet you," he said; and offered a large hard hand. In fact everything about Mr. Fetterstein suggested hardness. He looked muscular and forceful. His hair was iron grey; the lines of his clean-shaven face were firm and grim; his jaw strong; his eyes shrewd; his voice had a determined rasp. Even his clothes were made of some hard, wear-resisting tweed.

"Now, come," said Mrs. Belmire; "I positively insist on your admiring this view."

"If you insist, Mrs. Belmire, there is nothing more to be said. But you know how looking at scenery always makes me hungry. Even now I've got an appetite I wouldn't sell for a twenty dollar bill. I grant you this is fine all right. We haven't got anything in the United States that could touch it. But for my part I'd rather look into the inside of a good car than at the finest bit of scenery the Lord ever made."

"Oh, you horrid materialist! But you must excuse him, Mr. Kildair. His enthusiasm is entirely professional. Mr. Fetterstein makes automobiles in America somewhere...."

"Detroit, Michigan, ma'am. We have five factories running right now. In fact I'm over here to pick up pointers from French cars. I've got one down there that's a hummer. But that reminds me, Mrs. Belmire, we'd better be getting *ong root* if we want to make *Song Reemo* in time for *dayjoonay*. Come on. Let's get down if you've had enough of your old ruin."

Mrs. Belmire sighed. "I'm sorry you don't appreciate my ruin."

"I guess it's a first class ruin all right, but they ain't much in my line. Now, Mrs. Belmire, if you'll kindly give me a few pointers on roulette when we get back to Monte Carlo to-night, that'd make a hit with me."

They descended to the village square where stood a long vicious-looking, torpedo-shaped car. It was painted a warm orange, with finishings of nickel. In the curving body was a well with two seats, and the whole thing looked like an aeroplane without wings.

"Twelve cylinders," said Mr. Fetterstein, as he climbed into the raking seat. Mrs. Belmire looked distinctly nervous but bravely adjusted her cloak and veil. Mr. Fetterstein raced the engine, jammed in his first speed; the car leapt forward like a flame. Hugh saw it flashing down the white road and thrilled as it took the sharp curves. Then a shoulder of mountain hid it from his view.

"A most delightful woman," he thought; "no wonder she has a lot of admirers. I wish I could call on her, but what's the good. She'd only find out that I'm what Mr. Fetterstein would describe as a 'four-flusher.'"

2.

Hugh lunched and lounged in Menton, until he felt a strange nostalgia for Monte Carlo come over him.

"Curious," he reflected; "already the place has such a hold on me, I cannot leave it even for a few hours."

He jumped into a big lemon-coloured motor bus and in half an hour was sitting in the Café de Paris.

"Hullo, old chap," he heard a shrill voice say, and looked up to see Mr. Jarvie Tope. Mr. Tope seemed as if he had stepped from a band-box, a flawless figure of a well-dressed man.

"Hullo!" responded Hugh. "You're looking well."

Mr. Tope raised his jaunty panama.

"I should think so, sixty and still going strong. Getting younger instead of older. Oh, I'm a great boy, I am."

"Come and have tea with me," Hugh begged.

Mr. Tope sat down. Together they gazed at the brilliant scene. The air was bright with banners and exultant with music. Gay crowds promenaded in front of the Casino. An aeroplane swooped down, scaring the drowsy pigeons on the cornice. Men watched it through their monocles, women from under their tiny frilled sunshades. Under the striped umbrellas elegant *demimondaines* sipped their orangeades; professional dandies, slim and elegant, passed amid the green tables; and dancing girls, befurred and bejewelled, sauntered on their way to the *Thé Dansant*. It was a kaleidoscope of colour; a moving pattern of dainty costumes; an entertainment that never lost its interest.

"Isn't it just like a scene in a theatre?" said Mr. Tope. "That's how it strikes me even after twenty years. A beautifully dressed crowd, beautifully behaved; yet below it all vice unfathomable. It sometimes reminds me of the rainbow iridescence one sees on a pool of scum.... By the way, I haven't seen you tempting the fickle goddess?"

"No, I haven't been inside the Casino."

"Ha! that's quite a distinction. I noticed you talking to old Bob Bender the other day."

"Yes, he's having rather a hard time. He's waiting a backer from America."

"Oh, you needn't waste any sympathy on old Bob. He'll never starve."

"Why?"

"Well," said Mr. Tope, lowering his voice to a whisper, "they say he's in the service of the Secret Police."

"What do you mean?"

"Ah, young man! you only see the showy side of Monte; but believe me, there's a very seamy under one. This is the most cosmopolitan spot in the world, and criminals of all countries collect here. You might call it a sort of criminal clearing-house. Well, to counteract this, the Casino people have the most efficient police force in Europe. They have agents in all the big capitals; an international crook can't put his foot in Monaco without being recognized and watched."

"You surprise me."

"Do I? Let me tell you: the rooms are full of detectives, male and female. The chief of the Secret Police is a man of genius, a Swiss called Krantz. He speaks seven languages and seems to have an eighth sense, the sense of detection. You may have seen him, a tall, thin man dressed in black with a dark, clean-shaven face. He always wears a smile of cheerful simplicity."

"And Bob?"

"Oh, Bob's just a spy. He keeps track of the English crooks and shadows if required. They say Krantz values him."

"It seems very strange to me."

"Not at all. If you only knew the underground workings of this place, the mentality, the way in which everything is run.... Why, here you're not living in the Twentieth Century at all. It's mediæval. Even now some spy may be trying to over-hear us."

"A queer place!"

"Yes, and packed with the queerest people on earth. Now, for instance, that little girl in black, just entering."

Hugh started. The girl was Margot Leblanc. He had not seen her for some time, and had wondered if she was still at the pension. She was dressed shabbily and as she passed he saw that her face was white and haggard, and her eyes stared vacantly before her. She sat down at a nearby table.

"Now, that girl," continued Mr. Tope, "is a puzzle to me. She came here about two months ago and she has never been seen to speak to any one. She is always alone. Nobody knows anything about her. She spends most of her time in the Rooms gambling with small stakes. I have seen her stand silently at a table for hours.... By the way, here come my friends, the Calderbrooks. Let me introduce you."

The Calderbrooks were so uncompromisingly English, that their nationality was recognizable a long way off. They wore tailored costumes made of the same kind of tweed, with stockings of wool and low tan shoes. Under broad-brimmed hats their faces were pink and cheerful. The mother was sweet; the girl pretty; the father a tall thin man, with drooping moustache, a mild manner, and pale-blue eyes.

"Yes," said Mrs. Calderbrook, after they had been introduced, "we're going on to Mentony; but we thought we must spend a day or two here.... Perfectly beautiful! Mr. Tope tells me you don't go to the Rooms? How very extraordinary! Of course, we strongly disapprove of the whole thing; but I think every one should go once, if it's only to see. We're going in now for the first time. Mr. Tope has promised to be our guide. We shall play just once to say we have done so. You'd better come with us."

Hugh shook his head smilingly; "I'd rather not, thank you. I'll wait here till you come out."

"All right. Shan't be long."

Piloted by Mr. Tope the three mounted the carpeted steps, passed the bowing flunkeys, and disappeared through the swinging glass doors. In half an hour they reappeared. They were quite excited.

"It's wonderful," said Mrs. Calderbrook; "Alice put five francs on the twenty-one, that being her age. What do you think! The twenty-one came up. They paid her a hundred and eighty francs. Of course we stopped at once. It doesn't do to abuse one's luck. I really believe we are lucky. We're going again to-night. Father will try this time,—won't you, Father?"

Mr. Calderbrook said he would in his weak, refined voice. Alice was shyly radiant. Hugh wished them further good fortune and they returned to their hotel, eagerly talking of the play.

3.

Hugh remained a while longer. He was watching the girl of his pension. Her face was pinched and peaked, her eyes strangely haunting in their pathos. She was so thin that he could see the outline of her sharp shoulder blades under her shabby jacket. Her bright hair was braided and coiled away under a hat of black crêpe.

"Poor little devil," Hugh thought; "she looks up against it."

Presently she took a note-book with black glazed covers from her bag, and began to turn its pages abstractedly. Hugh saw that it was filled with columns of figures.

"Roulette records," he thought again, "the same idiotic obsession."

Soon she rose; and having finished his tea, he sauntered idly after her. He thought she was going to re-enter the Casino; but instead she turned up-hill in the direction of the town. He saw her climb the steps of the Church and enter its swinging door.

After waiting a little, he, too, entered. He found her seated in the cool dusk, her slim hands crossed and her eyes closed. Whether she was sleeping or praying he could not tell. He watched her for a while; then as she continued to sit immovable he went away.

4.

Hugh had found that the strange theatrical charm of Monte Carlo was most obvious after dark, and he never tired of wandering through the still gardens, breathing the delicious freshness of the air. Whichever way he looked a picture formed itself. The tiny paths were like coral ribbands on a gown of green, embroidered with pansy patterns of crimson, violet and silver. Under the lamps the blades of the patrician palms shone like swords. There were lace-screens of translucent green, rich velvet dusks, and sudden surprises of silver. The fountain sprayed diamonds into the dark pool, from which came the ruddy flash of gold-fishes; the roses climbed the palms as if to reach the light.

That evening he took a seat on the terrace. He heard below him the soft crooning of the sea, and felt its cool breath. Behind him was starlight and softly luminous mountains; in front, deep violet space ... mystery, immensity.

A small form came slowly along the terrace. As it drew near he saw it was the strange girl who was always alone. Once or twice she stopped, looking out over the balustrade to the sea. As she passed him he saw that her face had the vacant look of a sleep-walker. She sank on a bench, and took a glazed note-book from her bag. As she looked at it she sighed with weariness. Her head drooped forward and she slept.

Another dark form drew near her, the furtive figure of a man. Softly he sat down on the same bench and seemed to edge nearer and nearer.

Hugh rose, making unnecessary noise. The man, with a start, glanced his way and swiftly disappeared. Yet in that flash Hugh had recognized him; it was that sinister individual, the Rat.

Hugh went for a walk in the Condamine and did not return until half-past ten. He glanced down to the terrace; hunched on the bench, a solitary figure, the girl still slept.

When he got back to the pension, he found it strangely upset. The two Swedish ladies were going off in a fiacre with their baggage. Their faces were very red, and they gabbled furiously. The Twitcher and the Sword-Swallower were talking in low tones. The Rat was nowhere to be seen.

"Perhaps," whispered Teresa, the waitress, "I shouldn't tell you, but madame and mademoiselle have left us. They say some one has gone into their room and stolen money. It was done this afternoon. Fortunately for me I was away at the time. It is very annoying. *Voila!* it is evident we have in the house a thief."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE THIEF

Hugh was preparing to leave the Pension Paoli. Its increasing atmosphere of furtiveness and suspicion was getting on his nerves. He had taken a large, sunny unfurnished room in the Condamine and had bought a folding bed, a table, a chair, and some cooking utensils. Here he would be alone and quite free. He would spend his days in sketching, his evenings in reading.

He was considering all this as he sat on a bench on the terrace just above that green promontory where they shot the pigeons. Even as he watched the slaughter was going on. A nimble lad would run out by one of the red, radiating paths and put a pigeon into one of the grey boxes; then he would retire and after a short interval the side of the box would collapse, leaving a bewildered, bird facing an overwhelming freedom. Sometimes the bird would hop around stupidly, fearing to rise until a rubber ball bounding towards it hastened its decision. *Bang! Bang!* Generally the bird would drop on the green turf, to be swiftly retrieved by an eager dog. Sometimes, however, it would get away and, minus a tail, circle over the sea, finally rejoining its fellows in front of the Casino. When a pigeon escaped, Hugh wanted to applaud for joy. But few escaped, and he was turning away in disgust when he saw the Calderbrooks.

"Hullo!" he said, "I'm surprised. I thought you'd gone long ago."

"No," said Mrs. Calderbrook, "we decided to extend our stay. It's really a lovely little place. We find the Casino so fascinating. We go there every day now."

"Do you still play?"

"Oh, a little. Just for chicken-feed though. Father makes enough to pay for his cigarettes, while I generally get the Casino to stand afternoon tea. Oh, we're very careful."

"Yes," said Mr. Calderbrook in his soft refined voice. "One has to be careful if one goes every day. However, an old fellow called Bender has taught me a system that so far has been very successful. You put three pieces on the passe and two on the first dozen, or three pieces on the manque and two on the last dozen. You have only six numbers against you. It's safe."

"By the way," said Mrs. Calderbrook, "we saw an American break the bank yesterday, a Mr. Fetterstein. He played the number seventeen in every possible way, staking the maximum. They had to ring for more money. It was quite interesting. He must have won over a hundred thousand francs. Well, Father, we'll leave you with Mr. Kildair to finish your pipe, while Alice and I go in to try our luck."

When they had gone Mr. Calderbrook talked of various subjects, until suddenly dropping his voice, he said:

"You see that man in black coming along the terrace—the tall thin one."

"The one with the clean-shaven face and the fixed smile?"

"Yes. That's the great Krantz, the Chief of the Secret Police."

As he passed them the eyes of Krantz were focussed on their faces.

"There," said Mr. Calderbrook, "he knew we were discussing him."

Hugh looked after the detective. His right hand, held behind his back, was carrying what looked like a sword cane. It was a long and muscular hand, and Hugh noted that part of the little finger was missing.

"They say," said Mr. Calderbrook, "that he has all kinds of spies working for him and that he is quite unscrupulous. People who displease him have a way of disappearing suddenly. But then everything is high-handed about this place. It is beyond the law. All kinds of strange things can be done here and hushed up, all kinds of crimes go unpunished. It seems to be run quite irresponsibly. The Casino is supreme and rules with a high hand. All it cares for is to get money...."

Mr. Calderbrook began to bore him, and Hugh excused himself. He returned to the pension to prepare for his departure.

"To-morrow," he thought, "I shall go away and all these people will pass out of my existence. It is pleasant to think one can put them so quietly out of one's life. Ah! the beauty of liberty!"

He felt that he could not bear to remain more than one more night under the same roof with the Rat. The Twitcher and the Sword-Swallower were to be tolerated, but the Rat made him shudder. There are people who make us wish the world was bigger, that we might have more room to avoid them. The Rat was one of these; his very proximity was physically disagreeable. His skin was the colour of the fresh Gruyère cheese, except where his eye sockets darkened to chocolate. Criminal or not the man suggested reptilian perversions.

When Hugh paid his modest bill, he received a thousand francs in change, and as he stuffed the small notes into his pocket-book, he was aware that the sharp eyes of the Rat were upon him.

It was after ten o'clock and the Pension Paoli was very quiet. All the boarders were apparently at the Casino. The big building seemed deserted.

Leaving the door of his room ajar, Hugh threw himself on his bed. Soon he heard the street door open and some one pass upstairs. It was the Rat.

As he lay in the darkness, and listened to the sounds of the great gloomy house, a strange feeling of uneasiness began to creep over him. This grew so strong that after a bit he rose and went out on his little balcony. The air was exquisite. Over him flowed the river of night, and looking up into its lucid depths he saw the sky, its bed, pebbled with stars. Then his eyes drifted to the myriad lights that lay between him and the sea, lights now clear, now confused into a luminous mist....

What was that? Surely some one was moving softly in the passage? No; he was not wrong. Some one was trying the door of the next room, the Twitcher's. But the Twitcher had locked it, and after one or two efforts the sound ceased.

Then Hugh had an inspiration. Taking out his pocket-book he threw it on the bed. Enough light came from the window to show it black against the white counterpane. There! the trap was baited.

Footsteps again in the passage, fumbling, muffled. They were drawing nearer, they were opposite his door. In the darkness he heard hard, hurried breathing. His own heart was tapping like a hammer. Surely the footsteps were passing? No, they had halted. Then slowly, slowly, his door was pushed open, and a black stealthy form crept to his bed.

He held his breath, and waited.... Now the dark shape was close.... Now an arm reached out, and a hand seized the pocket-book.... Now ...

Hugh leapt forward and closed the door. He was alone in the darkness with the intruder. He had done it. The Rat was trapped.

"You dirty sneak-thief, I've got you," he cried.

He switched on the electricity, and the room leaped into light. Against the far wall, cowering and clutching at it for support, was a figure in a black hood and cape.

Then it was Hugh's turn to start back and utter a cry of dismay.

For framed in the black hood, and gazing at him wild-eyed with fear, was Margot Leblanc.

CHAPTER SIX

THERE WAS A LONG SILENCE

1.

Shrinking against the wall the girl looked up at him, her face sick with terror. Amazement turned him to stone. Then suddenly he recovered himself; and his astonishment changed to disgust.

"Well," he said in a hard voice, "caught you in the act, didn't I?"

She did not answer.

"I'm sorry, very sorry. I'd rather it had been any one else. Tell me, is there any reason I shouldn't hand you over to the police?"

No answer.

"Speak, please. Is there any reason?..."

Her arms dropped. She straightened up, and looked him full in the face.

"There is. I'm starving. I haven't tasted food for two days...." Then she sank at his feet.

2.

Two hours later they were in a lonely corner of a restaurant. She had satisfied her hunger, and was sitting silent, downcast, sullen.

He looked at her with keen, bright eyes. "Poor little devil!" he thought, "perhaps, she isn't so bad after all." Then aloud he said: "I suppose when you went to the Twitcher's room your intention was to steal?"

She hesitated. After all, what did it matter? "Yes," she answered. "I went down there to steal."

"You also stole the money belonging to the Swede women...."

"No, I didn't do that. I swear I didn't...."

He looked at her steadily. He did not believe her.

"What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know."

"What's going to become of you?"

"I don't know."

He leaned back, his hands clasping his knee. He noted a tress of bright gold hair coiling over her hollow cheek.

"I mustn't leave her to her fate," he thought.

Bending forward he said impulsively: "Look here, let me lend you some money."

A deep flush stained her cheek. He, too, was one of them ... the beasts. Sharply she answered:

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't choose to accept your aid."

"It seems to me you're not in a position to refuse it; you haven't a *sou*. To-morrow you're to be turned out of your room. Madam will certainly keep all your belongings. You will have nowhere to go. You have no friends here. You are not fit to do any work. You are on the verge of a break-down. Again I ask ... what's going to become of you?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does. Look here ... suppose I lay a charge against you of entering my room with intent to steal,—will you deny it?"

"No."

"Well then, you are in my power. You must submit to my conditions."

She looked at him sullenly. "What are they?"

"I'm not going to lend you any money, but I am going to help you in my own way. First of all, I want you to promise me that you will never enter the Casino again."

She laughed bitterly. "I'll promise that. I hate the place."

"Now, I'm taking a room in the Condamine. I want you to come there and be my housekeeper."

She could not keep the contempt out of her eyes.

"Don't look at me like that," he said sharply, "I see you don't understand."

"You don't mean ... *that*?"

"No, damn it, I don't mean—*that*."

She looked at him with new interest, steadily, wonderingly. He went on: "It's a big room. We'll divide it into three, with screens and curtains. There will be your part, and my part, and a common one to be used as a kitchen and dining-room. Don't fear. You'll be as safe behind your curtain as if you were in a room with doors double-locked."

She had never met a man like this. Wonder widened her eyes. He laughed to see it, a frank boyish laugh.

"Sounds crazy, doesn't it? I don't see why it won't work, though. If I were a Frenchman, it surely wouldn't. But we Anglo-Saxons are a cold-blooded lot. We're idealists, given to doing strange, mad things. I give you my word of honour I will respect you as I would a sister. There you have it. We will be brother and sister. We are enough alike to pass for that. I had intended to do my own cooking, but that will be your job now. Then, while you are resting quietly and getting back your health, I will attack the Casino and get back your money."

"How will you do that?"

"By playing. I hate to play, but if I do I have an idea I can win. At least I can afford to risk a thousand francs and with that I propose to win back the two thousand you need to take you to Paris."

"No, no. You mustn't play. No one ever wins there. You'll lose everything."

"Leave it to me. Come on now, it's decided. That you trust me, is all I ask. Everything will come out right. In six weeks I promise you I'll send you back to Paris with enough money to start your little shop. Brother and sister,—*n'est ce pas*?"

She shrugged her shoulders helplessly. "I am in your hands. You can do with me as you will."

Again he laughed that boyish laugh. "There! don't look so tragic. Everything's lovely. Come on, we'll get back to the pension."

They walked in silence through the exotic gardens. The pink clock in the tower of the Casino pointed to half an hour after midnight; the shutters were descending over the entrance doors. He looked at the place with a new interest. Hitherto it had meant nothing to him. Now he saw in it an antagonist. He was looking on a battleground where he would win or fall. On the morrow the fight would begin.

So absorbed was he that he forgot the girl by his side. Then a soft sound aroused him. He looked down and saw that she was crying.

END OF BOOK TWO



BOOK THREE

The Wheel



CHAPTER ONE

THE TEMPLE OF CHANCE

1.

Monte Carlo is various kinds of a jewel. In the morning it glitters like a diamond; in the afternoon it gleams like a great pearl of the Orient; in the evening it glows with the mellow lustre of a sapphire. It has its moods of invincible beauty. There are times when one wonders if it is real and not the fabric of a dream. But of all its moods its glamour is, perhaps, most felt in that mellow moment that precedes the setting of the sun. From earth and sky exhales a great serenity. In the golden air, a thousand windows shine like casements of romance, the sea melts placidly into the tranquil sky, and the mountains breathe tenderness and calm.

It was at such a moment, reassuring to the soul, that Hugh, for the first time, mounted the seven steps that led to the temple of chance. The sun gleamed on the brass rods of the carpet, gleamed on the gold braid of the four porters who guarded the entrance, gleamed on the buttons of the little page boys that swung open the double doors. Behind the glass partition, leaning on a brass rail, and scrutinizing every one who climbed the steps, were three detectives. Characteristic of the place,—the eager welcome; the watching detectives!

Hugh mounted the steps and paused at the top, just as he had seen so many others pause to look over the scene.

Beyond the "Cheese," the central garden was a vivid emerald, enamelled with patterns of pansies; a breeze, pure and delicious, rustled the palms. Daintily dressed children were throwing crumbs to the lethargic pigeons. A shining Rolls Royce floated past and anchored in front of the Hotel de Paris, while a tall negro in a swallow-tail uniform descended in stately fashion and opened its doors. The space in front of the Café de Paris was starred with striped umbrellas and coloured with gay groups. The Roumanian orchestra was playing with sparkling abandon and a crowd was whirling around the "Cheese." The English dominated the throng;—tall, thin women with patrician noses, tall, thin men with grey hair and lean, fresh faces. It was a suave picture of elegance and ease.

Turning to the left Hugh entered the bureau of admission. The Nice train had just come in and behind the high curved counter the clerks cowered before the clamouring crowd. Seated at a commanding desk was the chief of the bureau, an owl like man with a crabbed air; he was the final arbitrator, the judge from whom there was no appeal. Before him was a Swiss aubergiste who was trying to explain that if the clothes he wore were not good enough for the Casino, he could change them for better. Another rejected one, a stout woman who had foolishly given her occupation as a dress-maker, was pointing out that the lady ahead of her who had just been granted a card was a *femme galante*, one of her clients who even owed her money. But to such protests no attention was paid. A blank look, a shrug of the shoulders,—that was all. Judged by Casino standards and found wanting, they had to go away disconsolate.

Hugh, however, had no such trouble. A brisk little interpreter bustled up; and he slipped a bill into the man's hand. He was pushed forward in front of the others.

"This gentleman is known to me," said the interpreter with fluent audacity. "He is a celebrated *artist dramatic de Londres*."

So Hugh assumed the air of a *jeune premier*, and with many polite smiles was handed a card.

"Now," he murmured, "for the next step in the gambler's progress!" A courteous flunkey ushered him into the atrium, a galleried hall designed to impress the visitor and put him in the proper frame of mind to enter the Rooms. It was of staid richness, of sober dignity. Through a vista of marble columns Hugh saw a circular refreshment counter, and nearby a bulletin board where a group were reading the latest despatches from the ends of the earth. On leather-padded benches men were smoking cigarettes, and women gossiping and criticizing all who passed. Other men and women strolled up and down, taking a breath of air after a strenuous spell at the tables. He overheard scraps of conversation.

"Well, I've made my day, but the bank gave me a hard fight for it." "Yes, a martingale's deadly. It will always get you in the end."

Looking towards the left he saw three mysterious doors. From the center one a stream of people was pouring, with an

expression on their faces of either impassivity or disgust, elation was rare. By the side doors another crowd was entering. Those to the left were eager and excited; those to the right calm and blasé. These were the respective doors for the visitor and the habitué. It was through the visitors' door that Hugh passed. At last! He was on the threshold of the greatest gambling room on earth.

First impression,—nasal. How could people breathe such air? It struck him like a blow in the face. It was so thick, so richly human,—a compound of physical exhalations, cheap cosmetics and disease. It almost daunted him. Second impression,—oral. A confused murmur of many voices. A discreet rumble, punctuated by the acrid cries of the croupiers and the click of rakes on counters. Third impression,—visual. To the right and left were walls of human backs surrounding pools of light. The light came from green shaded lamps that hung from heavy cords. Peering over a triple row of shoulders he caught a glimpse of a green table and a scuttling ball.

He passed through a smaller room into a great central one. In contrast with the restful dignity of the atrium it was of a brilliant beauty. Huge columns of honey-coloured onyx seemed to strike the note of the decoration. Everything was in the same key, from the padded seats of yellow leather to the Watteau-like panels painted on the wall. Two immense chandeliers were tangles of gilt on which lights clustered like grapes on a vine. Everything seemed to shine, glisten, reflect. Even the inlaid floor was lustrous with the polish of a million gliding feet. Just as he had called the smaller room by the entrance the "Grey Room," so he called this the "Hall of Light." From the gleaming floor to the vast dome it suggested light.

There were five tables, and each was besieged by gamblers. Those in the outer row stretched and strained to get their money on the table, marking the numbers in glazed note-books, shouting their manner of staking, squabbling and scrambling for their gains. Hugh felt a little bewildered.

As he stood there a very curious thing happened. A tall, distinguished looking woman, wearing a cream-coloured mantle, advanced to the centre of the hall. She took from under her mantle a plate of white china and deliberately let it fall to the floor. At the sharp crash those nearest turned, and in an instant she was surrounded by a curious crowd. Then as quietly as she had come she backed out and disappeared. Two attendants in light blue came forward and calmly gathered up the debris. The crowd, laughing, returned to the tables.

While Hugh was wondering what it meant, the affable little Mr. Jarvis Tope bustled up to him. Mr. Tope wore a white waistcoat and white spats, and was, as the French say, "pinned at the four corners." His round red face was wreathed in a smile of welcome.

"Ha! young man, so at last you venture into the cave of the dragon. Well, it's good to see a fresh face among so many stale ones. What was all the excitement about?"

Hugh told him of the lady and the plate. Tope laughed.

"Oh, is that all! Didn't you know that to break china on the floor of the Casino is supposed to change one's luck? It's rather a desperate resort. The lady you saw must have been hard hit. Women believe in those things, mascots and so on. They bet on the number of their cloakroom check; they have their favourite tables and believe that the croupier can control the ball. Every woman who believes in any of these things is a fool; it's astonishing how many are fools. Come, I'll explain the game to you."

Going to what Mr. Tope called the "Suicide Table," they pushed themselves into the triple row of standing spectators till they were behind the seat holders. These had a sphynx-like air of absorption. Piles of counters were methodically stacked before them, and their little note-books were scrupulously neat. Some were marking down dots and zig-zag lines, some columns of figures. They played occasionally and with deliberation. They were the regulars, the system workers, who sat every day in the same place at the same table.

While Mr. Tope was explaining the different methods of playing, Hugh felt a light touch on his arm. Looking round he saw a sweet if somewhat over-emphasized face smiling up at him. The girl wore a bonnet that seemed to be made of tiny lilac flowers, and her hands were daintily gloved. Hugh thought at first that she had mistaken him for somebody else.

"Listen, Monsieur. Lend me a louis. It will bring you luck."

But Mr. Tope frowned. "Don't do it. Pretend you have no money."

Hugh awkwardly refused, and with a little grimace the girl went away.

"One of the parasites of the place," said Mr. Tope. "The Casino's full of them. She spotted you at once for a newcomer. She's on the watch for greenhorns. Now she'll tell her sisterhood that you turned her down, and you'll be less pestered. Never speak to a woman you don't know on the floor of the Casino. In the end it will cost you money."

"I wonder the management doesn't stop that sort of thing."

"They encourage everything that speeds up the gambling. Morality doesn't exist as far as they are concerned. All they want is to get your coin; and in the end they usually do."

"Do they get yours?"

"Oh, yes, I lose sometimes. There's a class of people who tell you they never lose. They're known as the liars."

"That was a very pretty girl who spoke to me."

"Yes. There's a story about her. She was engaged to a Frenchman who went to America and established himself in business. He sent her money to buy her trousseau, and to pay her passage over. She was crazy about him, all eagerness to join him; but she was tempted to risk a little of the money at the tables. In the end she lost it all. She dared not tell him, so she never answered his letters. Since then she has lived a hectic existence. She's an incurable gambler. A ruined life.... But come, I want to introduce you to two of the oldest habitués of the Rooms, veterans like myself. Mr. Galloway MacTaggart of Strathbungo."

Hugh was forthwith presented to a tall wiry man, who enveloped his hand in a large dry grip. He had a grim spectacled face and thin-grey whiskers.

"Welcome, malad," said Mr. MacTaggart. "The Fraternal Order o' the Veeatic bids ye welcome tae this den o' ineequity. And noo, if ye'll alloo me, I'll present ye tae the Grand Maister, Mr. Gimp o' Cincinnati. Mr. Gimp has the disteenction o' bein' the auldest member."

Mr. Gimp was small and wiry. He was the neatest man Hugh had ever seen; even his eyes were neat. He had a puckered pink face, and white silky hair like the floss of the thistle. His moustache was like a wisp of cotton. He extracted the thumb of his right hand from the armhole of his waistcoat and presented two fingers for Hugh to wag solemnly.

"Gimp's feeling peevish," said Mr. Tope. "He's just won five francs and lost ten."

"Never play the goddamn game," snorted Mr. Gimp. "When you catch me putting a cent on those tables, you can call me a goddamn fool and kick me round the 'Camembert.'"

"Well, after coming here for thirty years without missing a season you ought to have enough of it."

"Darned sight too much. No place for a respectable man! Never enter the Rooms unless I'm obliged to. Just come in now to look for a friend. A hot-bed of crooks and courtesans. Yes, and spies. Look at that damn inspector edging nearer to see if he can't hear what we are talking about. Bah! Look at that woman now. Why, she'd make a rotten egg smell like a rose. Well, I can't stand it any longer. I'm off to breathe God's good air. Au revoir."

With that Mr. Gimp stalked virtuously away. "He's always like that," remarked Mr. MacTaggart dryly. "An' if ye come in the Casino an' oor from noo ye'll find him smokin' his cigarette in the atrium. He's one o' the fixtures o' the place. It wouldna' be complete withoot him. An' there's a whole lot mair in the same boax. A man frae Brazeel went aff his heid in the Rooms the ither day. 'Puir Chap!' they were a-sayin', but I telt them, 'He's nae worse nor the rest o' us. We're a' daft in this establishment.' Whit's yer impression o' it, young man?"

"I'm surprised to see so many old people in the Rooms."

"That's right. Gamblin's the last infirmity of ignoble minds. When folks are ower dodderin' for wine an' wimmen, gamblin's a' that's left tae them. Look at that auld Bianca there. They say she wis the mistress o' the King o' Italy. Whit things she must hae seen! Noo she goes roon like a spectre mumblin' an' breakin' wind every time she plays. Weel, I'm feelin' auld an' tired masel. Ma nerves are no whit they were. There's nae doot it gets ye. It's a crool, crool game...."

They sought the fresher air of the atrium and lighting their cigarettes sat down on a recessed divan of padded leather.

"MacTaggart is our great hope," said Mr. Tope. "He is patience and pertinacity personified. He has now been sitting at the same place at the same table from the beginning of the play to the end for two years."

"For three years," said Mr. MacTaggart. "I've got the record o' two hundred thousand consecutive *coups*."

"MacTaggart claims he knows more about roulette than all the rest of us put together."

"So I do. Ye're like a lot o' children. Ye ken naethin'. When ye've spent night after night for three years compilin' an' analyzin' permanencies, ye'll begin tae hae some glimmerin' o' the mysterious workin's o' the laws o' chance. I've studied the game noo for twenty years and I'm jist beginnin' tae know a little, a verry little."

"Look!" said Mr. Tope, "there's that poor little Emslie girl waiting as usual for her mother."

On one of the benches near the exit from the Rooms Hugh saw a slight girl with a very sweet face. Her chestnut hair was braided behind and her colouring was fresh, and girlish. She sat with her slim hands clasped in her lap, looking anxious and forlorn.

"That," said Mr. Tope, who seemed to know everything and everybody, "is one of the hardest cases. She's only sixteen, and has been left a few thousand pounds by her grandfather. But her mother's a gambler *enragée*. She's lost all her own money, and now they say she's playing with the girl's."

At that moment a woman came from the Rooms, and the girl ran to her eagerly. The woman was tall and handsome, and her face was alight with joy. Opening her gold chain bag, she showed the girl the contents. They both laughed, almost hysterically, and went off arm in arm. With a start Hugh recognized the cream-coloured cape; it was the lady who had broken the plate.

2.

In the days that followed Hugh came to know the great building intimately. He gave fanciful names to the various Rooms. Beyond the "Hall of Light," as he called the main gambling room, was the "Hall of Gloom." In decoration it was heavy, dark, depressing. There was something Teutonic about it, even to the panels of lumpish Amazons that filled in the wall spaces. On the only occasion he played there, he came away whistling the "Dead March."

To the right of the "Hall of Light" was a little gem of a room which contained only one table. He called it the "Room of the Opium Dreamer," on account of the exquisitely painted ceiling of naked nymphs voluptuously sprawling on fleecy clouds. Its windows looked on the terrace and often he pulled aside the silken blind to marvel at the radiant beauty of the sea. The air in this room was unusually bad.

Beyond this was what he called the "Hall of the Three Graces," on account of the huge wall panel that dominated it. It represented three nude women against a Florentine background. Mr. Tope gave him some curious information about this picture.

"These," he said, "were three *demimondaines*, frequenters of the Casino. They claimed to be Swiss: but it turned out that they were Austrian spies in the pay of Germany."

Hugh looked at them with a new interest.

"When war was declared all three cleared out in a hurry. The director himself had to get away. He had, they say, gotten the Casino Company to acquire the golf links on Mont Agel, and right under the eyes of the French garrison he had all prepared for the installation of a wireless outfit. It was an ex-captain of Uhlans. His son made a demonstration in favour of Germany in front of the Casino and was mobbed.... Oh, this was a great place before the war, a hot-bed of treason. I'm told the French Government had to put pressure on the Government of Monaco to clear them out. And now they're creeping back again."

3.

Hugh soon came to recognize the various types that frequented the place. The women known as the skimmers particularly interested him. They haunted the Rooms, hovering over the tables and waiting for a chance to grab the stakes of others. They were the cause of most of the disputes. In the course of an afternoon a dozen of these rows would occur. As a rule, the croupiers discreetly professed ignorance of the cause. Although the disputants often called one another nasty names, Hugh saw them come to blows only on one occasion.

A Russian woman, said to be a princess ruined by the Bolsheviks, was playing steadily. Twice a Frenchwoman with a face like a bulldog, reached out and grabbed her winning stake. The Russian looked puzzled, but said nothing; she only watched and waited. As the Frenchwoman reached forward a third time she cried "Thief!"

The Frenchwoman promptly slapped her face. The Russian looked at her in steady contempt, shrugged her shoulders and turned to go. Then a fury seized her, and swinging round, she struck the Frenchwoman a violent blow, clutched at her hat, her hair, tugged, scratched, slapped, a very wild cat of fury. The attendants separated them. The Russian was marched off; the Frenchwoman dried her tears and declared triumphantly that the other would lose her ticket. But presently when the attendants returned, she, too, was led off. Hugh never saw either of them in the Casino again.

He spent long hours studying the play. He took down numbers and poured over the permanencies. He felt quite at home now. He had a monthly card, and was confident, even eager to begin. One evening he left the Rooms with his mind made up.

"To-morrow I cease to be a spectator. To-morrow I commence to play."

CHAPTER TWO

A GAMBLER'S DÉBUT

1.

"Margot, would you mind coming here a moment?"

The girl was drying her hands after washing the supper dishes. "Yes, monsieur."

"Oh, I say, I wish you wouldn't call me 'monsieur.' It sounds as if I were treating you like a servant."

The girl was silent. Hugh went on.

"Why can't you call me by my first name, as I do you? If you don't, I shall think you dislike me."

"Oh, please don't think that. I would do anything to please you."

"Then why be so unfriendly?"

"I don't mean to. But ... it's hard."

"Why?"

"Well ... there's such a difference between us. I am only a poor girl, a nobody. You are ..."

"No better than you are. Perhaps I've had just as hard a struggle in life as you have. I've always been poor. I'm poor now. I want to think you are my little sister, and I am your big brother. You must do the same."

"I'll try. Please give me a little time. Perhaps, it will be easier."

"All right. And now please come here. I'd like you to look at something."

He was sitting at the table with a big green book before him. Each page was filled with columns and columns of figures. His face was eager, his eyes sparkling.

"You know, I'm going to begin playing to-morrow."

"Oh, please don't. It's terrible how it gets a hold of you. And in the end it always means ruin."

"You don't know me. I'm a pretty obstinate sort of chap. I'm going to gamble. Maybe I wanted to do so all along, and only waited for the excuse you've given me."

"What excuse?"

"To win back the money you lost."

"You're not going to gamble on my account."

"Of course, I am."

"I will refuse to take the money."

"All the same I am going to win it."

"After that you'll stop?"

"I don't know.... There, don't be so frightened. Come closer and look at these figures."

On a sheet of paper he had made the following diagram:



"The seven dots," he explained, "represent a run of seven or more on any of the simple chances. The run breaks as you see, then returns once again. It's a well-known formation. Well, I've got to get that before I begin to play."

"But it doesn't happen very often,—only three or four times at a table in the course of the day's play."

"Yes, but I have the run of all the tables, fourteen of them. I can range the whole place. By glancing over the shoulders of those who are taking numbers, I can tell if there is anything in my line. When I find the combination I am seeking, I start staking in louis the sums I have marked."

"You only stake one the second time...."

"Yes, that's a buffer. I neither win nor lose if I gain that coup. I have to do that in order to ease up on my progression. Otherwise it would increase too rapidly. Then on the third, fourth, and fifth terms of my progression, I stand to win a louis only, but on the sixth term I win two louis, and on the seventh term, four. I use this progression because I have only a hundred louis at my disposal. I want to make a progression of seven terms, and I want my gains to increase as my stake increases. The great defect of the ordinary martingale is that you often find yourself obliged to risk quite a big sum to win a single unit."

She continued to look at the figures frowningly.

"You see," he went on eagerly, "to beat me the bank will have to follow up the first big run of seven or more by a second of eight, after a single break. Now I have examined a book of the records of the play at the second table for a whole year, and I haven't found a single case of this happening. So you see, I feel pretty safe. I only want to make three wins a day, three louis. At that rate, in about seven weeks I shall have all your money back. You can return to Paris, start your shop, and live happily ever after. Great scheme, Isn't it?"

"What if you lose?"

"I can't. It isn't conceivable."

"In roulette it's always the inconceivable that happens."

"No, I'm quite convinced. Armed with this system, I am going to the Casino just as confidently as If I were going to draw money from the bank. Of course, I know it means patience, watching, walking miles between tables; but that will be fun. I don't want to win too easily."

He continued to pore over his records, and she went softly about her work. When she had finished she looked toward him. In the shaded lamp-light his face was joyously eager; he was tapping his white teeth with his pencil, and his eyes were absorbed.

"Good night," she said timidly.

"Good night," he answered absently, without looking up.

2.

He worked very late over his permanencies and awoke to bright sunshine, and the fragrance of fresh coffee.

He had divided the room in two by a heavy green curtain. The part with the door and the little *cabinet de cuisine* was the living part; the other was for sleeping. This he had divided still further by a grey curtain so that they each had a little compartment with a bed. The girl seemed doubtful of this arrangement at first.

"I don't see why it matters," he said indignantly, "whether there is a curtain or a three foot wall between us. Remember we are brother and sister. Honour and decency are better protectors than bolts and bars."

With this fine sentiment he disposed of her objections. There was no doubt he thoroughly believed it; and when he retired more or less weary behind his curtain, he slept as calmly as if he were alone in the room.

On this particular morning, having slept late and well, he rose light-heartedly, singing as he dressed. When he entered that part of the room that served them in common, he found that Margot had set his breakfast on the table, and was preparing to go to market. She was dressed like the women of the country, with a shawl over her bright hair. Each morning she would ask him:

"What would you like for lunch?"

"Oh, anything; I don't care."

"No, don't say you don't care. You know I like to please you."

Then he would think profoundly. "I tell you what, ... Give me ... a surprise."

With a gesture of despair she would go away. She was rather a good cook, but he seldom noticed what he ate. Now he stopped her as she was going out. "Had your breakfast?"

"Oh, yes, long ago."

"I wish you would call me in the morning so that we can take it together. I like you to talk to me while I'm eating. Sit down and talk now. You're not in such a hurry. Come, take a cigarette."

"You know I never smoke."

"I wish you would. It's so chummy. Anyway, sit down. That's right. Your hair's lovely when it glistens in the sunshine. You know, you're looking ever so much better already. Your chin is getting round, and there is actually a delicate rose colour in your cheeks. Your face is far more English than French. Some day if you'll pose for me, I'll paint you. This coffee's awfully nice...." As he rattled on in his gay manner, the girl listened with a grave smile. There was a curious look in her eyes, a tenderness almost maternal.

"I say," he went on, "I didn't tell you I went to the Pension Paoli yesterday. I had a talk with Terese, the black-eyed Terese. She gave me some news."

"Yes, what?"

"You remember that unsavoury sort of a chap who made such a bad impression on everybody,—I used to call him the Rat."

"I never liked him."

"Well, do you know what the mystery was that seemed to surround him? The poor harmless fellow was a priest, a *curé* who had slipped away from his flock, dressed in everyday clothes, and was having a good time. I don't blame him, poor devil. He wanted to be free, to taste life just once, before going back to his black skirts and his prayer-book. I expect

he's doing bitter penance for it now. He was recognized by an old abbé and there was no end of a row. He was haled off by two burly priests, crying like a child."

"It just shows how one should never judge people."

"And you remember those two Swede women?"

"They enjoyed eating so much."

"Yes, and they declared some one had entered their room and stolen money? That, too, was wrong. The mother came the other day to the pension and told madame the money had been found. The girl had put it between the pages of a very dull novel. When she came to finish the book she found the bills. So all's well that ends well." The girl said nothing. She remembered that he had once suspected her of taking this money, and the thought still pained her. "Come on," he continued gaily, "let's go out together. Remember to-day I leap into the arena. To-day I make my début as a gambler."

3.

It was half past ten when Hugh entered the Casino.

The Rooms in the forenoon presented a very different aspect from the one with which he was familiar. The air, though stagnant, was not obnoxious. The rumble of voices was subdued to a discreet hum. Only five roulette tables were running. Every one had an air of knowing every one else. In place of the fever and scrabble of the afternoon there was a suave and amiable courtesy. The regular Monte Carloites were taking advantage of the morning calm to play their systems. Hugh stood by the table where the majority of the system players were. They were mostly ageing men, neatly dressed, bespectacled, business-like. The records in their tiny note-books were scrupulously kept from day to day. They played but seldom, and then generally with flat stakes. At the end of the season their books showed probably only modest gains. The little old lady who took down the numbers for the Monte Carlo Gazette worked at this table. Every day, year after year, she sat there, dressed in rusty black, looking rather sour. She made quite a lot of money by giving up her place for a small consideration to any who would pay for it.

Next to Hugh stood a very shabby old man. His trousers were baggy and frayed, his braid-trimmed coat of a pattern of a bygone day. He had a weak chin, bulging eyes, a heavy grey moustache, and a curious air of faded gentility. He had been pointed out to Hugh as an Italian nobleman, the Count Viviano, who had gambled away all his estates and now lived on a small pension. The old man stood for a long time gazing at the table in a strangely absorbed manner. Hugh, who saw things with an artist's eye, noticed that his hands had big veins and a glazed look. They trembled almost constantly and were the only sign of emotion in a figure otherwise calm.

Suddenly the old man began to fumble in the pocket of his waistcoat and drew forth a blue oblong placque representing a thousand francs. He waited till the ball had been spun, then reaching over unsteadily, placed it on the first dozen. He tried to look unconcerned. He lost. Again the ball was spun and again Hugh saw him fumble, draw out another pale blue placque, and place it tremblingly on the same dozen as before. Again he lost. The next time he put a blue placque on both the first and second dozen. Alas! the third dozen came. He seemed in doubt whether to stay or go away. His agitation was pitiable. Again the ball was spun. Many looked at him to see what he would do. Just at the last moment, he drew from another pocket two more blue placques, and put one on the first dozen, the other on the third. Was ever such infernal luck! The second dozen won.

Curious and commiserating glances were cast at him.

The old count looked dazed. With shaking hands he took from the inside of his coat a shabby pocket-book and drew from it all the money it contained, a hundred franc note and a few small ones. He threw them on the first dozen. Again he lost. He was broke.

And as he stood there like a man in a dream, as if to mock him, the first dozen came again and again. Six times it repeated, and each time the man seemed to grow older, more crushed, more hopelessly stricken. He continued to look at the table as if fascinated; then, with the saddest face Hugh had ever seen, he slowly left the room.

Another figure now attracted the attention of the onlookers. A tall man was plastering the table with louis and Hugh recognized Mr. Fetterstein. He looked the typical captain of industry, solid, powerful, dominating. His face, slightly

Jewish in type, was bold, and massive. His eyes changed from a twinkle of amusement to a look of profound concentration. There was something unshakable about him. He played imperturbably. When he lost, he laughed; when he gained, he seemed indifferent. At present he was winning. He had covered the number fourteen and all its combinations. Fourteen came. He repeated, again putting the maximum on fourteen. There was a murmur. Fourteen again. Once more he put the maximum on fourteen. The croupier who spun the ball looked nervous and worried. The *Chef* looked at him with a frown, as if to say, "There are thirty-five other numbers. As you value your promotion avoid the fourteen." Again the man spun. A great shout went up.... *Fourteen*.

As he was paid with the usual impressive deliberation, Mr. Fetterstein folded up the wad of *mille* notes he had gained and put them away. He had won over thirty thousand francs,—but what was that to him, a millionaire? He went on playing, but the croupier who had been throwing was changed.

Hugh saw many people whom he knew, among them the Calderbrook family. The ladies were playing a lively game and, even this early in the morning, looked rather excited. On his way out, he passed the forlorn Emslie girl in the atrium, waiting for her mother, and in the vestibule, he encountered Mr. Gimp rolling a cigarette. The little man nodded curtly. His puckered pink face and his snowy white hair gave the impression of frostiness.

When Hugh reached home he said to Margot:

"You know, I was so interested watching every one I forgot to play. Well, this afternoon ..."

4.

In the afternoon the trains and yellow busses from Nice had disgorged their tourist hordes and turned the Casino into a welter of humid humanity. There were cheap-trippers taking a flutter, skimmers from the slums of Nice, sight-seers from every land under the sun, flaunting *femmes de luxe*, evil faces of the underworld,—the whole mob of strange invaders which a Monte Carloite finds so little to his liking. As fourteen tables were running, Hugh soon found an opportunity to try his system. He made three wins in the course of two hours. In neither case had he to fall back on his progression. He was elated and having finished for the day, amused himself by making sketches of the crowd.

By and by he wandered to the first trente-et-quarante table where a big game was going on. An American millionairess was playing as high as the limit allowed. She had before her a heap of pink placques, like cakes of soap, representing five thousand francs each; she tossed them around as carelessly as if they had no value. At one end of the table, Hugh noticed a tall distinguished-looking Englishman with an eye-glass; at the other, the Twitcher.

Hugh was admiring the superb insouciance of the American woman, who had lost twenty-five thousand francs in five minutes when he suddenly saw the Twitcher throw a bundle of mille notes on the red. There were evidently twelve of them, a maximum. By Jove! the Twitcher certainly was going it! Hugh watched with breathless interest. At the same time he saw the Englishman throw a similar sum on the black. The table was covered with big notes and placques. Every one awaited the turn of the cards with breathless interest.

"*Couleur perd.*"

The Twitcher had lost his twelve thousand francs. His face grew very pale. Then he reached forward. Just as the croupier was about to rake in his wad of bills he grabbed them up again, and crammed them into his pocket.

"I made a mistake," he announced calmly. "I meant to play on black."

"But Monsieur has lost...."

"I don't care. I've got my money back. If you want to get it, you will have to take it from me. But I warn you I will make a desperate fight for it. It is all I have in the world. If I lose it, I am ruined. I will then kill myself. All I have, I have lost in this cursed den of thieves. You won't get this without a struggle. And again, I warn you, I am armed."

The crowd fell back, seemingly admiring his daring. Two lackeys in blue and gold advanced threateningly, but the Twitcher put his hand to his hip pocket in a significant fashion.

"Look out," he said quietly. "I am going away. If any one lays a hand on me I will defend myself."

Then with a leisurely gait and an air of triumph he walked out of the Casino.

The whole thing was over in a moment. The inspectors came crowding round. The floor director, a bandy-legged, pot-bellied man with a stubby grey beard, hurried up; he was joined by another man with goggle eyes and a face like a mulatto. They talked, gesticulated, shrugged their shoulders. There was nothing to be done. A fracas on the floor of the Casino, that was inconceivable! Legally they could not claim the money. It was a gambling debt. Let it go!

So the storm subsided. The croupiers recovered from their stupefaction. They raked in the other winnings and paid the winners. Among the latter was the tall Englishman who had played on black. He did not seem to understand French. He kept saying: "Mo-ah! Mo-ah!" and point to his stake. They paid him one by one twelve crisp bills of one thousand francs each. He deliberately folded up the notes and went away.

That evening Hugh returned from a walk by way of Beausoleil. Outside of a café of the lower sort, he saw two men smoking. In spite of the darkness, he recognized the Twitcher and the tall Englishman. Hugh was so curious, that he sat down and ordered something to drink. He had not waited long when two men approached from the other direction. They were Bob Bender and the detective Krantz. Bob stepped before the drinking couple.

"Well, you brought it off," he said in a not unfriendly way.

The tall Englishman laughed. "Yes, damn you, we got twelve thousand out of you."

Krantz stepped forward. "Let me congratulate you, gentlemen. It is not every one gets ahead of us so easily. But we do not forget. I would strongly advise you to go away immediately." Again the Englishman laughed.

"Bah! What do we care for you now? We have crossed the frontier. We are on French soil. We snap our fingers at your little tin-pot Principality."

Krantz smiled pleasantly. He spoke in his silky voice, rubbing his hands together. Again Hugh noticed that the little finger of the right was missing.

"We know all about you," he purred. "We have your record in France, England, America. We don't want you here. You had better get out." "What if I refuse?"

"Refuse! Well ..." Krantz rubbed his hands still harder and continued in his cheerful, chirping way, "Listen ..." With his lips he blew a shrill, peculiar whistle. From the shadow across the road half a dozen dark shapes detached themselves.

"After all," said Krantz, "the frontier is very near, the other side of the street, to be precise. It would be easy to take you over there by force. Once we have you, ... there's no saying what might happen."

The Englishman made a grimace. He seemed to reflect. Finally he banged his hand on the table.

"You go to hell," he said.

Krantz blandly said good-night, and taking Bob Bender by the arm went quietly away. The mysterious shadows across the street melted again into the deeper shadow. But the Twitcher and the Englishman did not laugh any more. Presently the Englishman rose.

"I expect he's right. We'd better go."

Hugh went thoughtfully homeward.

"Well, that's one system," he said to himself, "that will take some beating."

5.

In the weeks that followed he had no difficulty in making his three louis a day, and in no case did he need to go beyond the fourth term of his progression. It was sometimes difficult to find the combination necessary for his *coup*; but once he found it, he played with an almost mechanical assurance and considered the louis of gain as good as in his pocket. He had earned it.

His favourite among the rooms was the "Hall of the Three Graces." It was brilliant with many mirrors, and the chandeliers were like cascades of light. The air was better too. At the end table, sitting directly under the Three Graces, Mr. MacTaggart played his system. His grave air of a church elder seemed to be a standing reproach to what he called, "Them shameless hussies above ma heid."

In the pauses between play, Hugh became familiar with the strange characters of the place. He knew them by their nicknames, and made sketches of them in his note-book. He never wearied of watching these *détraqués* of the game. He would sit for hours on one of the couches of padded leather, forgetting to play in his absorbed interest.

Often after he had gained his "day," he would escape from the fetid air of the Rooms, from the sordid eyes in the mean faces, from the monotony of excitement, and seek a quiet corner of the Café de Paris. There he would sit and smoke, pervaded by a sense of utter content: his strenuous moment over. The Casino was paying for his tea, his cakes. The Casino was his banker, his provider, a charitable institution erected for his benefit. He looked at it, so peaceful in the afternoon sunlight. No hint of the scrabbling mob behind its biscuit-coloured walls.

Perhaps after all it was not so black as they painted it. Perhaps it did not do all the harm they claimed. People amused themselves, lost money they could afford to lose, went away satisfied. No, it was a very charming institution indeed. It was very good to him. It would give him all the money he wanted. He was drunk with success. He loved the place.

Then suddenly ... *woof!* his system went all to pieces.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SMILES AND FROWNS OF FORTUNE

1.

"I say, Margot, I think I'll go to the Casino to-night."

The girl looked at him in surprise. It had been his habit after supper to light his pipe and read until bedtime, or else work at his eternal permanencies. She had enjoyed these quiet evenings in the glow of the shaded lamp, bending over a bit of embroidery, listening to the puff of his pipe, and the rustle of his Daily Mail.

"I didn't make the 'necessary' to-day,—only a couple of louis. The Rooms were so squalid I got a beast of a headache, and had to take a walk on the hill. I'll get that extra win this evening."

"Oh, please don't go. Something tells me if you do you'll be unlucky."

"Nonsense. It's not a question of luck. My system is misfortune proof. Luck or no luck it will win. If you are lonely, why don't you go to the cinema, and amuse yourself?"

But Margot did not want to go out, so with a last glance at her sweet face under its coils of gold he left the room.

"Good little sort," he thought. "I'm really getting very fond of her."

As he emerged from the huddle of houses, a moon the shape and colour of a musk melon was rising from the sea. The two cement arms of the harbour held in their closed fists the harbour lights, one emerald, the other ruby.

"The green of hope," he thought, "aye, and the crimson of tragedy." He walked slowly up the steep hill, reflecting that three months ago he would have climbed it only with an effort. How this place had bucked him up! He must be careful though. Too much Casino, bad air, excitement,—that was already affecting him. Witness his splitting headache that afternoon. He doubted, though, if he could stay away from it now. It certainly got one,—roulette! The great wheel which symbolized all the smaller wheels whirled you helplessly with it! It was like an eddy in which the players were circling, getting nearer and nearer the centre, until ... down to ruin. Ah! the Wheel! the Wheel! In the evening he found the Casino quite different from the rest of the day. The asthmatic system-players of the morning were in their beds; the cheap trippers and skimmers of the afternoon had returned to Nice; only four roulette tables were running and the quietness was almost startling.

This was the time when the great hotels poured forth their streams of wealth and fashion, the hour of the *élite*. Seated on one of the yellow divans beside the money changing booths, he watched the parade. The men wore dinner jackets and their faces were flushed with wine. They had been playing golf or tennis, or motoring in long, luxurious cars; now armed with tickets for the private rooms they came to cap the day with the excitement of losing a few hundred louis. With sparkling eyes and a fluttering air of excitement, their women followed them. Some of them were half naked, like savages. Many had the arms of washerwomen and the speckled shoulders of kitchen maids. Others were skraggy, with flat greenish busts and stringy necks. Each sought to outvie the other in the gorgeousness of her raiment. There were robes of shimmering beads, robes of rich brocade, robes of delicate lace, robes of exquisite embroidery, robes trimmed with gold, and robes hung with lustrous sequins. There were old ugly women in lovely dresses, worthless women with small fortunes on their backs. This luxury and extravagance had something barbaric about it. Hugh had never seen anything like it before. It seemed as if these people had dressed up purposely to amuse him.

"Who toils to keep it up?" he wondered. "What suffering and sacrifice lies behind it? It's enough to make a chap turn socialist."

After a while he rose. A number of women with elaborately painted faces were going from table to table, pretending to watch the game, but turning to gaze at some man player with a peculiar little smile. If he took no notice they would sidle off again.

Hugh saw many people he knew, among them Mrs. and Miss Calderbrook. The Calderbrook family seemed to live in the

Rooms now. This evening Mr. Calderbrook was not with them, and they were taking advantage of his absence to play with louis instead of five franc pieces. When Hugh saw them lose five louis, he shook his head in mock warning, but they were too engrossed to notice him. Their faces were flushed, their eyes excited. He saw Mrs. Calderbrook take a bill of five hundred francs from her purse and change it into red chips. He was wondering if she was going to risk it all at one time, when his attention was distracted; his own moment to play had come.

The even numbers had been up eight times running; then there had been a break to the odd; then another even. This was his chance. He put a louis on the odd. He lost. He put another louis on the odd. Again he lost. This time he was rather pleased, for it was his buffer stake, and if he had won he would have been where he started. He settled down to his defence. He put three louis on the odd. A loss. He increased it to six. Again a loss. It was beginning to be interesting. Only once before had he gotten so far in his progression. Still with calm assurance he put twelve louis on the odd. Curiously enough the number twelve came up. Lost! Then quite suddenly all his confidence deserted him. He began to get frightened. He fumbled in his pockets. The next stake was to be twenty-five louis. Quick! the ball was already spinning. He handed a note for five hundred francs to the croupier.

"Impair...."

Then he heard the monotonous cry of the spinner: "*Numero deux, pair, noir et manque.*"

It was incredible, a conspiracy against him. It seemed as if the odd numbers had ceased to exist. He was down to his last stake, fifty-two louis. As he threw it on the table a strange recklessness surged up in him, the irresponsibility that takes hold of the gambler and makes him risk his last dollar on the spin. He had a miserable moment of suspense, then with a nonchalant air the spinner twitched away the ball. *Number twenty....*

He had lost everything. He was dazed. The great Hall of Light seemed to be full of dark shadows, and the faces of those around him touched with mockery. He was turning to go when a hand gripped his arm. He beheld at his elbow the contumelious countenance of Mr. Gimp.

"How much d'ye want?" snapped the little man, opening a large pocket-book.

"Nothing. I've lost everything. Broke! Couldn't pay you if I borrowed."

"How much d'ye *want*?"

Hugh scarcely knew what he was saying. "I've lost two thousand. I'd probably win it back this time if I could go on. It can't always keep coming even."

"Here, take this two thousand."

"I don't want to."

"Take it, I say."

Hugh took the notes and threw them on the impair just as the ball was slackening its spin. "*Numero treize, noir, impair et manque.*"

He had won at last. He took from the table the four thousand francs, and returned Mr. Gimp his two bills, saying:

"You shouldn't have done that."

"I know I shouldn't."

"Well, I don't know how to thank you. You saved me. But there.... Bang goes my system."

"Mighty good job, too. Your system was no use. You were playing against a phenomenon. Don't you see the phenomenon was lying in wait for you, and sooner or later you were going to go up against it. Bah! this rotten place. Let's go into the atrium and have a smoke. When I see these fools all crazy over that rotten wheel I am ashamed of the human race."

Sitting on her usual seat near the door was the Emslie girl; she seemed very tired and started up every time any one came out.

"There!" said Mr. Gimp fiercely, "just look at that kid. Should be in her bed hours ago. Waiting for her fool of a mother who is playing like the devil in the *salon privé*. If you were to open that woman's head you'd find a roulette wheel instead of a brain."

As Hugh left the Casino the night air seemed delicious. The moon was now perfect in shape,—a moon worthy even of Monte Carlo, dappling the oily swell of the harbour with pools of playful quicksilver. He sat on a bench and watched it till his serenity returned.

When at last he entered their room, the lamp was turned very low and behind the grey curtain that divided them he heard the girl breathing gently.

2.

After breakfast next morning, Hugh sat figuring over his green book of permanencies. Finally he said:

"See here, Margot, I think I'll have to change my system."

"Why, what's the matter with it?"

"Well ... you see I have to walk about so much between the tables. It tires me out."

"I thought you didn't like to 'win too easily'?"

"Oh, I don't mind not winning easily."

"Ah! you've been losing."

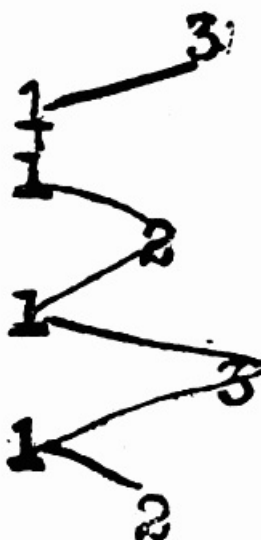
"No, I haven't. My capital's intact and I have five hundred francs of gain. But ... well, I'm tired of it. I want a change."

"What are you going to try now?"

"I call it a pattern system. You see I set the bank a task...."

"I *don't* see."

"Look here then. Look at this diagram."



"These figures represent the dozens arranged in three columns. They form a certain pattern, a pattern of seven. Now I sit comfortably at a table (no more walking for me), and take down numbers, arranging both the dozens and columns in three rows. When my figures begin to accumulate, I look back to see if I cannot find a coincidence between the pattern I am making, and the one that has gone before. When I find this, and the pattern duplicates as far as the sixth figure I simply bet

that it won't go as far as the seventh. That is to say, suppose I get a second set of figures similar to those I have set down here as far as the sixth, I simply bet against the repetition of the last. Am I clear?"

"Not very,—but I understand."

"What do you think of it?"

"Fantastic."

"Not at all. I am defying the bank to repeat the same combination of dozens or columns in a comparatively short space of time. The odds are overwhelmingly in my favour. You see in this game one has certain advantages over the bank. One can choose one's moment to enter, and one can retire when one wants. Also one can make a progression."

"Are you making one?"

"Yes, I begin by putting a hundred francs between the two dozens on which I am betting. If that should fail, I will increase to three hundred francs, and then if necessary to a thousand. In the first two cases I win fifty francs, in the third a hundred. I would always bet, of course, against the corresponding dozen or column of the combination I am following. In short, to finally beat me the bank needs to produce a coincidence of nine. That, you must admit, is extraordinary."

"It is a game of the devil. Anything may happen."

"Well, I'm going to get four wins a day. That will mean two hundred francs. At that rate in about ten days I will have your two thousand francs, and you can go back to Paris and start your little shop."

"You seem in a hurry to get rid of me."

"No, it's not that.... But you know we can't go on like this indefinitely. It would look queer. I have to think of your reputation."

"Don't bother about my reputation. As for your own, and the opinion of your friends ... well, I am very discreet, am I not? We never go out together."

"No, no one need ever know. And after all we have nothing to reproach ourselves with. We're playing the game like two good pals. Our consciences are clear."

He let the matter drop there; but the question of Margot's future worried him. He knew he would always be interested in her, and that it would hurt him if any ill befell her; he was beginning to think of her as if she were really his sister.

3.

Hugh found his new system absorbing, but very fatiguing. Looking back through rows of figures for coinciding groups was something of a mental strain. When, however, his opportunity came to play, he did so with calm certitude. In no instance was he beaten. It seemed as if the powers of correspondence exhausted themselves after the sixth term.

Sitting snugly at one of the tables with pencil and note book, he would lose all sense of his surroundings. He was alone with the wheel; the rest was a dream. Vaguely he was aware of players reaching over his shoulders, and of the monotonous voices of bored croupiers. Sometimes a dispute would arouse him from his distraction and amuse him a little; but though he often could have settled it, he never "buted in." It was none of his business. Also he never handed any one their winnings. The one time when he had done so he had handed to the wrong person. Fortunately it had been only a question of ten francs and the bank had promptly paid a second time. After that, however, when people asked him to pass money he gave them a rake and let them get it for themselves.

During the long hours at the table Hugh entered into conversation with his various neighbours, and made many of these gambling acquaintances so easily made, so easily unmade. Roulette is a destroyer of reserve; its courtesies mean nothing, and people who chat at the table, when they meet afterwards on the terrace, stare frigidly.

Of these acquaintances the only one with whom he became in any way friendly was a one-legged Irishman with red hair, Major Fitzoswald. He played a dashing game, always building around the number thirty-two. When he won he won

heavily; but more often he lost. He had a jolly little wife and four children, ranging from a baby to a girl of seven; and when he had finished gambling in the afternoon, he would hobble out of the Casino on his crutches and join them in the sand pit near the dove-cot. It was said that he had lost his leg in a glorious action on the Somme front.

One day Hugh was amazed to see Mr. Gimp actually playing. The little man was standing erect and business-like at the *trente et quarante* table opposite the American millionairess. She had a tiny mannikin in front of her as a mascot. On one finger was an immense diamond, and around her neck glimmered a double string of superb pearls. Her blonde beauty suggested pearls; and her wideset blue eyes, mobile mouth and very strong white teeth made her look like a happy child. Every time she played Mr. Gimp would play on the opposite chance. But while the honey-coloured beauty threw on heaps of placques, now rising to rose, now dropping to azure, Mr. Gimp played only a modest louis. Behind his hand he whispered to Hugh:

"This is the best system of all. It's known as 'playing the corpse.' You get opposite a big player and play the contrary. When they have to make a progression, you win on all its terms. It goes without saying they're dead ones from the start. The Casino will get their money. You're playing on the side of the Casino, that's all. And while the Casino is taking big risks, you are taking small ones. 'Playing the corpse,'—it's the only sure system I know. It's a shame to take the money. You know I hate gambling like hell; but if there's easy money lying round a man's a damn fool if he don't pick it up."

When Hugh returned late in the afternoon the beautiful American was still playing, and opposite her, methodically putting on his single louis, was the pertinacious Mr. Gimp.

4.

One day Hugh arrived home for luncheon looking exultantly happy. The table was neatly set, and the girl was in the little cabinet where she cooked.

"Hurrah! Margot. I've got something for you."

"I can't come for a minute. I'm cooking two soles I bought in the market. I saw you coming, so I put them on."

"All right. How jolly the place looks. How nice you keep everything. We'll both be sorry to leave it."

The girl turned suddenly. Her voice trembled.

"Leave it! Why?"

"Hang it, one can't stay here always. I'm feeling stronger than ever I did in my life. I want to get out and do things. And you?"

"I've never been so happy as I've been here."

"I really believe I can say the same. It's been awfully jolly. What a pity all pleasant things must end! We both have the future to face. But I'll take care you have your share of happiness. That's why I'm giving you this...."

"What is it?"

"Look out. The fish is burning. Finish frying and you'll see."

He threw an envelope on her plate, and she went back to the little gas-stove. He watched her with pleasure. She was so slim and trim in her pink apron, with her hair massed in shining coils round her head. She had so much of it that she scarcely knew what to do with it. He liked her eyes, too. They were a brave, sympathetic blue. Her face was English in its open frankness. It was wonderful how she had changed. A softness had replaced her sharp lines and the hollows had become curves. Her mouth had lost its hopeless look, and was now tenderly sweet.... He almost regretted what he was going to do. Well, she would always be his little sister; he would never lose sight of her.

She brought the fish and potatoes, and sat down. As she took up the envelope he watched her eagerly. She opened it and drew out two crisp bills for a thousand francs each. Her face grew pale.

"What's this?" she faltered.

"It's yours," he exulted. "I had a splendid morning. Got two hundred francs ever so easily. Now that I've made up the sum you need, you can start for Paris to-morrow if you like."

She pushed the money away from her.

"I don't want it. It's yours. I can't take it."

"What? Why, I won it for you! It was for you I gambled; for you I risked my capital. It's given me the rarest pleasure doing this for you; now you mustn't spoil all by refusing."

"But I do refuse," she cried fiercely. "It's your money. How can I take it?"

"Oh, rot! You'll make me cross in a minute. Granted it was an absurd idea on my part to make the Casino pay you back this money, what else was there to do? I couldn't leave you in the hole. I had to do something for you. This way appealed to me as being both original and amusing. Come now ... if you like, consider it a loan, you can pay me back some day. There! It's the solution of all your difficulties. It will establish you, perhaps be the beginning of a modest fortune. Think of that bright little bonnet-shop on the Boulevard du Montparnasse. How happy you'll be there. And I'll come and see you...."

"If I take it as a loan, will you stop gambling?"

"Oh, come now, that's absurd. Why should I? It really amuses me very much and I'm sure to win. The Casino owes me a living. It's like a bank from which I draw a little every day. It would be a shame to stop."

"You're like all the rest. I've seen it coming over you for some time. You're getting to think of nothing but roulette. You used to go for long walks, spend your time in the open air; now you're either in the Rooms or working over permanencies. In the end you'll lose everything."

"Nonsense. I tell you I understand the game now. I can get my living at it. It only needs prudence, patience, judgment. A man can start with five francs and win a fortune. The great mass of the people are fools. They play anyhow. But I tell you it takes brains to play that game. There are the laws of chance, the calculation of probabilities.... Oh, I know I can win. I tell you, I can win...."

"I've heard the others say that," she answered scornfully. "Once I thought the same. It's all an illusion. In the end it's ruin."

"All right. You won't take that money?"

"No."

He was angry. He wanted to shake her. The air was charged with hostility. "I'm sorry," he said. "You've made me feel like a fool." Rising he left the house. The two little crisp soles remained untasted on their plates.

CHAPTER FOUR

SHIFTS AND STRESSES

1.

In his irritation and perplexity, he went for a long walk by the shore.

"Confound the girl!" he thought. "What right has she to be so proud! Pride is for those who can afford it. There she was, sick, desperate, without one *sou*. I saved her from goodness knows what. And now, behold! When she ought to be humble, she throws up her head, turns independent, refuses my further help...."

With his stick he switched savagely at a clump of geraniums that stained a villa wall.

"Confounded fool that I was ever to have anything to do with her. These sudden quixotic impulses! They always lead to trouble. Damn! It was none of my business. Who could have blamed me if I had let her go her own way? And yet ... that would have worried me enormously. Her own way! What would it have been? I'd hate to think of any harm coming to her. No, I feel I am bound to protect her...."

He sat down and stared at the sea. He watched the same wave washing the same rock it had washed for centuries. Its monotonous persistency soothed his spirit.

"After all, she's a jolly, good little sort. She's made me feel a fool, though. She knew all along I was only gambling for her sake. She might have let me know she wouldn't take the money. Maybe the whole idea was silly, sentimental.... No, it wasn't. It was a good sporting proposition. Any other chap would have done it. Besides, it amused me. I got all the reward I wanted in the fun of winning. I made gambling a virtue instead of a vice. I played the knight-errant fighting for the fair lady with chips for a weapon and a roulette table for the field of battle."

He felt better. He rose and began to flip flat stones over the water.

"She's got to take the money. It's hers. I don't want it. Why won't she take it? If she had been a princess instead of a poor working girl I could have understood. I don't mind if she regards it as a loan. There's no harm in that. An honest loan. Haven't I been decent and honourable? Haven't I treated her with every respect? Haven't I been like a brother to her? Why can't she accept my aid? Ridiculous, I call it. Girls are funny. Hanged if a chap can understand them...." Having had enough of stone flipping, he lit a cigarette and resumed his seat on the rock.

"Well, what's to be done? The present state of affairs can't go on forever. I rather wish it could, though—it's been so nice having her there. She's made the place so homey, looked after me so well. Don't think I've ever been so happy. But there! It would be dangerous to go further. We have each our own way to make in the world, and our ways don't lie together. If she won't take the money I must do something else to help her. I have to go on helping her. Poor kid! She's had a devil of a time up to now. I'm sorry if I have hurt her feelings.... I'll go home and make it up."

But instead of going home he found himself drawn irresistibly to that great "centre of depravity" (as Mr. Gimp called it), the Casino. He was leaning moodily against one of the columns of the atrium when the doors leading to the Opera House belched forth a weird crowd of Monegasques.

The opera is one of Monte Carlo's delusions, for though it is widely advertised as one of the attractions of the place, a large proportion of the seats are given away to the natives, those descendants of Sæacen pirates who now plunder the visitor by modern methods. It is as if the company that exploits the Principality, having planted the Casino in their midst and forbidden them to enter the gambling rooms, was trying to make up to them in other ways. The same seats are filled night after night by swarthy folk, barbarously bedecked in flaunting finery. The laundress or lodging-house keeper of the Condamine smirks across the stalls at the butcher or the baker of the upper town, who, in turn, bows deeply to the bureaucrat who lives on the Rock, and is wondering if his dress shirt will last the season without another washing.

As Hugh watched the crowd he heard a voice suddenly address him:

"You're not going into that monkey-show, are you?"

Looking round he saw Mrs. Belmire seated near him, holding an unlighted cigarette. She wore a gorgeous gown of egg-yolk yellow and pea-pod green. Under a modified Gainsborough hat, her mahogany-tinted hair rippled over her shell-pink ears.

"Give me a light, please! I'm dying for a smoke. Just been in the Rooms and lost fifty louis. Isn't it silly of me? I've seen you playing quite a lot lately. Have you been lucky?"

Hugh was discreet. "No, not very. I play a small game. Just for chicken feed."

"Well, as long as you don't lose, you're lucky enough. I say, you can take me for tea to the Café de Paris, if you like."

Hugh was flattered. They found a place in the restaurant from which they could watch the dancing. Mrs. Belmire looked rather stunning, and he was proud of being her escort. They listened to the confident music, ate chocolate cake and drank insipid tea.

"I bought two new hats to-day," said Mrs. Belmire. "They cost a lot of money. I'm sure when I get them home I'll hate them. I always like to have a pal with me, when I chose a new hat. I wish *you'd* been with me to help me choose."

Hugh expressed a polite regret, with an uneasy feeling that his privilege in such an event might not be confined to choosing. Mrs. Belmire went on to talk about herself with an engaging frankness and almost childlike egoism. She elaborately displayed the confidence that is supposed to engender confidence; but Hugh was cautious.

"I suppose you're going to the automobile show to-morrow," she said. "You're crazy about cars, aren't you? I am. When my husband was alive, I used to drive our car myself. I drive a good deal here. My men friends are very nice to me, and take me for such jolly spins. You must take me some afternoon. By the way, where do you hang out now?"

"I'm living in the Condamine," said Hugh vaguely.

"Are you? You're lucky. I have had to give up my apartment. Lost so much playing at the club that I had to draw in my horns. I'm now staying at an Italian pension on the sea front,—Pizzicato's. It's very nice. The cooking's Italian. To-day we had eels for lunch; I didn't know they were eels till I had finished, or else I don't believe I should have enjoyed them so much. You must lunch with me some day. I had General Jenkinson yesterday. You don't know him, do you?"

"No, I don't think I do," said Hugh with a doubtful inflection.

"Delightful man. Oh, I say, my friend who looks so like you, Paul Vulning, is on his way here. You'll probably meet him."

All the time she talked—and it was principally of herself—Hugh could see that she was trying to find out more about him. For his part it pleased him to baffle her. Her manner was breezy, her voice ringing; he liked her, and judging by the smiling regard in her nut-brown eyes she liked him. It was nearly seven o'clock when she said: "There now, you've been awfully decent to me. Perhaps, you wouldn't mind driving me to my hotel."

Hugh called a voiture and accompanied her to the Pension Pizzicato. At the door she held his hand.

"I say, if you aren't very comfortable where you're staying, why not come here? I wish you would. There's such a nice room next mine, and not too dear. Do say you'll take it."

Hugh hesitated. "I'll think over it."

"Yes, do. And I say,—won't you lunch with me to-morrow?"

"I'm afraid I can't. I've got a friend coming to see me."

"Bring your friend, too. Tell him you know a very jolly Englishwoman you would like him to meet."

"I'll see. I'll ask my friend."

She shook his hand warmly. So as not to look cheap he took the voiture back. It cost him twenty francs, which with the thirty francs for tea made fifty.

"A charming woman," he thought, "but expensive,—damned expensive. I mustn't cultivate her."

2.

He had dinner at Quinto's Restaurant. He knew that Margot would be waiting for him at home, but his meeting with Mrs. Belmire had made him a little arrogant. He resolved to give the girl a lesson.

"Let her worry" he said to himself; "it will do her good."

After dinner he had intends to take a walk, but the Casino drew him like a magnet. Good old Casino! So friendly, so inviting, so generous. Down the long, pansy-patterned sward of the garden, between the proud palms he could see its portico, goldenly aglow. The big yellow hotel-bus from Cap D'Ail dashed up to the door, small figures in evening dress got out and mounted the seven carpeted steps. He was conscious suddenly that he, too, wanted to play. Yes, more than anything in the world he wanted to gamble.

More brilliant than ever seemed the "Hall of Light." Nearly all the men were in evening dress. Perhaps it was the influence of Mrs. Belmire, but for the first time Hugh felt out of place in his serge suit.

"I must get a dinner jacket," he thought, "and all that goes with it." Then came a second thought: "Why not make the bank buy me one? If I can win a thousand francs! By Gad! I'll try it."

He had his capital, two thousand francs, in his pocket. He felt strangely elated. Perhaps it was the flush of his recent success, perhaps the flask of Chianti he had taken with his dinner. He changed a note of five hundred francs into the red counters that represent louis, and began to play a game between two tables. He bet that one table would not repeat the colour that had just come up on the other. When he lost he made a progression. It was lively and exciting, and after playing an hour he found his twenty-five louis had increased by ten.

Two hundred francs for his dress suit in sixty minutes,—that wasn't bad. Now with his winnings he could afford to be a little reckless; so as the impair at one table had come up seven times running, he played pair with a hundred francs,—and lost. Cheerfully he put another hundred on pair for the next spin: he lost. Too bad! All his winnings gone. He felt nettled. He would get them back quickly enough. He would go on backing pair for the break in the run. He put on a hundred: impair. He doubled: again impair. He martingaled to four hundred: alas! still impair.

His feeling of resentment had now given way to one of alarm. He had lost seven hundred. Then just as the ball was thrown, moved by a sudden desperate impulse, he tossed the rest of his capital, thirteen hundred francs, on the table. There ... if he won, he would gain six hundred francs; if he lost, he would have—the emotion. He felt his heart beating thickly. He saw a woman close by turn and look at him curiously. He contrived a careless smile. Then, inexorable as fate, he heard the colourless voice of the croupier: *Thirteen*. Impair again; he had lost.

He stood looking stupidly at his little pile of money, his no longer. As if to torment him the croupier raked it in with what seemed an unnecessary show of indifference. It had happened all so quickly. He was stunned, sick. He looked round, but there was no Mr. Gimp to save him this time. He felt at that moment he would have traded his soul for money to go on. A run of fourteen on impair,—it was incredible.

The woman who had glanced at him was a little old Jewess known as the "Swallow." She was dressed in rusty fragments of black crêpe, held together by a host of safety pins. She had a bit of pale blue silk wound in a weird fashion about her throat, and another bit of the same in her musty black bonnet. On her hands she had black lace mittens over rusty black gloves, from the fingers of which her nails emerged. Her face, covered with a white veil and a thick coating of bluish-white powder, was precisely like the waxen face of a corpse.

As his stake was swept away, Hugh saw this ghoulish creature begin to play on the pair and win time after time. She was taking advantage of his bad luck. Pair came six times running. He went into the refreshment room and ordered a brandy and soda.

While he was drinking it, the old Jewess waddled in. The black tail of her dress, which gave her her name, wiggled after her. She ordered coffee, then fumbling in a mildewed looking bag, took from it the black stump of a cigar and lit it carefully. She sat puffing her cigar, and watching Hugh, the black eyes in her corpse-like face snapping with pure malice. He gulped down the rest of his brandy and went out quickly. He hated the place, loathed it.

As he descended the long, sloping road to the Condamine, the lights seemed to glitter in cruel mockery. The harbour lamps turned to green and red serpents wriggling on the varnished blackness of the water; the lamps of the quay thrust downward silver octopus-arms. Everything was reptilian, abhorrent. He was ruined.

Softly he crept up to the familiar room. The lamp was turned low and a simple supper set for him. In every corner he could see some evidence of Margot's neatness and care. She was sleeping; he heard her steady breathing from behind the curtain. For the first time he pulled it aside a little, and peered in. Her hair was a bright disorder on the pillow. She had been crying a good deal for her eyes were red and swollen. He would have liked to waken her, to beg her forgiveness. As he turned away he saw on the table where he had left it, the envelope containing the two thousand francs.

The sight hardened him. She was still too proud to take it. He, too, could be proud. If it came to a contest of wills, he would prove himself the stronger. He sat down, sullen, bitter, brooding. Then temptation came to him. He looked at the money lying in the envelope. It was hers, absolutely hers but ... why not borrow it, play with it, win back what he had lost? He felt sure he could win this time,—sure.

Bah! what a demoralizing business gambling was! Here he was throwing all his pride to the winds, wanting to sneak away with this money that was to establish her in business, to risk it on the tables. How ashamed he would be if she knew! But she need not know. He could return it in an hour's time. After all, in a sense, was it not his? Had he not a right to borrow it? He took it up, then laid it down again.

"No, damn it! It's not playing the game."

Then after another spell of morose musing, his hand went out to it once more.

"Well, there's no use leaving it there. I might as well put it in my pocket."

He did so, and then continued to sit moodily staring at the lamp. He began to fidget restlessly. Finally he said:

"I don't feel a bit sleepy. I'll just go back to the Casino and watch awhile."

Already, having money in his pocket, he began to feel better. As he climbed the long hill, he knew quite well what he was going to do. Even as he entered the "Hall of Light" he was thinking:

"The pair played me a scurvy trick to-night. It owes me a good turn now."

Going to the same table he laid a thousand francs on pair. He lost.... He was becoming callous. These flimsy bits of paper no longer represented real money. He threw the second of them on pair. If he lost, what matter! He would then be finished, purged clean, cured of gambling forever. A good job too. Let him lose.... He won. He saw them lay a thousand franc counter beside his bill. He looked at the two contemptuously. With a nod to the croupier he left them there for the next spin. He even strolled away a little and watched the play at the neighbouring table. A curious and thrilling sensation this,—to know that your fate is being decided behind your back. Looking round, as if casually, he saw that the ball had dropped and that they were not raking in his money. Then he saw them add to it two other counters of a thousand each. With a hand that trembled a little he took up four thousand francs and went home.

The lights were joyous again, the place adorable. So he thought, as he hurried to their quiet room. Softly he replaced the two thousand francs in the envelope. He listened again to her breathing. Once more he peeped through the curtain. Her face was like that of a tired, fevered child. He felt a curious surge of affection for her, a warmth that was nigh to tenderness. With a happy sense of her nearness, he sought his own bed and immediately fell asleep.

3.

On rising next morning, he found she had set the table for breakfast, but the envelope was gone.

"I'm going away," she told him. "I'll do anything you ask. I don't want to be a bother to you."

"Don't think I want to be rid of you. Still you must see that, all things considered, it will really be for the best."

She was pale, but seemed cheerful and resigned. All day she went about making her preparations for departure.

"I'll take the train for Paris to-morrow," she announced.

He was unprepared for the suddenness of her going.

"Oh, not to-morrow," he said; "wait till the day after. We'll spend to-morrow together, go picnicking."

She agreed and they took the train next morning to La Turbie. They made a fire among the rocks and ate a cold pâté, cheese and fruit, as happy as two children. Hugh went to get some water to make tea. When he returned, he found the girl cowering at the foot of a big rock. She had slipped and fallen, while gathering flowers. The distance was about ten feet. She was all right, she assured him, excepting her foot which hurt her badly. She could not walk, so he had to lift her and carry her to the road. He was greatly distressed. At the village he got a *voiture* and they returned slowly to Monte Carlo.

He summoned a doctor who said that she had sprained her ankle badly and must rest for a week or two without putting her foot to the ground.

"That's very awkward," she told the doctor. "I intended going to Paris to-morrow."

"Impossible, madame," he said; Hugh also echoed the word, "Impossible." She submitted to this decision with a resignation that was almost too cheerful. Hugh was sympathetic gentleness itself. He did the marketing with the joyousness of a boy, and even attempted to cook under her direction. Whenever he found himself free, he hastened to the Casino to gamble; roulette was rapidly becoming an obsession with him.

Propped with pillows in the big wicker arm-chair he had bought her, Margot would sit and watch him. How his teeth gleamed when he laughed. She loved the look of him, tall, slim, with his fair hair brushed smoothly back, his fine sensitive face, his eloquent dark eyes. He made a graceful picture even when swathed in a white apron and frying eggs.

"He is so good, so kind, so patient," she sighed. "My conscience hurts me. Oh, if he only knew I slipped from that rock on purpose."

CHAPTER FIVE

THE GAMBLER'S PROGRESS

1.

In two weeks Margot was able to limp about; and, as nothing more was said about her departure, she quietly reassumed her household duties, Hugh was happy. He was free to gamble. Morning, afternoon and evening he was at the Casino. He invented fantastic systems and enthusiastically tried them out, or like a hawk hovered over a table watching for a likely chance. A picker-up of unconsidered trifles, he called himself. He was patient, prudent, intelligent. He believed in the calculation of chances; and, best of all, he had an intuition that was reasonably reliable. He loved the game, but most of all he loved to turn out his pockets in the morning, and to hand Margot a fistful of money with the remark: "There! that's for the house. By Gad! it's a great thing to live on the fat of the land at the cost of the Casino."

One day while doing her marketing the girl was stopped by a tall dark man. She stared a moment. She could scarcely believe her eyes: Florent Gamier. How changed! He was stout, prosperous-looking, even pompous. He had a fancy waistcoat, with a heavy gold chain, a broad-brimmed Borsolino, and a diamond pin sparkling in a rather loud tie. Yes, he was a big, handsome, important-looking man.

"Ha! ha! You are surprised, my little Margot," he laughed. "I'm altered, am I not? When you saw me last, I was the lean Parisian workman. You remember I was thrown into prison. That rascal Popol,—he croaked in Laboisiniere. Black smallpox. Good job! I'd have killed him when I got out. Well, soon after that, my uncle, a big contractor in Lyons, died leaving me everything. I'm a rich man now."

"Then you're not a socialist any more?"

"*Bon sang!* No! How can I be? I'm a *patron*. Socialists don't believe in *patrons*. No one remains a socialist after he has acquired a little property. It changes one's ideas entirely. Socialism is for those who have nothing and don't see any prospect of having anything, except by grabbing from those who have. We're all on the grab, the Socialist as much as every one else. Oh, I know them. The leaders are exploiters of the proletariat. Socialism is only a stepping stone to political power."

They were in the market place, close by the rock of Monaco. Margot had a *filet* of vegetables on her arm, a shawl on her head. As he talked Florent gesticulated, a big diamond ring flashing on his brown hand.

"Yes," he went on, "socialism is based on a wrong conception of human nature. It believes that if you scratch the man, you find the saint; whereas what you really find is the savage. Human nature is selfish and nothing will ever change it. Socialism believes in the unselfishness of human nature. That's its fundamental error. Then again, it's contrary to justice. It believes in paying all workers equally. The good worker is to receive the same wage as the poor. That is unjust. Yet the moment you begin paying one man more than another you institute capitalism.... But there! Come, let us sit at that café under the arches and talk of yourself. What are you doing? Not married, I hope."

"No, I'm housekeeper to an English gentleman."

"Ah! I'm not married either. Not for want of chances though. Somehow there's no one I fancy. Listen, Margot,—let's go to Nice this afternoon, if you can get away from your place. Say it's your cousin. Do come. We'll have a good time."

After supper that night as Hugh sat pouring over his permanencies, the girl looked up from her sewing.

"You will be surprised to hear I had an offer of marriage this afternoon."

He gazed at her abstractedly. "No, I'm not surprised. You're really awfully sweet, you know. I expect you've had many. Well, I hope he's a fine chap."

"Yes, he is. He has a big business and makes lots of money."

"Good. That's the great thing,—money! You know, I think this system I'm working on will make lots of money. Already it's made a fortune on paper. Well, when's it coming off?"

"What?"

"The marriage, of course."

"Oh, I've not accepted him. I don't want to marry. I'm too happy as I am."

"What! Refuse such a good offer! Are you crazy?"

"Maybe. You see I'm foolish enough to think that one should love the man one marries, and I don't love this one."

"I accept the rebuke. Well, my dear girl, don't make any mistake. At the same time I'd be sorry to lose you just yet. We seem to rub along so nicely together."

"Do we? Then you don't want me to marry?"

"Why, certainly. If you find the right man. My dear child, your happiness will always be my first consideration."

"Do you still want me to go back to Paris?"

"Please yourself about that. I must admit I'm beginning to get so used to you I'd miss you awfully."

With that he took his hat and went off to the Casino. She was used to his brusque ways, but she looked after him rather anxiously. He seemed to think of nothing now but his hateful roulette. At meal-time he ate abstractedly and over his cigarette he stared thoughtfully at columns of figures. He took little notice of her. She was jealous; jealous of a game of chance, jealous of the wheel.

2.

He was, indeed, becoming more and more engrossed. He spent hours talking to that profound student of roulette, Galloway MacTaggart. One evening he told the big spectacled Scotchman of the time he had so nearly come a cropper.

"Ah! ma lad," said MacTaggart, "if it's the simple chances ye want tae play, don't play the pair and the impair. They're the maist treacherous o' the three. The black and red are the maist popular. The colour catches folk's fancy. But for steady, logical playin', play the passe and the manque. There's no many do it, but Ah've tested it oot, an' it's the maist conseistent o' the three. I can't tell ye why, but there ye are."

Mr. Gimp put him onto another twist in the game. "When you see a big bunch of money staked on one of the simple chances, put a louis on the opposite one. You'll have a win three times out of five. It stands to reason. You're playing with the bank instead of against it. And you know the bank's winning a million a week."

Learning a little here, and a little there, Hugh became more and more identified with that crafty band that contrives to make a living out of the Casino. Their numbers are few but their tenacity undeniable. Year after year these lean, neat men and fat, frowsy women manage with a few hundred francs of capital to scratch up the daily louis or so necessary to provide them with food, shelter, and clothing. They are known as the Limpits, because they hang on. Their faces are anxious until they have made what they call "the material"; then they relax pleasantly.

He was a member of the inner circle, one of those who meet at the Casino as at a club, discussing the gossip of the moment, the latest plunger, the latest *decavé*, the latest suicide. Jarvis Tope was the recognized president of the Casino Gossip Circle. He seemed to know everything and everybody.

"You remember," he said one day, "that Italian nobleman, the Count Viviano, old, dried-up, proud-looking fish; said to have gambled away lands, castles, fortunes over these tables? Well, he was found last week in a bare room in Beausoleil; nothing in it at all, nothing. He was lying stark naked on the floor, a perfect skeleton. Literally starved to death.... Ah! there's the Princess. I see she has pawned her set of sables. Poor thing! Excuse me, I must go and inquire after her health."

He toddled after a weird looking Russian woman who was said to have had all her family massacred by the Bolshevics.

Hugh became more and more conscious of a growing air of suspicion in the Rooms. The inspectors seemed to be keeping an unusually close watch scrutinizing all who played with unwonted keenness. There was an anxious expression on the

faces of the directors who emerged from the mirror doors that open by hidden springs. And one day in a circular window high over the "Hall of Lights," Hugh saw a peering face; that of Krantz, the great Krantz, and he, too, looked anxious.

It was Mr. Gimp who enlightened him. Mr. Gimp took from his pocket a reddish counter with "20" marked on it in silvery letters.

"What's that? Tell me?" he asked, handing it to Hugh.

"Why, it's a chip for a louis,—Casino money."

"Yes, it's a chip for a louis, but is it Casino money?—that's the question—I don't know. You don't know. They don't know. Nobody knows."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it may be Casino money, or it may be an exact imitation. When I say *exact* I mean so perfect that not even an expert with a magnifying glass can tell the difference. You couldn't even call it a counterfeit, for it may be a duplication of Casino money. Don't you see what they're up against? Since the war they can't play with silver and gold. They've got to issue these damn things and any crook can make them. Once they're in circulation who's going to tell them from the genuine ones?"

"But can they do nothing to check it?"

"What can they do? If it was a case of the big blue hundred franc chips they might keep some sort of tabs on them. They are all numbered and the numbers only run up to ten thousand. But when you come to the louis counters there must be about a million of them and they have no distinctive mark of any kind. It's them that make the Casino people such an easy mark. You see notices all over the place imploring you to cash in before you leave the building, but half of the players don't do it. They take the chips away in their pockets. They are used around the town like cash; they are accepted as payment for hotel bills. It's impossible to keep track of them. Why, they say there are over a hundred thousand francs worth of false counters in circulation right now. And the number's increasing every day. There's a gang hard at work this very minute shooting them out. I tell you, son, it's one of the slickest gangs that ever hit this dump. No one knows who they are. I may be one of them. You may be one of them."

"Thank you."

"Oh, I'm speaking just to demonstrate my point. No one knows anything about any one else in this place. For all I know you may be in the pay of the police, or for all you know I may be. Between friends, though, I'm neither a crook nor a detective, but just a common or garden boob—like yourself."

"They must be worried, the outfit upstairs?"

"Yes, I guess they're lying awake nights, some of 'em. For don't you see, a man can play with the counterfeit chips, and if he loses, no matter. But if he wins they pay him real chips and he is in right. He goes on calmly playing with the bank's own money. Oh, it's a cinch! And the point of the joke is that there is no law against it. You're not counterfeiting money, you're counterfeiting counters. And for gambling purposes, too. Why, if they found you out, I don't believe they could legally do anything to you. Anyway they would never bring such a case into court. They ain't seeking publicity of that kind. Nop, the worst they could do would be to fire you over the frontier and take care you never came back. I tell you I rather admire the bunch that are putting this thing over. If I was broke and desperate, I'd do the same."

"And what do you suppose the Casino crowd are doing about it?"

"Everything they can. Taking away the cards of every one they suspect. Watching us all. Krantz is a cute one. It's only a question of time before he gets on.... By Christopher! pipe that man coming out of the Rooms. That man's your double; that's the Honourable Paul Vulning."

CHAPTER SIX

A SLAVE OF THE WHEEL

1.

Looking in the direction in which Mr. Gimp's finger pointed Hugh saw a tall, slim man sauntering across the hall. He had fair hair, brushed smoothly back, and features of the conventional English regularity.

"He's like you and yet he ain't," commented Mr. Gimp. "You're fresh and he's a bit used up. He's just what you'd be like in ten years' time if you went the pace something fierce. A gay dog! He's got a villa up on the hill. They say there are strange goings on at that same villa. He's got a swell car, too. He owes all over the place, but he always seems to have heaps of cash to spend. That's Mrs. Emslie speaking to him. A terrible woman, she is. I expect she's trying to borrow from him. She'd do anything for money, that woman. She's getting so desperate."

"Pity for the daughter!"

"Yep, poor kid. Say, I saw her on the terrace early this morning, all alone in the corner beside the baths. So I went up and I says: 'Well, Honey, how goes it?' She turned round, and blamed if she wasn't crying. 'Couldn't be worse,' she says. 'We've lost everything. Mother won't stop. She's borrowing from all sorts of horrid people. I think she's mad. I don't know what's going to become of us.'"

"What will become of them?"

To this Mr. Gimp replied only by an eloquent shrug of his shoulders.

Hugh watched Paul Vulning with a curious fascination. As Vulning stared superciliously at the crowd Mrs. Emslie talked to him feverishly, trying to hold his attention. Then they sauntered away together.

"You see that big jolly man," Mr. Gimp observed, "the one with the black skullcap. Well, that's the slickest player ever hit this skin-game joint. That man never loses. They call him 'Cheero,' because every time the zero comes up he calls out: 'Cheero.' That man's always smiling. He goes about his business quietly, but believe me, he's just salting away the dough. He claims he can hypnotize the croupiers and make them throw where he wants."

"What rot!"

"No more rot than lots of other systems.... See that tall woman in grey just crossing the hall. Nobody knows who she is, and what's more, nobody's ever seen her face. She always wears that thick veil. They call her *Number One*, because she goes from table to table, always playing on the number one. At night she goes off to Nice in a covered car. Some say she's an Indian Princess, some say it's cancer. Any way, nobody knows what's behind that veil. She's one of the Casino's mysteries."

"What queer characters!"

"Queer! Why, we all get queer if we stay here long enough. I'm queer. You'll get queer. MacTaggart's getting queerer every day. Yep, it's a queer place.... Say, if I was a writing man I could make a dozen books out of it. There's a mine of material here. It's fantastic; it ain't real. It's a stage show. Yes siree, it's the queerest place on earth."

They sauntered over to the "Hall of Gloom," and sat on a padded bench near the door of the private rooms. As they watched the stream of people coming and going, Hugh noticed two ladies, one matronly, the other old and decrepit. They were dressed alike, with big roses in their hats and feather boas.

"Mother and daughter," said Mr. Gimp. "They're known as the two Roses. The mother's over eighty, but she simply cannot stay away from the Rooms. She sits at the table, her face level with the cloth, her hands clutching a few counters. Sometimes she has fits and has to be carried out. She should be on her knees in some church instead of goggling and gasping over that bloody board. ... There was another old lady, nice, serene, gentle, fat, who used to be known as 'Queen Victoria,' because she resembled the late Queen. She held a kind of levée every day in the Rooms. But her friends took her home to England, and they say she nearly died of lonesomeness there. There's lots like that, old folks tottering on the

edge of the tomb. They'd die in the Rooms if you'd let em.... Just look at that table over there. There's a man that's blind and beside him a woman that's paralyzed. I tell you, folks come here that have to be carried to the table. They're half dead."

"Do many die in the Rooms?"

"Suicide? Not on your life. It's considered bad form. As the English say: 'It's a thing that's simply not done. ...' By God! if I wanted to do it, I'd give 'em a jar. I'd go to that centre table and lean well over the wheel; then I'd start pumping lead into my bean. I'd cover that table with gore. A bucket of blood. I'd spatter my brains over the damned croupiers. I can see the *Chef de Partie* wiping them out of the corner of his eye...."

"What a ghastly idea! I hope you're not seriously thinking of such a thing."

Mr. Gimp cackled with laughter. "You don't know me, son. I'm not that sort. Still I've got a kind of idea in my old head I'll make a sensational exit. I have a notion that when I go, I'll go with a bang. I don't just know how, but there it is...."

2.

In the week that followed Hugh saw a good deal of Paul Vulning. The latter liked to swing round the "Cheese" in his long low carmine-coloured car. He leaned back, driving with studied nonchalance. On one occasion, he narrowly shaved Hugh and Mr. MacTaggart. The big Scotchman shook a wrathful fist after him.

"The dawmed swanker! Ye'd think he wis rinnin' the place. Ah'll gie him a puck on the gub yin o' thae days that'll teach him tae look doon his neb at folk better than himsel'. I've got ma eye on him. I've seen him aboot a lot wi' Mrs. Emslie lately. Ye can tak' me word for it he's up tae nae guid."

And sure enough the very next day Hugh saw Mrs. Emslie and her daughter in the carmine car. Vulning had a squint-eyed chauffeur who sat with him as he drove. The mother and girl were behind. On their return he saw them again; but this time, June Emslie was in front with the chauffeur, while Vulning was behind with the mother.

That evening, he met the two women once more,—this time on the Avenue des Fleurs. As he passed them in the darkness, he heard the mother's voice tense with anger. He never again saw the daughter waiting in the atrium, but Mrs. Emslie, her white cheeks painted, her eyes burning, gambled more desperately than ever.

Hugh himself was trying a new system which was behaving rather decently. He put two louis on the manque and a louis on one of the transversals of the passe. If it came manque he won a louis; if he struck the transversal he won seven louis. He did not play until certain indications told him he had the odds in his favour. He had to a curious degree that sense of probability which is so valuable to the player of roulette. Occasionally he had a hard tussle with the bank, but on the whole he averaged a hundred francs a day. In addition to this he made two louis for the running of the house. He was greatly pleased and used to say to Margot:

"Isn't it jolly to think that every mouthful we eat, we make the Casino pay for? Doesn't it make the food taste ever so much sweeter?"

"That's not much of a compliment to my cooking."

"You're cooking's delicious, my child. It's the things you don't cook. By the way I made a couple of louis extra to-day, so here's something for you. You can regard it as a present from the *Société*."

The gift was a pair of suede gloves. It was a joke of which he never tired, that of giving her a present and saying: "With the compliments of the Casino."

He had come to love their big bright room. It was a refuge, a retreat from the fever and fret of the tables. Here was reality, the simple things that mattered; there, a false splendour, a theatrical pretentiousness. Margot considered his growing fondness for home a victory for her, and increased her efforts to make it attractive. She bought many little furnishings, so that the living part became extremely comfortable. But behind the big green curtain their sleeping arrangements remained unchanged. The small grey curtain divided his part from hers. This curtain seemed to him to have a definite significance. It was the symbol of his honour. It was the frailest of barriers, yet by the expression of his will it

had become more solid than a sheet of steel. It seemed curious at night to think that she was so close. He often heard her breathing. Perhaps she was his for the taking. But then she trusted him. He would open his eyes and look at the grey curtain with a certain grim exultation. Good job it was grey. Maybe if it had been orange or crimson, or some colour that appealed to the senses, he might have been tempted to tear it aside.... But grey had a sobering effect.

Not that he would have yielded to temptation. He was not that sort, he told himself. If any such intention had ventured into his mind, he would have stamped on it as he would on a snake. He had pride and strength. He was clean-minded, cool-blooded. He was equal to the situation he had created. Yet it was oddly pleasant to have her so close to him. What did she think? he sometimes wondered. She, too, accepted the situation and played the game as honourably as he. They were like brother and sister.

He had to admit that every day she was growing more attractive. As if to please him she had taken to dressing her hair in the English fashion; parting it over the forehead, and massing it in a thick pleat at the nape of her neck. The slight hollowing of her cheeks and the sweetness of her mouth reminded him of Rossetti's women. She did not have much colouring; her skin was like ivory, and the faint pink of her cheeks that of a sea shell. He made a good many sketches of her; and told himself that some day he would paint her portrait.

But, for the time being, the Goddess Roulette claimed him as her own. She brooked no rival. There in the gaiety and the golden sunshine, he thought roulette, dreamed roulette, lived roulette. He was a worshipper among a host of worshippers, their temple the Casino; and few worshippers at a sacred shrine are so devoted.

One night he had a dream.

The vast hollow of the sky seemed to be the bowl of a mighty wheel. The ball rolled with the long menace of thunder and shot into its slot like a lightning stab. Beneath the shadow of this sinister wheel, the air was grey with fluttering bank notes, the earth was like an ant-heap of fevered, frenzied men and women. As they leaped at the money it nearly always evaded them. With each leap they grew more feeble. Then he noticed that the ground beneath them was a quagmire, into which they were sinking. Their struggles plunged them deeper and deeper into the ooze, until they disappeared from sight. But no sooner had they gone than others took their place. They, too, leaped and clutched at the elusive fortune, only to sink in turn. And over them the great shadowy wheel rumbled and flashed, taking the place of God and the stars. ... It was all so vivid that he awoke shuddering and crying aloud: "The wheel! The wheel!"

But no dream could damp his ardour, nor cloud his happiness. He was superbly happy. He told himself it was because of the beauty and charm of the place. Monte Carlo in its setting of primitive grandeur, glutted with luxury, and gorged with light; man's insolent triumph over nature; a cocotte of price poised amid the eternal verities of mountain and sea. He adored it. Its keynote was joy. Life glittered and sang. Every day was a fête day. He loved the feeling that he was part of it, one of its gay pleasure-seekers. That was the side of it he chose to see. What if there was another, a sinister one! As far as he was concerned it did not exist. Ruin, suicide, misery, all these were lies of blackmailing journalists. The gambling was a harmless diversion indulged in by people who lost what they could afford to lose. Those who fell were only the weak who would have gone to the wall in some other way. No, it was the most adorable place on earth.

One evening as he climbed the long hill to the Casino, his thoughts were of the pleasantest. The night was rich with velvet darkness. A sense of rain lurked in the crystal purity of the air, a soft reluctant rain that might come before morning. On the concrete blocks that protect the harbour the little lights of fishermen made swirls of gold, and their nets moved round and round, scooping up the fish attracted by the glow. The water of the harbour was as black as patent leather, and the quay lamps shot down long bright stems that sprouted into silver foliage. The few lights on the dark heights of Monaco seemed only to accentuate its mystery.

He stood for a while where the white bust of Berloitz springs on a shaft of marble from a patch of purple pansies. He looked past the fiery frontages of the vast hotels, to where, above them all, the cornice of the Riviera Palace appeared like an agraffe of pearls. He inhaled deeply the breath of the sea. How well he felt! Never since the year before the war, when he played cricket and football, had he felt so fit. He was a man again, ready to tackle the job of life.

As he walked past the band-stand the Casino windows made panels of orange against the biscuit-coloured stone. No, he would not play again that night. One must not abuse one's luck. He had already made three hundred francs. He had now a thousand of the bank's money to gamble with. To-morrow he would buy ten chips of a hundred francs each and play with them instead of with louis. He was full of confidence. To-morrow the battle again; to-night the joy of victory. He

rounded the corner where the grounds of the Casino overhang the station, and entered the quieter garden beyond. Finding a shadowed seat he sat down to smoke. He was soon in a happy reverie.

A rock garden close by formed a small plateau on which was a pergola. Suddenly his attention was drawn to it. He saw two people emerge from the shadow. At first he thought they were lovers; then he noticed they were struggling. As he bent forward trying to pierce the darkness he heard a woman's faint cry of distress. Rising swiftly, he ran towards them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PLUNGING

1.

A man in evening dress was holding a girl and trying to draw her closer to him.

"Leave me alone," she moaned; "let me go or I'll scream for help. I will, I tell you...."

"You little fool! As if a kiss or two would hurt you. Come on, I've got the car down below. Let me take you for a spin."

"No, no. Let me go home to mother."

He laughed. "You know your mother's in the Casino playing the fool, with money I lent her,—the last, by God! she ever gets from me,—unless you are more amiable. I say, let's go over to Ciro's and have something."

"Oh, please let me go. You're hurting me. I must find mother. She wouldn't like me to be alone here."

"Bah! As long as she can gamble, your precious mother doesn't care two pins what you do. Why, she knows you're with me. She's got an extra thousand to-night to keep out of the way. Come on, be reasonable! I'll save your mother yet; but you've got to be pretty nice. Here, another kiss...."

"Oh, no. Please don't. You forget yourself. You've been drinking. Let me go, I say, let me go...."

His answer was to clutch her more fiercely. With a sudden wrench she freed herself and broke away. He stood swaying for a moment, then with a drunken laugh sprang after her. His arms were once more about to close around her when Hugh leapt forward and dealt him a blow. The man went down.

The girl had turned. In the radiance of an arc-light Hugh saw her fear-distorted face.

"Miss Emslie!"

"Yes, yes," she panted. "Oh, please help me. I'm afraid...."

"You needn't be afraid. I'll deal with this chap."

"I don't know you, but I've seen you often. How can I thank you...."

"Never mind about that. Run home to your friends."

She vanished. As the man rose Hugh recognized Paul Vulning, his face flushed with wine and deadly with rage.

"You young devil, you! Why did you do that?"

"Because under the circumstances it seemed the proper thing to do."

"Is it the proper thing to interfere in an affair that doesn't concern you?"

"Her friends are my friends."

"Who the devil are you? I've never met you. If it were not for these fellows there I'd thrash you."

"These fellows" were two firemen who had appeared from the shadow. Probably they had been there all the time but had not judged the moment opportune to intervene. Hugh laughed.

"We needn't let that stand in our way. If there's thrashing to be done, I expect we can find lots of quiet places down on the beach."

"I would be a fool to do that. I don't know who you are. You may be a crook for all I know."

"I may be. You don't know me. But I know you for a rotter and a cad."

Paul Vulning's face grew purple in its fury. Throwing discretion to the winds, he rushed and swung a heavy blow. The two firemen valiantly tried to come between them, and one of them received the vicious swing intended for Hugh. Angered, he too struck out. There threatened to be a general mix-up, when a voice, suave but edged with authority, made them all turn.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, what's this about? Do you want to be arrested?"

A tall dark man, with a lean intelligent face and a bland smile, seemed to have sprung from nowhere. It was Krantz. He continued smoothly:

"I would strongly recommend you both to go home. You know, gentlemen, we don't want trouble in the Principality. Peace, perfect peace is our ideal. Be advised, messieurs: go home."

Paul Vulning's jaw had dropped, and he was staring at Krantz with a look that was half fascination, half fear. Then with a glower of hate at Hugh, he strode away.

The next day, as he had planned, Hugh played with placques and won a thousand francs. On his way out he met Mr. Gimp. The little lean man seemed agitated as he fumbled over "the makings." He pursed out his underlip grimly.

"Heard the news?"

"No."

"Mrs. Emslie ... she's gone ... the veronal route ..."

2.

One morning Hugh awoke joyously and sang as he dressed.

"You seem very gay," said Margot, "considering you came home so very late last night."

"Yes, it was a gala night at Café de Paris. Masked dancers and all that sort of thing. Very jolly. But I'm gay for another reason. Look...."

He spread on the table five notes of a thousand francs each. "There! Gaze, gloat, marvel—the bank's money."

Her obvious awe was touched with anxiety.

"And you've made all that?"

"All."

"You're wonderful. You'll stop now, I hope."

"Stop nothing! I'm going on. I've got a lucky streak."

"You'll lose it all again."

"*Tant pis!* I'm going to risk it. I'm going to play big. I say, you'd better come and watch me."

"Never! I couldn't. The emotion! It would be painful."

"That's what I love,—the emotion. The moment, just before the ball drops, when the heart seems to pause. Whether one wins or loses one has that precious thrill. Come."

"No, thank you."

Alone Hugh climbed the familiar hill. On his left towered huge hotels, on his right the water of the gem-like harbour was like lapis lazuli, the quays like porcelain. Dainty yachts, all varnish and brasswork, glassed themselves exquisitely. A carmine car dashed past him. Hugh caught a glimpse of Paul Vulning at the wheel. The seat raked so that he seemed to be lying down. Beside him sat the cross-eyed chauffeur.

Hugh entered the Rooms with no definite plan of playing. His five thousand francs were folded up into a small packet. It was curious, he thought as he fingered it, how suddenly he seemed to lose all sense of its value. It was not money at all, merely a ball of worthless paper. A magnificent recklessness came over him. Going to the first table, he took from his pocket the greasy wad of notes and threw it on red. There it was gone, that crumpled soiled packet. He was rid of it. In another moment that silly little ball would drop into a black slot, and he would turn away with a careless smile.... No, it had dropped into a red. How funny! He saw everybody turn to look at him. He stood in a daze while the croupier unfolded his notes, counted them and paid him five more. He had been in the Casino just one minute and he had made five thousand francs.

He was back in his room half an hour after he had left it. He spread his ten notes out on the table. Margot looked at him with admiration and anxiety. He enjoyed the admiration.

"Come on," he said; "I won't play any more to-day. We'll go to Nice for lunch and make an afternoon of it."

The next day he followed his impulse again, and threw five thousand francs on black. He lost. Going to another table he played again on black and won. The situation was unchanged, but his nerves were a little uncertain.

The following day he hesitated; but finally, after taking three imaginary losses, he played for a win, and got it. He had now fifteen thousand francs.

On the fourth day his nerve failed him. After watching the play, making up his mind, then hesitating and drawing back again he came away without having played.

On the fifth day he played a well known *coup* that comes off three times out of five. After a long run on black, a break and a return to black, he played on red and won. Twenty thousand francs.

That afternoon like a miser he spread his twenty big notes all over the table, and a sudden exaggerated sense of their value came to him. Twenty thousand francs! Why, it meant Capital. In some quiet country place he could live for three or four years on that; buy himself an interest in a business, get a good start in life again. The Casino had served him well.

Margot looked at him with growing anxiety. "You'll stop now, won't you?"

"No, I haven't got enough yet."

"*Mon Dieu!* How much do you want?"

"Sixty thousand! I want to buy a good car for about twenty thousand. Then there's a little cottage with a big garden at Villefranche I can get for another twenty. Between the car and the garden I think I can make a pretty tidy living."

"And the third twenty?"

"That's for you, my child. What the French call a *dot*, the day you marry."

"And if I never marry?"

"Well, then, you'll keep house for me in my little cottage covered with roses. You'll still be my little sister."

"That's nicer. Now you can stop at forty thousand."

"No. I'm an obstinate brute. Sixty thousand goes."

The girl sighed. "By the way we have a new neighbour, such a fine looking old man, a Professor Durand."

"The dickens! I know him quite well. He's a little touched. Thinks he has an invincible system that's going to bust up the Casino."

"Yes, the concierge told me. He has books and books of figures and diagrams. He works over them night and day."

"Seems to me the concierge takes too much interest in his *locataires*. I don't like that man. I wish you would talk to him as little as possible."

"Very well. I don't like him myself, he ... he tried to make love to me."

"The dog! I'll smash him."

"No, please don't make a fuss. I stopped him pretty quick. It doesn't do to make enemies of those people."

The following day Hugh met Professor Durand on the stairway. The old man was bronzed and hale-looking.

"Ha! my young friend!" he said. "Yes, I've been in the mountains, the pines, preparing for the battle. I want all the strength that is left in me to accomplish my mission."

"Poor old chap!" thought Hugh, "he doesn't know what's in front of him. Pathetic! Maybe another Casino tragedy."

3.

As he was sitting in the Café de Paris that evening listening to the music, Hugh idly watched the entrance to the Casino with its four great lanterns. In the softened lustre its pale yellow stone took on a mellow radiance almost onyxlike. Seen through the palms with the stars for a background it was like a gleaming palace of delight, poised over the mystery of the sea.

Into the pool of light from the doorway swished glossy limousines from which descended elegantly dressed people. One, a very tall man, mounted the steps and paused for a moment. He had a spade-shaped beard, a swarthy face, and a hooked nose.

"First time I've seen that chap," thought Hugh. "Looks like a grandee of old Castile, but is probably an Armenian money-changer."

Just at that moment Mr. Tope came bustling up. "I say," said Hugh, "who's that hidalgo-looking johnny on the steps?"

Mr. Tope screwed a monocle into his right eye. "Don't know exactly. Some say he's a South American, ex-president of some small republic who got away with the state treasure. Wouldn't be surprised. He has a vulturish look. The scum of the world find their way here, and as long as they have money they are welcome. By the way, I hear great things of you, winning maximums and so on. Congratulations, young man! Any one who can get ahead of that institution over there has my profound admiration. You know, my boy, they're making a million a week; and they say there's a suicide a day. I believe that's an exaggeration, though. If they put it at six a week they might be nearer the truth. I suppose you've heard of the latest one?..."

"No."

"That big man with the skullcap; they used to call him 'Cheero.'"

"Really!"

"Prussic acid in the Café of the Casino. They always said he was the luckiest player in the Rooms, the man who never lost. As it turned out he did nothing but lose; he lost a million and hid it behind that placid smile. That smile was a mask that hid his agony...."

"Pretty rough! One never knows. Oh, I say, I haven't seen anything of the Calderbrooks lately."

"No, they're lying low at present. They went through their letter of credit and then borrowed from the bank. The old man wanted to go home, but the two women persuaded him to stay another month. They put a mortgage on their house, and are having two thousand pounds sent out."

"And what about Mrs. Emslie's daughter?"

"Oh, June. The Fitzoswalds have taken her in. Poor girl! She was very ill after the tragedy. We wanted to send her to England, but it seems she has no relatives there. They come from Australia. The mother gambled away all the girl's fortune and the poor thing is alone in the world, helpless and destitute."

"Is she better now?"

"Yes. The mother led her an awful life. June is helping Mrs. Fitzoswald to look after the kiddies. You know Mrs. Fitz?"

Spunky little Irishwoman with bronze gold hair and a turned up nose! Fitz is that red-headed, one-legged man; always plays the same game, builds up Louis round the number thirty-two. He says it is his wife's age, but she denies it. She says she wishes Fitz would hurry up and be ruined, for then they could go home to Ireland and live in peace. Well, they're awfully fine people, and so good to June. I say, young man, there's a chance for you. A sweet, pretty, refined girl, friendless and without a *sou*. Why don't you sail in, marry her and be happy ever after?"

"But I've never had the faintest idea of marrying."

"Ah well, poor June must become a nurse or a governess, or fall into the clutches of some professional seducer such as Vulning. I've heard he's after her. I hope the Major gets ruined pretty soon, and then the Fitzoswalds can take June away from this infected hell."

4.

The very next day Hugh encountered June Emslie. She was playing with the Fitzoswald children in the circular sand-pit near the dove-cage. She started and grew pale; then advanced to meet him with outstretched hand. Neither of them referred to the previous meeting. He found her timid, painfully embarrassed, but shyly worshipping as she looked at him. Come to think of it, he had made rather an effective entry on the scene that night, quite in the hero of romance fashion. If she was at all sentimental she must have idealized him. Being a prosaic young man he was rather annoyed at the thought and his manner became brusque, careless even. Her recent sorrow had not driven the fresh colour from her cheeks. If Margot was the type of the lily this girl was like a rose. Her features were sensitive and delicate, her hair a dark chestnut, her eyes deep blue. She was tall, and slender, and apparently not more than seventeen. After a few commonplace remarks, he said:

"If I can do anything for you, anything at all, please let me know. Think of me as a friend, and call on me if ever you should need me."

She understood what he meant and a deep flush over-spread her face.

"Yes, I will. Thank you so much. By the way,—I don't know your name."

He told her. "Shall I write it down?" he asked.

"Oh no. I assure you I can remember it."

They said good-bye and he left her with an impression of her virginal sweetness and budding charm.

But she did not remain long in his thoughts. That afternoon he had an engagement with Mrs. Belmire. Of late she had gone out of her way to be nice to him, and he had begun to admire her enthusiastically. He was proud to be seen with her, and was blind to her deficiencies. She had for him the attraction of the ripe, experienced woman for the raw, callow youth. When she asked him to take her to Cap Martin, her request made him simmer with joyous excitement.

He called for her in a voiture with two horses and they drove along the shore road. She was simpler and sweeter than he had ever known her; but, he thought, abstracted and depressed. They sat on the rocks awhile, then had tea in the hotel. On the way home her pensiveness increased so noticeably that at last he taxed her with it.

"I say, what's the matter? You seem so sad to-day."

She turned with a forced smile. "Am I? Perhaps I am. You see I'm worried. But then what have my troubles got to do with you?"

"Oh, please tell me. Look on me as a friend."

"Dear boy, so I do. Well, I'm in difficulties—financial difficulties. I've got money coming out from England; but I've had such rotten luck at baccarat lately, and a lot of little bills have been coming in, and ... well, this is all I have to meet them."

From her vanity bag she took a tiny jewelled purse, and showed him in its satin interior a few torn franc bills and some *sous*.

"Grotesque, isn't it? I wouldn't care, only there's my week's bill at the pension. I'll pull through somehow ..."

Hugh thrilled with sympathy; he blushed, stammered and blurted out: "I say, I've been rather lucky at the tables lately. Won't you let me help you ... a little loan ..."

"Oh, no, I couldn't think of it."

"It will be a privilege. Make me happy, please, by accepting."

"Well, if you put it that way. I know you've been lucky, dear boy. You're just too nice. Perhaps a *mille* would tide me over."

Hugh feverishly searched his pocket book. Alas! he had prudently left his big bills with Margot. All he had were some twenty ten franc notes.

"Look here, it's too bad," he said, "I've left all my money at home. But, to-night, if you can meet me at the Café de Paris at nine, I'll have it."

"I can count on that?"

"Yes."

"You darling! I say ... there's no one on the road. Quick. If you like, you may kiss me."

5.

He arrived at the Café de Paris about half past eight, keyed up and exalted. The afternoon seemed to have added an inch to his stature. The most charming woman in Monte!... And he had kissed her.... Having a little time to spare he went into the Rooms. The impulse he knew so well was luring him on.

"If I give her a *mille*" he thought, "why not make the Casino pay for it?"

At the first table he threw a maximum on red and won. Rather sourly they paid him six thousand francs.

"Five thousand for me," he said, "and a thousand for Mrs. B."

He found her exquisitely dressed and impatiently awaiting him. His luck had added to his excitement. He was feeling capable of any folly. He folded up a *mille* note very neatly and slipped it into her bag. Then somewhat to his chagrin she excused herself.

"I'm awfully sorry. I have an engagement at the club. Probably see you to-morrow."

She left him feeling rather chilled and sober.

"Well," he consoled himself, "perhaps it is just as well. In any case I now have twenty-five thousand francs."

He did not play for the next few days. His success rather dismayed him; his nerve was gone. Then on two successive days a chance appeared which was too favourable to be resisted; it was what he called a sure shot. As a matter of fact, it really came off in five cases out of six, but only by watching and waiting could one get on to it. A long run on one of the simple chances had to be followed by a certain combination of both chances. In each case when he played it he won; his capital had now increased to thirty-five thousand francs.

He began to feel what he had never felt in his life before,—secure. To a rich man that sum was nothing; to him, everything. But he was becoming increasingly nervous. He must not lose this money. He must be more prudent than ever. If he lost it, it would discourage him utterly; he would never have the heart to begin over again. Yet he must make the sixty thousand on which he had set his heart. Only twenty-five thousand more. Four wins of maximums would practically do it. Well, he must pluck up his courage and try again. He must nerve himself for the final struggle.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE BIG FIGHT

During his long spells of waiting, he became more and more intimately acquainted with the world of the Casino,—from the prowling seeker of the sure-shot to the holiday plunger, from the philosophic veteran with pencil and note-book to the *nouveau-riche* spraying the table with louis. He came to know the eternal types, the avid-eyed old women, the blowsy, brazen matron, the *cocotte* throwing money away with cynical contempt, the young girl from the convent risking her first five-franc piece.

Then the unending Casino comedies. For instance, the Honeymoon Couple comedy. The first day she hangs on his arm while he plays. The second day *he* hangs on her arm while *she* plays. The third day they separate a little and try tiny flutters of their own. The fourth day they get seats at the same table and advise each other as to their play. The fifth day they get seats at separate tables, and each plays as if the other did not exist. The sixth day she is begging him for money, and he is refusing. The seventh day they moon round without playing, he moody, she sulky, very near to a quarrel. Then on the eighth day they disappear, perhaps never to be the same again.

Then there is the woman who talks to the croupier, fawning on him and asking him how she ought to play. Sometimes the knight of the *rateau* hazards a guess. If it comes off, *tant mieux*. Perhaps, it means a tip; if it doesn't, *tant pis*. No man is infallible.

These types repeat themselves endlessly; but among them from time to time appear strange original characters piquing the curiosity of the public. The Casino is like a stage where they enter, play their parts, and make their exit. Old and young, good and bad, rich and poor,—they come and go; they lose or win; they sidle across the glossy floor under the great white dome; they smirk and posture, wrangle and vapour. Beefy Englishman and desiccated Yank, flatulent Frenchman and oily Italian, morose Spaniard and bovine Swede; Jap, Chinaman, Rasta and Levantine Jew—they mix amid the throng that surges around the whirring wheels, and their strange tongues mingle in one confused babble.

So fantastic did it appear to Hugh that at times he rubbed his eyes and wondered if it could be real. How he wished he were a writer. If only he could see into their hearts, know their histories, pick their brains, what books he could write, a library of books, a document of human-kind that would outweigh the works of Balzac and Zola combined.

He became better acquainted with daily frequenters of the Casino and watched them with unceasing amusement. There was one, a Greek, a grossly fat man with three chins and a promontory of greasy waistcoat. On his pudgy hand he wore rubies as large as walnuts; and as he walked from table to table, laying *mille* placques on the dozens he never ceased to perspire. The tall woman in grey also attracted him. She was always gloved, always veiled. She played with persistency her game on number one, losing or winning with apparent indifference. Who was she? She went from table to table with the strangeness and mystery of a specter.

His attention was drawn irresistibly to the very tall man with the spade-shaped beard, who, he had learned, was a Brazilian diplomat. His name was Doctor Bergius and he was said to be of mixed Spanish and German parentage. From the moment he had entered the Rooms, the doctor had become a dominating personality. He was as straight as a shoot of bamboo, with a high carriage and an eye of piercing command. His long nose resembled the beak of a vulture of the Andes; his brow retreated from his piercing black eyes and his skin was as coppery as that of an Indian. He always dressed with immaculate care. He never played, but looking gravely on, with his hands behind his back, appeared only remotely interested in the game.

Then there was another man who attracted Hugh, partly because he was so graceful and handsome, partly because he had once broken the bank. He was an Italian called Castelli, of medium height and well-shaped figure. He had the olive skin, dark velvety eyes, and the perfect features often found in men who prey on women. He always had women with him. He played a dashing game, superbly indifferent to loss or gain.

Hugh was conscious of an atmosphere of unceasing suspicion. Every day hundreds of false louis were foisted on the bank, and no one knew how it was done. It was impossible to check them. Most of the players were too lazy to cash in before leaving the Casino and the chips continued to circulate in town as freely as money. The Casino inspectors were up on their toes, every one was being watched.

One day there came to him the mood for which he was waiting, the conquering mood. His nerves were of steel, and he felt that he could win a fortune or lose all without turning a hair. He had in his pockets seven packets of five thousand francs each. He sat down at the suicide table and began to play.

It was strange how confident he was. Something was fighting on his side. He could not be beaten. Then to his dismay, he lost the first *coup*, but won the three following. Again he lost a *coup*, but gained another two. And so it went on. The scales dipped, now for, now against him. On the whole, however, fortune favoured him, and he steadily drew ahead.

At last the great battle was on. He felt inspired. Silently he sat, watchful, emotionless as a wax figure. His eyes became opaque; and a crease of concentration came between his brows.

"A big game," the rumour spread. "Come and see."

The circle of watchers deepened and their interest increased. But to Hugh they were only a dull blur of meaningless faces. No, not all, for he saw one that thrilled him for a moment. It was that of Mrs. Belmire. Then her too he forgot in the stress of the struggle.

And it was in reality a struggle. The bank had abandoned its attitude of disdain, and was directly fighting him. No longer was he a petty "piker" but a foeman worth while. He felt that the eight silent men in black who ran the table were concentrating their wills against his. Psychology was coming into play. He willed that that capricious little ball should go one way; these eight willed it to take another. He would beat them; he would make the ball go where he wanted it to go.

He waited until it was spun; and then, acting from sheer impulse, threw a packet of notes on one of the simple chances. Sometimes he even threw on two chances. The battle swayed. He advanced, he retreated, but only to advance again.

As the spirit of the fight glowed in him, his play increased in boldness. If he fell he would fall gloriously. For once he had the centre of the stage. He would be worthy of the part, of the audience. He began to play on all three simple chances. He won ... and won again. Fortune favoured the brave. Hurrah for the big game! Again a triple shot. Ha! he had lost one of the three that time.... Well, the next time. The grey croupier who was paying did not look at all pleased. No wonder! Handing out *mille* notes continually from the little grilled box. And the *chef de parti* was scowling at the little chap who twirled the ball. Hugh won another *coup*, another fifteen thousand.

"*Messieurs, le boule passe.*"

The cowards! They were changing the croupier who threw the ball. That one was too unlucky. What a stack of notes he had. Must be nearly a hundred thousand. Ah, the devil! this new man was beating him. He had lost ... lost ... lost. His stack was diminishing. His luck had turned. He heard people asking: "Why doesn't he stop?" No, he would win back again ... win back. He was dazed. He scarcely knew what he was doing. He was reaching out to play another time when a hand gripped his arm.

"You darned young fool, quit now. Quit while you're still to the good."

It was Mr. Gimp. The American dragged him away from the table, followed by the admiring gaze of a hundred eyes. Then in a corner they counted the gains. With his own capital he had fifty-five thousand francs.

He sat on a leather seat in a stupor. He wanted to smoke a cigarette, to go home, but did not have energy enough. Then, when he was finally starting the stranger's door swung open and Professor Durand made his first entrance into the Rooms.

CHAPTER NINE

THE PROFESSOR BEGINS

1.

The professor advanced with an impressive dignity. Even the two blue coated attendants who guarded the middle portal stared and gaped. They were used to strange figures, but never had they seen a stranger.

The professor wore a black frock-coat of a bygone day. He carried a brigandish hat in one hand, and a cane with an ebony knob in the other. His silvery hair coiled over his shoulders; his deep, broad beard was patriarchal; he walked with a slow, deliberate step. Every one turned to look at him as he passed.

"It's Father Christmas," said a man, and everybody tittered. The name stuck.

But the professor paid no attention to them. He seemed to know just what he wanted to do. He went straight to the table favoured by the system-player, the one next the "Opium Dream Room", and handed five francs to the sour old lady who takes down the numbers for the Monte Carlo Revue. Promptly she gave him her place.

"Come," said Hugh to Mr. Gimp, "I know the old chap. He's queer. Let's watch him."

Others too were hastening to watch, and expectancy was in the air. The professor seemed entirely unconscious of the interest he aroused. He carefully installed himself, then took from an inner pocket a long red note-book and a pencil. He asked the old lady to show him her numbers, and copied down the last dozen. Then taking out thirty thousand francs in bills he demanded counters. There was something so elaborately pretentious in these preparations that even the croupiers looked at one another, though they did not lose their contemptuous smiles.

The professor peered through his silver rimmed spectacles at the numbers and sat for awhile, taking down the fresh ones as they occurred, and consulting carefully his long red note-book. Finally he stood up with an air of decision, and put the maximum on thirty-two in every possible way,—en plein, chevals, carrés, transversals, dozens columns, simple chances. When he had finished he had on the table about twenty-five thousand francs. Even the croupiers stared. A thrill of excitement ran through the circle of watchers, but the least moved was the old man. He leaned back and waited with calm confidence for the spin. It came. It was the number thirty-four. He had lost.

Not all, though. It is true he had missed the number, but he had got the three simple chances, the dozen, a transversal double, a carré. He had won about ten thousand francs.

The croupiers shrugged their shoulders. People looked at each other with eyes that said, "Fool's luck!" The professor again consulted his notes. He seemed a little nonplussed. He allowed three *coups* to go by without playing, then on the fourth he rose again and built his maximums about the thirty-two.

The croupiers seemed now to realize the dramatic value of the situation. The spinner turned the wheel solemnly as if it were a sacred rite; there was a tense moment, then a thrill ran through the crowd. In a voice that trembled with chagrin the croupier called out:

"Trente deux, rouge pair et passe."

The old man had won. They paid him carefully and ostentatiously. He gathered the notes in a worn leather wallet, put his note-book and pencil back into his inner pocket, rose and went away. A crowd followed him to the door; inspectors gathered in groups and talked; directors looked down from upper windows. Never had there been such a sensational *début*.

"It's fantastic," said Hugh. "What with my own luck and the professor's you could bowl me over with a feather. I want to indulge in hysterical laughter."

"Better indulge in a brandy and soda," said Mr. Gimp. "I'll see you home after."

2.

Hugh found Margot embroidering a piece of white silk. He marvelled at the delicate patience of her fingers.

"How jolly nice. What's it for?"

"A blouse."

"Good. You'll look ripping in that."

"You think so?... but it's not for me."

"Not for you!"

"No, you see, I've got some sewing to do. I might as well. I have many spare hours each day. I am trying to make a little money. It's that nice *lingerie* shop near the Hotel de Paris."

"Good Heavens! And how much can you make at that?"

"About five francs a day."

"The deuce! What would you say if I told you that to-day I had made fifty thousand?"

"You didn't ..."

"I did. It's true I lost some of it afterwards. Ah! if I'd only stopped in time. But I hung on to thirty thousand."

Eagerly he took out his sheaf of bills, and spread them before her.

"There! I've fifty-five thousand, only five short of the sixty."

She looked frightened. She laid her hand on his.

"You'll stop now. Please say you'll stop."

"No, I want sixty."

She was silent, staring with troubled eyes before her, her embroidery in her lap.

"Wake up," he laughed. "You're in a trance. What are you thinking of,—your dowry?"

"No, of that rose-covered cottage."

"Oh, that.... I say, you're not going on with that embroidery for the sake of making a measly five francs a day?"

"Why not? It's *clean* money."

"Don't you think this money is clean?"

"No, I might have thought so once; but now ... I've had my lesson."

"I haven't. It's good enough for me. Why, it would take me twenty years to save this money in the usual way, and make a wreck of me at the same time. Life's too hard a battle. We can't afford to choose our weapons."

A knock came at the door. It was Professor Durand. The old man had doffed his dignity, and was in slippers and a dressing gown. He bowed profoundly to Margot, then he said to Hugh with a benevolent smile:

"I saw a light and thought you might have returned. I am lonely. I wonder if you would care to come to my den and smoke a pipe."

Hugh followed the old man. The room surprised him. There was a steel safe in one corner, a large cabinet, a broad table covered with papers on which were algebraic formulæ and geometrical figures.

"My workshop," said the professor. "You saw me to-day? Eh, what!"

"Yes, I congratulate you. You made a wonderful beginning."

"No, I'm not satisfied. My timing was out. To-morrow I'll do better. I'll only play once, but I'll hit it."

The professor spoke with such conviction that Hugh was impressed.

"Extraordinary! A marvellous system. A discovery."

"No, not a discovery, an invention. Just as logarithms was an invention. But remember, it took me twenty years to perfect it with all the resources of the higher mathematics at my command. Twenty years! Come, take that easy chair and light up. I'm going to give you a liqueur, some very old Chartreuse; and we'll talk."

The professor, however, did most of the talking. "Look," said he, "at that stack of green volumes. You have there the records of table number two for the past thirteen years. I know that table like a living thing, and yet I never saw it until to-day."

"I suppose," said Hugh, "that you base your system on the law of average?"

The professor laughed tolerantly. "No, I don't. Law of average,—that is child's talk to me. Of course every table has its average, every wheel has its average, every croupier, you, I; every *coup* that is played, is an average with something that has gone before. Ah! these foolish system players with their talk of average and probability and phenomenon. Why, every *coup* is a phenomenon as regards something that has gone before. These things don't exist. They are sounding terms that mean nothing. No, the trouble is that all these students of the laws of chance go about it wrongly. Their systems are analytic, mine is synthetic."

"Do you claim that it is infallible?"

"By no means. You saw me fail to-day. What I do claim is that I will succeed one time out of three."

"That's good enough."

"Good enough to ruin the bank. I won't stop till I have taken a hundred millions from them. Don't think I want the money. I won't touch one *sou* of it."

"What will you do with it?"

"I am a patriot. My country is in trouble, in debt. I will give it all to my country."

"But why do you hate the Casino? Is it revenge?"

"No, retribution. My only son came here, played, lost all ... he's dead. Now you know the brutal truth. I did not intend to tell any one. It's painful even after twenty years...."

"I understand ..."

"Well, you'll see me play to-morrow. I'll take my seat at three o'clock sharp."

"I'll be there."

"I have them in the hollow of my hand. They don't suspect, they don't dream. But to-morrow they will begin to be uneasy, and as I close my hand to crush them they will be seized with panic, they will be filled with despair. That will be the time I shall need some one to aid me, to protect me, for I am old. I want a young man full of intelligence, of courage, to guard me, and if need be, to carry on my work. For instance,—*you*! Now do you understand why I have asked you here to-night, why I have told you all I have?... We'll talk again of this."

It was late when Hugh left the old man and returned to his room. Margot was still bent over her embroidery.

"You'll hurt your eyes," he remonstrated; but she shook her head obstinately.

"No, I won't stop. I promised madame I'd finish this for to-morrow."

When he arrived at the Casino the following afternoon, he saw a crowd collected under the great rubber tree on the edge of the "Cheese." To his amazement he found that it was gathered around Mrs. Fitzoswald and her little brood. He heard exclamations such as: "The poor dears! What a shame! Such a plucky little woman!"

Mrs. Fitz was excited. The light of battle was in her eyes. Her cheeks were flushed. She proclaimed her wrongs to the skies.

"Yes," she cried, pointing to the Casino, "they ruined him, the dirty rascals. They got all his money and now they've thrown him into prison. A *mutilé* of the war; a man who has given his leg for freedom, thrown into prison like a criminal. But I'll have justice. I'll stand here till they release him. Look at his innocent children, without food, without shelter."

At this the three little girls, aged seven, five and three, began to weep and cling to her. Only the baby in the arms of June Emslie was unmoved, laughing and chuckling at the world.

June explained to Hugh what the trouble was. Major Fitzoswald, it seemed, was expecting money from England and had issued a cheque against it for the rent of his apartment. Unfortunately the money was delayed and the cheque was refused. The landlord appealed to the authorities, who decided to make an example of the major. There had been similar cases and they felt that the citizens must be protected. So two very gorgeous gendarmes had driven Major Fitzoswald to the Rock of Monaco and presumably thrown him into its deepest dungeon. Meanwhile the landlord had put his wife and children on the street.

The English and American colony had been scandalized; It was equivalent to a national insult. They had offered to pay the amount of the cheque ten times over, but the authorities were adamant.

"No," they had said pompously; "the law must take its course."

Both the English and American Consuls had been appealed to and had done their best to get the Major released but without result. Public opinion was aroused; prominent men had interviewed the administration, but all to no purpose. The one-legged Major continued to languish in his cell.

Then it was that Mrs. Fitz had come into action and, planting herself with her brood in front of the grand entrance, she cried her woes to the world. A sympathetic crowd gathered, black looks were thrown at the temple of chance, and its all-powerful administration were objurgated. Every one was competing to aid the unfortunate victims. Hugh saw Mr. Fetterstein, the multi-millionaire, descend the steps of the Hotel de Paris, and, to the scandal of the flunkies, take back with him the whole bedraggled family for luncheon.

As Hugh entered the Casino he found Mr. Gimp in his usual place between the two pillars at the entrance of the atrium.

"Darned shame," said Mr. Gimp. "Darned fine little woman. Nice kids. I took 'em all to Quinto's for dinner last night. The whole thing's a mistake. The Major's a gallant gentleman, but that bunch of Dago scalawags that run this place are down on British and Americans. They like our money, but that's all. There's no law. The Casino gang runs the government. The whole population live on the Casino like lice on a shark. The Prince with his tin-pot army is in their pay. It's mediæval, fantastic, rotten. And you ask me, then, why do I stay here? I can't tell you. I just stay."

Mr. Gimp inhaled his home-made cigarette and snorted out a cloud of disgust.

"Say, I heard a good story of this place! A guy once committed a crime. They ought to have guillotined him; but as they didn't have a guillotine, they decided to imprison him for life. They threw him into a cell, but soon it became such a nuisance to cook his food, that they transferred him to a small hut near the frontier, hoping he would escape. They had his meals sent in to him from a neighbouring restaurant. But when the bills came in, they drew a long face. He cost some, this prisoner. They decided to pardon him, but he consulted a lawyer, and found that his pardon was irregular. He refused to accept it. Finally to get rid of him they had to pay him a big sum to escape. That's a sample of how things are run here.... Look, there's your friend the professor."

4.

The sensation in Casino circles caused by Mrs. Fitzoswald was as nothing compared to the excitement aroused by the second appearance of the professor. The news ran like an electric thrill from one end of the Rooms to the other. It

communicated itself to the stolid blue-coated lackeys; to the wary, black-coated officials with their tiny cards, even to the callous croupiers themselves.

The professor stumped across the room leaning on his cane; the old lady gave him her place as before. Every one made way for him. He was the star player. Again he went through the same programme with note-book and pencil. He consulted the previous numbers and quickly came to a decision. But instead of buying chips as formerly, he handed the croupier the exact sum to play his series of maximums. Then he announced his number,—Five.

It took some time to place the money correctly. The croupier did so with unction. His actions had all the solemnity of a ceremonial. Finally every stake was correctly placed. Excitement held the crowd spellbound. With a determination at all cost to avoid the five, the spinner threw the ball. It whirled around smoothly, then dropped amid the diamond-shaped studs, dodged, rebounded, zig-zagged, fell. A great shout arose. A sullen voice announced: "*Cinq, rouge impair et manque.*"

Again the professor took up his gains and stumped his way through the admiring crowd. Once more he had gained over sixty thousand francs.

On the following day he made his appearance a little after noon; the Rooms were at their quietest. On this occasion he seemed less sanguine of success. He made two shots but in neither case did he strike the number. However, his gains on his indirect stakes balanced his losses, and he rose from the table in a few minutes neither richer nor poorer. The Casino people breathed more freely. They had been puzzled and a little worried. They transferred their attention to the other and equally pressing problems.

As time went on, more and more of the false chips were being forced on the bank. Hugh felt the atmosphere of suspicion daily increasing in intensity. Black-coated inspectors and spies were everywhere. No one's affairs were private. The secret police were making desperate efforts to discover the fabricators of the false counters, but their efforts so far had resulted only in the conviction of a croupier for petty pilfering. He had done it by pretending to scratch his neck, and, in so doing, dropping a louis down his collar. They did not put him in prison, but hung a placard around his neck with I AM A THIEF printed on it, and marched him around Monaco before his friends and relations. Finally they kicked him across the frontier.

Mrs. Fitzoswald, too, was giving them no small worry. The little woman was conducting her campaign with skill and tenacity. She was to be seen at all hours of the day in front of the Casino, relating her misfortunes to a sympathizing audience. Her children with tear-stained cheeks ably supported her. People felt that it was unfair to have their feelings harrowed when they came to enjoy themselves. Complaint after complaint reached the administration, which at last decided to take action. They offered to pay her passage and that of her children to England if she would go away at once.

"What, go without my husband! Never! Release him and pay his passage, too. That's my ultimatum."

The authorities refused. Negotiations were broken off.

On the fourth day the professor again made his appearance in the afternoon; and again repeated his performance of the second day. The directors were in a state of consternation. For the first time they began to think that here was that inconceivable thing, a man with an invincible system. All Monte Carlo was talking of it. They awaited events with the greatest anxiety.

CHAPTER TEN

THE COMPACT

1.

As the following day was Sunday the professor did not play. Instead he went to early mass accompanied by Margot, to whom he had taken a fancy, and in the afternoon the two went for a walk together in the direction of Menton. They asked Hugh to accompany them but he refused.

To tell the truth he had other fish to fry. Since his success, he had blossomed out in many ways. Some time before he had been to a good tailor and had several suits made. He had developed a fondness for the American Bar of the Café de Paris, and had become increasingly intimate with Mrs. Belmire.

At first he had merely admired her immensely; he was flattered by her interest in him and had found a kind of heady pleasure, like champagne, in her society. In the end he had become really fascinated. Then one day something happened that acted on him like a spur. He was walking along the road to Beaulieu when a big carmine car swung round a bend. He recognized Vulning at the wheel. He thought the lady with him seemed familiar, but it was not until she looked back laughingly and waved her hand that he saw it was Mrs. Belmire.

If it had been any other man he would not have minded. He knew she went about with Fetterstein and one or two others. But Vulning!... He disliked Vulning, He realized with a shock that he was jealously infatuated with the lady.

On this particular Sunday afternoon he had arranged to motor with her to Brodighera. He was happy in the thought that he would have her all to himself for four radiant hours.

They had not been long on the road when she said sweetly:

"You poor boy! I believe we nearly ran you down the other day. You looked ever so startled. Paul always drives so recklessly. He gives me all kinds of thrills."

"Why do you go out with him then?" Hugh snapped.

She looked at him curiously. There was a gleam of amused satisfaction in her eye.

"Why shouldn't I? I love thrills. Besides he's an old friend. Good gracious! I don't believe you like him."

"Why should I?"

"Oh, he's not a bad sort. A bit blasé and all that sort of thing. But ... well, you don't know him."

"We have met."

"Have you really? I asked him after we had passed if he knew you, and he said he didn't. He meets so many I suppose he forgot. He's much sought after."

Hugh grew more savage. Again he snapped. "I don't believe he's the man a woman should be seen with often if she values her reputation."

"Her reputation!"

Hugh thought she was going to be angry. She stared at him a moment, then suddenly said: "Oh you funny boy! You nice boy! I like you so much for that. But ... I do believe you're jealous of Paul Vulning."

"Why should I be?"

"Because he's so like you. You've got the same regular features, the same fair hair. You're both tall and rather slight. But you needn't resent all that. Paul is a rather soiled man of the world; you are a nice clean boy who might be fresh from Oxford."

She looked at him thoughtfully.

"I'd like to keep you as you are, but it might be better for yourself if you were a little more sophisticated. I have half a mind to take you in hand, to educate you in the ways of the world. May I?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"No, I didn't think you would. You are a little—may I say it?—naïve sometimes.... I say, don't you admire my new blouse? I just got it this morning. The embroidery's so pretty, I think."

Something in the design struck Hugh as familiar. Yes, it was the work he had seen Margot sitting up so late to finish.

"You look so serious. Don't you like it?"

"Yes, it's lovely."

"I think so too. By the way, why don't you begin to gamble again? You play so well and you are so lucky. You must join the Club. You might make lots of money. Talking about horrid money reminds me ... mine hasn't arrived and I'm rather low again. You may lend me another *mille* if you like."

On the way back they overtook an old man and a girl. It was Margot and the professor. Margot's arms were full of flowers. Hugh waved to them, and the professor waved back. Margot only stared. Hugh felt uncomfortable. He was sorry he had encountered them.

When he reached home the room was bright with blossoms. Margot was very quiet. She did not refer to their meeting and neither did he. But for some reason for which he could not account, he did not care to meet her eyes.

2.

On his way to the Casino, the next day, he missed the usual crowd at the edge of the "Cheese," and hunting up Mr. Tope inquired after Mrs. Fitzoswald.

"Haven't you heard? The Casino capitulated. They had the Major released and paid the fares of the whole family to England. They all went off this morning."

"And June Emslie?"

"I believe she got a job as a nurse girl or something with a family in Menton."

"Poor girl!"

"I say, let me tell you once more, there's the very wife for a lad like you. Why don't you marry her? Just as sweet as a rose, and badly up against it."

Hugh laughed and was glad of the diversion caused by the entrance of the Calderbrooks.

"Hullo! They've come back. I've missed them for some time," he exclaimed.

"They were lying low. No money! Now they've got out some more and are starting in again. I'm told they've sold or mortgaged their property in England and taken an apartment here. In a few years' time they will be just like all the other derelicts, haunting the Casino with no money to play, seedy, down at heel, sodden. You know the sort. Look around; you'll see enough of 'em."

Mrs. Calderbrook with a resolute look, was stalking in front; the girl Alicia, tall and slender, followed; the father with his wistful blue eye and drooping grey moustache trailed after them.

Hugh had heard that Alicia had been engaged to a young ex-aviator who had bought a ranch in Alberta. She had expected to have joined him as soon as possible, but Monte Carlo had thrown its spell over her. The thought of a lonely ranch on the prairie became unbearable and she broke off the engagement. She would probably never have another chance to marry.

To Hugh's surprise he did not find MacTaggart in his usual place under the Three Graces, but instead, in his seat was Mr. Gimp.

"Yep," said Mr. Gimp, sourly, "I'm old Mac's deputy. Hate like hell to do this but he's sick. He was getting out of bed, wanted to crawl down anyway, hated to lose his records. I made him go back and told him I'd take his place. It's all damned rot, you know. I might as well put down any old numbers and give them to him. It would be the same in the end. Howsoever, I'm conscientious."

"Is he very sick?"

"Nerves mostly. The success of your old friend, the professor, gave him a nasty jar. Kind o' destroyed his confidence in his own system. Say, you want to tell the old boy to be careful. He was in this morning early, played five shots, and got the bulls-eye twice. Carried off over a hundred thousand francs."

"Why should he be careful?"

"Because the Casino folks ain't goin' to stand that sort o' thing indefinitely. They're gettin' scared; and believe me, when they get scared they'll get desperate. It stands to reason, they ain't goin' to let themselves be ruined if they can help it. The old fellow seems to have some way of spotting a winner, or getting so close to it he breaks even. It's plain now it ain't all accident. Well, if he can make fifty thousand a day he can just as well make two hundred thousand ... and then let him look out."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, if he went on, they'd just have to close their doors. Not only the Casino would be ruined but the Principality. D'ye think they're goin' to stand for that?"

"They could expel him."

"What good would that do? He could put some one else on. No, the only way would be to suppress both him and his system; and believe me, they won't stick at half measures to do it. I don't say as they'll stoop to crime; but there's men in their pay as ain't so scrupulous. There's the existence of the whole community at stake. Accidents can happen. What's a man's life compared with the ruin of twenty thousand people? Believe me, the professor's playin' a dangerous game."

Hugh left Mr. Gimp sitting on one of the side benches still sourly taking down the hated numbers. He mooned round the rooms, thinking more of Mrs. Belmire than of the play. She had called him *naïve*; that had hurt his vanity. Was he naïve?

Mrs. Belmire had urged him to go on gambling, but he had baulked. Of course, she thought he had plenty of money, and that his winnings at roulette meant little to him. On the contrary they meant so much to him that he was determined to hold on to them at all costs. Of his fifty-five thousand five had already melted away. He had loaned her two and had spent another two on clothes. Perhaps it was the lesson that poverty had taught him in his youth, perhaps it was due to his Scottish ancestry, but he had a curious streak of prudence in him. He had deposited fifty thousand francs in the bank and was determined not to touch it.

Since his last spectacular performance at the tables, a reaction had set in. He found himself almost in the same state of indifference that he had been before he had begun to play. His sudden passion for gambling seemed to have spent itself, and he wondered how he could ever have been so obsessed.

Fifty thousand francs! Yes, he had been miraculously lucky. It seemed like providence. He would buy a car and a cottage, and spend his spare time in painting. As for Mrs. Belmire, he would tell her just how matters stood. But not just yet. Perhaps he would allow her to educate him a little first. No more roulette though; not even for tobacco money. No opportunities, however good, would tempt him. Confound Mrs. Belmire! She had said that she was dining that evening with Paul Vulning. She had made a point of telling him about it, he believed.

3.

He spent three days painting at Cap Ferrat. He started early each morning and returned late, drunk with fresh air and sunshine. Then on the fourth day he rested and found his way in due course to the Casino. Mr. Gimp was still replacing

MacTaggart.

"I expect Mac will be on deck again to-morrow," Mr. Gimp said in response to his inquiry. "He can't afford to lie off much longer. You know he's working on a mere two or three hundred francs of capital. He lives on fifteen francs a day. If he don't make 'em, he goes hungry. I know for a fact, lots of nights, he makes a supper of dry bread. That's what's killing him,—the worry of making his day. If he could afford to play with higher stakes, say louis instead of five franc pieces, it would be different. He's got all kinds of faith in his system; sure there's a fortune in it."

"I had no idea he was so short."

"Oh, there's lots like that,—a good front and behind it starvation.... Just look at that Dago Castelli,—there's a dashing, sporty player if you like."

The handsome Italian was playing a brilliant *paroli* game. He played between three tables, putting a louis on each of the simple chances. If they were swept away he replaced them; if they won he left them on with the louis of gain. He continued to leave on stake and gains for six wins, then he took them up. This did not occur very often; but when it did it netted him thirty-two louis. The game was an unusual one, lively, easy to play, and interesting. Castelli always played this same game, and frequently with great success. That day, however, runs of six were rare and his louis were being swept away like leaves before the wind.

Hugh persisted in his decision not to play. He saw chance after chance to win, but let them go by. He was finished. He turned from the game and watched the players. The woman in grey came and went, always throwing a louis on number one. He saw her play several times at three different tables but without success. After looking on awhile, she went slowly away. The latest rumour he had heard concerning her was that she was a celebrated actress who had recently been acquitted of a case of *crime passionel*.

As he was wondering who she really was, a curious conversation attracted his attention. A big, ruddy Englishman was talking to a small shabby individual with a blotched face and gold-rimmed spectacles. The little man was saying:

"In six weeks from to-day you will pay me fifteen thousand francs. To-day I give you thirteen thousand, five hundred. That is understood, is it not?"

"Yes, that is understood."

"But what about exchange? If the franc goes down in value, you will have gained. In that case you will pay me the difference. Is that understood?"

"Yes, that is understood."

The little man took from his note-book a prepared slip of paper and the Englishman signed it with a fountain pen. The little man counted out thirteen thousand five hundred francs in notes and his companion took them, and threw a thousand on the first table. He lost, and without trying to regain them went off to the private rooms.

Hugh decided to go home. As he was crossing the "Hall of Light," he saw Castelli sauntering in front of him. What a handsome chap that Italian was. What a favourite he must be with women. He was speaking to one now.... No, he had turned and was in conversation with the chief inspector of the Rooms. After a moment they disappeared together through one of the glass doors that works with a hidden catch.

On all sides Hugh heard wonderful accounts of the professor. For three days the old man had won seventy thousand francs a day. Half the profits of the Casino were going into his pocket. It was said the administration was becoming desperate.

4.

Mr. Jarvis Tope had a source of secret information. His landlord was a retired croupier and the two were excellent friends. In this way he came to know many matters not revealed to the public, and he was very discreet about disseminating his information.

"By the way," he said to Hugh, "you've heard that a gang are passing counterfeit louis in Casino money?"

"Yes."

"Well, they've got one of them at least. In his room in Nice they found a suit-case full of it. You've probably seen the chap."

"Who."

"His name is Castelli...."

"No!"

"Yes. They got him two days ago, but they have been watching him for weeks. Some very sharp person on the Casino detective staff noticed that he seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of louis. That put them on the track. They've expelled him from the Principality. Well, that's one worry off their shoulders. Their other one is your old friend, the professor. There they've got a tough nut to crack, I fear."

"Do you think they'll crack it?"

"Think! I know. A word in your ear. You tell the old chap to get out. Get him away in a car, far and fast. They've simply got to get that system, to get *him*. You understand. If they wish to save themselves from ruin, neither he nor his system must continue to exist. They're only waiting now to make sure he's got them. They can't buy him off. They can't let him escape. I say, I wouldn't be in that old man's shoes for all the money he's made. Sounds melodramatic, I know. You think I exaggerate. You don't know this place. Get him away, I say. Lose no time. Don't laugh. *I know*."

Hugh was so disturbed that he knocked that night on the old man's door.

"Who's there?"

"Your neighbour."

There was a turning of locks and the professor appeared. He had been working out his play for the next day.

"Come in. Do you know I was just coming to see you. I want to enter into an arrangement with you."

"Yes."

"I want protection. Twice I believe my life to have been attempted. Twice I have nearly been run down by a car. The first time I thought it was accidental, but I noticed it was the same car...."

"You must be mistaken."

"I hope so. In any case I want you to accompany me to the Casino and back, and to stay with me when I play, I'll pay you anything you like. A thousand francs a day if you agree."

"I don't want pay. I'll be glad to help you."

"Ah, I knew I could count on you. But look here, young man, I warn you it's dangerous."

"All right. But for your own sake, hadn't you better try to compromise with them?"

"Never. They've already approached me. They said they didn't believe in my system, but were willing to buy it. They offered me ten million francs in Casino stock. I told them, if they offered me a hundred million, I would refuse. They advised me to reconsider my decision. They were very courteous, said they were acting in the public interest and so on. Oh, they talked smoothly enough, but I could see the menace behind.... Look here!"

The professor went to the safe, twirled the combination, opened the heavy door and took out a leather bound folio.

"Here it is, the condensed result of all my labours, the explanation of my system. It is all in cypher. I want you to learn the six different cyphers I use."

"Why?"

"Because, if anything should happen to me, I want you to avenge me. All you have to do is to publish this to the world. Their ruin will be complete. Hush!" The Professor went quickly to the door and threw it open. No one was there.

"I'm getting so nervous. It seems to me I'm watched all the time. You'll promise, won't you? You'll be my protector, my assistant, my partner? You hesitate. Are you afraid?"

"Afraid! no."

"All right. Will you?"

"Yes."

"Good. Your hand on it. To-morrow we'll begin."

END OF BOOK THREE

BOOK FOUR

CHAPTER ONE

PROSPEROUS DAYS

1.

"By Goad!" said MacTaggart, sipping his second whiskey, "the auld man's a wizard. He's got me fair bamboozilt."

It was evening, and he and Hugh were sitting in the Café de Paris.

"I thocht I knew something o' roulette, but noo I maun jist go back tae Strathbungo and play dominoes. And you, young man, wi' that canny wee smile on yer gub,—I'm thinkin' ye ken mair aboot it than ye want tae tell."

Hugh shook his head.

"No, I can't grasp it. And yet I'm with the old man every day. The scientific explanation of it's beyond me. A mathematical mystery. Your system and all the others are based on the laws of average, the equilibrium. It's a calculation of chances, of probabilities. So far so good! The law of average does exist. It's all rot to say that the *coup* that's gone has no influence on the one that is to come. It has. It's true that the slots are all the same size and so each has an equal claim to the ball, but it is because of this equal chance that they will each receive it an equal number of times. I've seen a number come up three times in succession, yet I wouldn't hesitate to bet thirty-five to one, in thousands, that it won't come up a fourth time. Mechanically, maybe it has an equal chance with the others, but by the law of average, no."

"That's elementary," said MacTaggart.

"Yes, but it's as deep as the most of us get. We're all in the kindergarten class. We grope vaguely. We fumble with probabilities. As far as we go we are right; but we don't go far enough. We reach a point where our system breaks down. The law of average is too big for us to compress into a formula. In its larger workings it eludes us; we cannot regulate it. Our observations of it are too limited."

"I've got a record of over two hundred thousand consecutive *coups*," said MacTaggart.

"The professor has a record of over two million. The amount of work he has done is colossal. He has studied the numbers in their relation to one another; he has classified, co-ordinated, condensed. His system is one of correspondence and elimination. He has used the resources of mathematics to put it on a working basis. He has gone above and behind all the rest of us. His comprehension is larger; he has grasped the wider workings of the law of average. He has narrowed down and focussed the probability, and reduced the phenomena by the magnitude of his calculations to a minimum. The day of the year and the hour of the day has a bearing on the application of his system. That red note-book of his is full of algebraic formula. By looking at the last dozen numbers that have come up and referring to his formulæ, he has a hint how to play. But even then he is never quite sure. Sometimes he is only within eight numbers, sometimes within four. But that's good enough. He has been lucky in hitting the precise number one time out of three; but scientifically speaking he considers he ought to strike it only one time out of five."

"I've seen him strike it every day for the last month. He must hae averaged over sixty thoosand francs a day, I'm thinkin'. I expect the members o' the board are losin' lots o' sleep them days. It's no' a question of him winnin', but how much is he goin' tae win. They've got old Bob Bender watchin' him every time he plays. If it wisna that you were everlastingly doin' the watch dog some one would get a graup o' that wee book he's forever keekin intae. Though I don't suppose they'd mak' much o' it, wi' a' thae queer, crabbed letters an' figures. I'm sure they'd be gled tae gi' him a year's profits if he'd stop. Aye, or pay a fortune tae any one that wad stop him. But then he's got you for a bodyguard."

"Yes, he never goes out without me."

"Aye, ye're a cautious young man. I'm sometimes thinkin' ye've got a touch o' the Scot in ye. I hope ye've no' been an' squandert that money ye were sae lucky as tae win?"

"No, the most of it's in the bank. I won't touch it for gambling purposes. In fact, I think I've finished."

"I'm wishin' I wis masel'. I'm sick o' the place, but I must stay until I mak' enough to go home no' lookin' like a tramp. Ye

ken I still believe in ma system."

"I tell you what," said Hugh, "why don't you play with a bigger unit? You play with five franc stakes and you make from four to eight pieces every day. Why not increase your unit to a hundred francs, and then you'll make from four to eight hundred francs a day."

"I hav' nae the capital."

"Suppose I lend you a thousand francs."

"I micht lose it."

"I tell you.... You play with my thousand francs, playing hundred franc stakes, and I'll take the risk of you losing. When you win you can pay me a quarter of your gains."

"All right. That's fair enough. I'll start to-morrow if ye like."

Hugh gave MacTaggart a *mille* note, and every evening MacTaggart hunted him up and handed over a hundred and sometimes two hundred francs.

2.

For weeks the great system of the professor had been successful. His bank book showed a credit of over two million francs. Every day accompanied by Hugh, he made his triumphal entry into the Casino surrounded by an excited and admiring throng. He made no other public appearance and was a storm centre of curiosity. Hugh acted as the old man's manager and saw to it that his mystery was preserved. He interviewed reporters, and kept off the curious; for the professor was fast becoming a character of international fame. The great press agencies chronicled his success; the great dailies paragraphed him; his portrait graced the picture page of the *Daily Mail*. There were articles about him in the illustrated weeklies; and even the monthly journals devoted to science began to consider him seriously. He and Hugh were snapshotted a dozen times a day. All the well-known roulette players, Speranza, Dr. Ludus, Max Imum and Silas Doolittle wrote long letters to the papers diagnosing his famous system. Never had the Casino had such advertising—yet it was costing them too much.

The old man never broke the bank. There was nothing sensational about his play. It was almost monotonous in its certitude; it had the air even of a commercial transaction in which he had come to collect a daily debt. It was this cold-blooded, business-like precision that alarmed them. It was almost cynical; it seemed to say: "Look out. I'm letting you off easy now, but when I proceed to tighten up the cinch, God help you."

An imaginative reporter had said that Hugh was the professor's nephew, and they both agreed to adopt this suggestion. Indeed, as time went on, Hugh himself began to think of the old man as a real uncle. At times it seemed almost impossible that they were not related.

Hugh had taken to smoking excellent cigars. Why not? MacTaggart was turning in over a thousand a week. He felt some compunction in accepting this; but MacTaggart was making three times as much for himself, and was more than satisfied. He could well afford to be extravagant in other directions as well. There was Mrs. Belmore, for instance. He took her to dinner a great deal, and out motoring as well. Apart from that he and Margot still lived in the same simple way.

One morning as Hugh sat smoking in the professor's den, he observed the old man closely.

"He's easily good for another ten years," he thought. "Looks rather like Karl Marx, burly shoulders, clear, shrewd eyes. A sane man except for his fanatic obsession to down the Casino."

The professor interrupted his reflections by saying:

"My boy, I've come to a great decision." He paused impressively. "I'm an old man, and I am afraid that death may come on me unawares, my life work unfinished. I have decided that you are to carry it on. You shall begin where I leave off. I am going to instruct you in the system. You shall take the avenging sword from my failing grasp."

Hugh made a gesture of protest. "I say, professor, it's awfully good of you. I assure you I'm humbly grateful; but really I'm

quite unworthy."

"I know of no one so worthy."

"Oh, no, the honour's too great. Besides, I've made up my mind never to play again. A resolution's a resolution, you know."

"I know. You have force of will. But think.... You are not playing for yourself but for humanity. Yours will be a mission, the ridding society of a dangerous pest. In destroying the Casino you will be God's avenger."

"But, professor, I'm just a common ordinary sort of chap. I don't want to be anybody's avenger. As for the Casino, I don't bear it any ill will. If I had lost, perhaps I might, but it has treated me well. Of course, I know it's a plague spot, a menace to mankind and all that sort of thing, but that's none of my business as far as I can see."

The professor looked both grieved and shocked. "But don't you want to be a benefactor to mankind? Don't you want to fulfil a great destiny, to be a reformer, the leader of a new crusade?"

"No, professor, I admit with shame I don't want to be any of those things. All I want is to live a quiet life and make a comfortable living. There's a cottage with a garden and a second-hand Panhard I have my eye on. Between them I can rub along. Then on off days, I'll paint. I've just begun to get the feeling of the place, and I think I can do good work. But there! You're not an artist. You won't understand."

The professor seemed quite crushed. He sat silent and thoughtful. Finally he said:

"No, I'm not an artist. I'm a man of science, and for that reason I don't want to see my life-work lost to the world. Well then, if you refuse to be my disciple, will you be my trustee? You refuse to play for me,—will you see that the system is published after my death? It is a contribution to science; at the same time by its divination of the laws of chance, it will destroy the spirit of gambling. Not only the Casino of Monte Carlo, but gambling institutions all over the world will fall. The Casino is only an item in my programme. I destroy chance; I replace it with certitude. My work is not complete, but others will follow. They will perfect it. Will you then do this much for me? Will you see my great work in print?"

"Yes, I'll do that. I promise. But hang it all, professor, you've got another thirty years to live."

"One never knows. There have been no attempts on my life lately, but I must take no chances. I will begin now and teach you all there is to know."

The professor opened his safe and took from it a thick folio bound in limp leather.

"*Voila!* My treatise. It's all there, the condensed result of the labour of thirty years. The red note-book contains the application of my system to roulette; but in this folio is the result of all my researches, the scientific explanation of the invention by which I annihilate chance. Look at it."

"But it's all in cypher."

"Yes, all. Not one cypher but many. For the alphabet alone I have three different sets of characters; for the figures, six. You will have to learn over a hundred symbols before you can translate this. And these must not be put on paper; they must be carried in the head. I will teach them to you but you must promise never to write them. I have protected myself well. Without the cypher keys that folio is valueless."

So Hugh spent the next few days committing to memory the hundred odd cypher characters of the professor's great discovery.

3.

When he was not engaged with the professor, he occupied most of his time dangling after Mrs. Belmore. She had definitely attached him to her train of admirers and he had fallen in line, not without a certain ill grace. The life she led was at variance with his tastes; and while he submitted to her charm, he was constantly on the point of rebellion. He was like a man who chafes at his chains but cannot break them. He resented the easy way in which she took his homage for granted. There were moments when he almost hated her. What rotten luck to fall in love with a woman so far beyond and

above him! If it had only been June Emslie, or even Margot. But who can help these things? In the end he decided to let himself drift,—with a certain regard to the direction of his drifting.

Perhaps Paul Vulning was to some extent responsible for his subjection. He detested the man cordially and was jealous of the friendship between him and Mrs. Belmire. When he saw them together he was possessed by an irresponsible rage and tortured by all sorts of jealous imaginings. If it had only been Fetterstein or the old General.... But Vulning!

She had not borrowed any money from him lately, although she was always urging him to play again. The last time she had borrowed from him had set him thinking. He had suffered so much from the want of money that now he was painfully aware of its value. At all costs he was determined to hang on to his fifty thousand francs. He would lend her another thousand but no more. That was the breaking point, he told himself.

"In any case," he thought, "I have only to tell her my position and she'll chuck me ignominiously. She thinks I'm a rich somebody. When she learns I'm a poor nobody then ... But I won't tell her yet awhile. I enjoy very much being with her, and undoubtedly I am learning a good deal from her. 'Sophisticating me,' she calls it. Well, I suppose that sort of thing is part of a chap's education. I will have to regard it as a return for the money I have lent her, and which, poor thing, I am sure she will never return. Confound the woman! I don't know what's got into me. I can't get her out of my head."

One day he would vow he was finished with her, the next he would be crazy to see her again. Even when he was with her, his irritation sometimes drove him to the point of rebellion. For instance, there was the evening that they had supper at the High Life.

It was she who had suggested that they go there, and rather gloomily he had complied. They had gone first to the Casino and spent some time in the private room, for Mrs. Belmire disdained the ordinary one. After watching the play for awhile she had suggested:

"Why don't you try your luck? It's stupid to look on and not risk anything."

"No, thanks, I don't care to."

"Oh, come on. You always win. Even if you lose, what do a few thousands matter to you when you have won so enormously? Even I saw you."

He sighed gloomily.

"Yes, you saw me win but—you didn't see me lose."

"Of course, poor boy, I know one can't always win. If you won't play, give me some money and I'll play for you."

He took a hundred franc note from his pocket and handed it to her. She looked at it with a surprised contempt that nettled him. As if it were dirt she threw it on the first table. Of course it was swept away.

"There!" she said pettishly, "that's gone. Well, it's no use staying here if we don't play. It's tiresome. Let's go where there's music and dancing."

They went to the High Life, a place he disliked. It had a rakehell atmosphere, and suggested debauch. He also resented the obvious fact that she was quite at home there.

"Faugh! a den of gilded corruption!" he was thinking, when an insinuating head-waiter presented a wine card and suggested a certain expensive brand of champagne.

"I know it's the kind madam prefers," he murmured.

"Do order a bottle," said Mrs. Belmire carelessly.

Hugh ordered, and at her further suggestion he demanded a *homard American*; the bill came to two hundred francs. He was annoyed.

"Damned robbers," he thought. "Well, they won't get ahead of me on the champagne. I'll finish the bottle."

As he drank the place became more and more cheerful. He felt very strong and very playful. He clutched Mrs. Belmire's

arm; once even he pinched her cheek and called her Marion. She looked at him curiously. There is no saying to what further indiscretions his exhilaration might have prompted him, had not there at that moment occurred the episode of the *Nouveau Riche* and the Sick Soldier.

4.

The *Nouveau Riche* was all a *nouveau riche* should be, big, bloated and boastful. He had been a cobbler before the war, but had made a fortune in shoe contracts. The Soldier should never have been there at all. Some friends, however, had dragged him in; and he sat looking thin, pale, and wretchedly out of place.

The *Nouveau Riche* was playfully emptying a bottle of champagne over a small palm tree. The manager expostulated. It was doubtful if palms, however thirsty, would appreciate the virtue of Chateau Margaux, but the *Nouveau Riche* waved him aside.

"Put your damned palm on the bill," he said, "and bring me a fresh bottle." He was proceeding to pour this, too, on the unfortunate plant when the Sick Soldier sprang up.

"I've had enough," he cried, and his black eyes flashed in his white face. He wrenched the bottle from the man's hand. "You swine, you! Where I come from there are men who would give their heart's blood for a mouthful of that wine you're wasting like filthy water."

The *Nouveau Riche* got purple in the face; the Soldier was gripping the loose flesh of his throat and pouring the rest of the champagne over his head.

"Here you sit and swill and guzzle," he went on, "while my comrades out there in the desert are dying from hunger and thirst. In Syria ... Yes, I come from Syria where we crawled on our bellies on the sand, crawled to the water tanks to steal a few precious drops and were shot for it like mad dogs. We buried a dead horse and dug it up a week later and ate it. Half of us died in agony, the rest are wrecks—like me. And now when I see a pig like you squandering and wasting, and think of my pals out there, suffering, starving, panting with thirst, I tell you it makes me sick.... Oh, if I only had you out there, you rotten hog ..."

There seemed every prospect of a row, but the Man from Syria suddenly collapsed and his friends led him away.

"This is a beastly hole," said Hugh abruptly. "Let's get out of it."

There was something hard and cynical in Mrs. Belmire's laugh as she replied: "Why should we? I think it's rather amusing."

"Amusing!" he retorted savagely. "You seem to think of nothing but being amused. One would think you lived for amusement."

"Why, so I do, I believe. What better is there to live for? What do you live for?"

As he could not think of any worthy object that inspired his life he did not reply, and they sat in silence. Their drive home was silent also, but at the door of the Pension Pizzicato she held his hand.

"We haven't quarrelled, have we?"

"No, why?"

"You're so queer. Not a bit nice. I say, won't you come up to my room and smoke a cigarette? It's so late we can slip upstairs without meeting any one."

An instinct of danger warned him. At the moment, too, she really repelled him.

"No, I'm tired. I want to go home."

But she still held his hand with a soft pressure.

"Can't I coax you? Please come. There's something very important I want to talk to you about."

"What is it? Can't you tell me here?"

"Yes, but ... I was thinking about that man who spilled the champagne. Of course, he was an awful brute, but what heaps of money he must have. What a nuisance money is! It's so sordid and yet one's just got to have it."

He knew what was coming.

"I say, you're the best pal I've got here. I don't know what I'd do without you. I'm in awful difficulties. Debts all round. Horrid people keep pressing me to pay their wretched bills. Oh, I'm only a lonely, unprotected woman...."

Here Mrs. Belmire began to cry.

"Can't you lend me ten thousand francs, dear boy?"

"No."

He was surprised at the explosive vehemence of his tone. The lady was even more surprised. Her tears ceased suddenly. With a kind of pained dignity she drew herself up.

"Good night," she said icily and then turning sharply, left him alone with the sea and the stars.

CHAPTER TWO

A BURGLAR AND A ROW

1.

When he got home he found Margot was still up. She was sewing under the lamp-glow, her coiled mass of hair a bright-gold as she bent over her work, her face pale but full of patient sweetness. As Hugh stood there in his evening dress, flushed and reeking of wine, the eyes she raised to him were tired and sad.

Since the time she had met him with Mrs. Belmire there had been a change in her manner towards him. No longer did she make timid overtures of friendship, no longer tell him of the day's doings. She had ceased to laugh and sing, and had become very quiet and reserved. She toiled continually with her needle.

It always irritated him to see her working so hard; and to-night, being in a bad humour, he said crossly: "Not in bed yet! You'll hurt your eyes, you know."

"I'm sorry. I'm just going. I stayed up because I wanted to see you about something."

"Yes, what?"

"I've managed to make two hundred francs by my sewing. I don't want to be a burden on you any longer. I'm going back to Paris to work in an *atelier*. I'm going to-morrow morning."

He was quite taken aback. He stared for a moment; then a steady, serious look came into his eyes. Going forward he took her hand firmly.

"Do you really mean that?"

"Yes. I've been planning it for some time."

"And you haven't said anything."

"I scarcely ever see you now. You're so busy during the day and get home so late at night."

He hesitated, staring thoughtfully at the lamp flame. His emotions were conflicting. Here was a chance to free himself from all responsibility regarding her. Sooner or later the separation would have to come, why not now while she was reconciled to it? Quickly he made up his mind.

"Look here, Margot, don't go ... not just yet. Stay at least a little while longer. I've got so used to you. I'll miss you awfully. Please stay, won't you?"

"But what's the good of staying?"

"I don't know. I just feel I can't let you go. I know I'm asking a selfish thing, but please don't leave me just yet."

"Very well."

"You'll stay? Thank you. You're a good little pal. The best of the lot. Good-night..."

The following day his mood changed. His mind was full of Mrs. Belmire again. After all, he thought, he had been rather rough. He would lend her the money; he would seek her out that very afternoon.

Then an event occurred that changed the whole current of his thoughts.

2.

For two days Monte Carlo had been at the mercy of the Mistral. Many strange ships were sheltering in the narrow harbour that with its concrete arms fended back the savage seas; the palms in the gardens lashed furiously and the air

was full of flying splinters.

All that morning the sky had been gloomy and towards noon the clouds over the Tête du Chien deepened to a purple black. The mountain seemed to cast a sinister shadow over the Condamine, and the pink roofs darkened to a dull crimson. Hugh suggested to the professor that they had better stay at home, but the old man insisted upon going to the Rooms. As they left the house they heard the first ominous growl of the thunder. Hugh wanted to take a carriage but again his companion refused.

"No," he said, "the walk to and from the Casino is the only exercise I get since that balcony business."

The business of the balcony had been a bad one. Across the front of the house, just outside their windows, ran a flimsy wooden balcony, with a division of lattice work between each room. The professor used to march up and down his portion of the balcony, while Hugh and Margot often sat in theirs.

One Sunday evening they were all on the balcony when they heard a crack, followed by a rending crash. As it happened both Hugh and Margot were near the window, and threw themselves backwards. The professor, too, saved himself by clutching at the sill of his window. The entire balcony collapsed. It overturned, hung for a moment, then fell with a rending of timbers. On examining the debris Hugh found that the supports had been sawn almost through, and that the cuts were quite fresh. Some one had evidently done it during the night.

A week later when Hugh was returning home after midnight a man rushed past him on the stairs. On the landing beside his door a pungent smoke was coming from a sack of shavings. Beside it was a large can of petrol. He beat out the fire. Had he arrived five minutes later the place would have been in flames. After that he got some ropes, so that in the case of future attempts to fire the place, they might escape by the windows. He also bought a Browning pistol.

That morning, as they entered the Casino, there was a livid blaze of lightning, followed almost immediately by a crash of thunder. Perhaps the professor was affected by the storm, for his game was not so successful as usual; he played seven *coups* before he struck a winning number. Though his winnings were only thirty thousand francs, he decided that he had had enough and rose from the table. They heard the roar of the rain on the great dome above them, and found on going to the entrance a most appalling downpour. It was falling in crystal rods that beat the oozing earth to bubbles. There was not a soul in sight.

"It's useless trying to get a cab," said Hugh. "Let us go back to the atrium and wait till it clears up."

They took a seat on one of the benches at the side of the refreshment bar and waited for an hour without any sign of the torrent abating. Every now and then Hugh would go to the door and look out. The day had darkened to a wan twilight in which the silver shafts of rain pearly the pools and rivulets.

"One might as well stand under a shower-bath as go out in that," thought Hugh. "It would be the death of the professor." And again he sighed for a voiture.

As he looked out for the tenth time he saw Margot making her way to the Casino through sheets-of water. She wore his Burberry and the rain ran off her in streams. She was panting and pale with excitement.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, I'm so glad I've found you. When the professor came back alone, I was afraid something was wrong."

"Professor come back alone!... what do you mean?"

"Why, he's there, in his room. When I heard him come up the stairs and enter, I went to see if you were there, too. As I knocked at the door, I heard him moving about inside. I knocked again, but there was no answer. All was quiet. What with the storm and everything else I got nervous and excited. After knocking a couple of times more I came here to find you."

Hugh listened with growing amazement.

"Are you quite sure there's some one in the professor's room?"

"Yes, yes!"

Leading her into the atrium he pointed to the buffet.

"There's the professor."

"But the other ... the man in the house ... now...."

"Stay with the professor. Don't leave him. This looks serious."

Without waiting for the coat she held out to him, he rushed into the rain and down the long steep hill, splashing through water and mud. In a few minutes, drenched and breathless, he reached the house. He mounted the stairs softly, pistol in hand. Whoever had entered had left the door on the latch. He burst into the room.

A man who had been bending over the steel safe rose and swung around.

"Don't shoot," he said sharply. He stood there, erect composed, smiling.

"Krantz!"

"Precisely. What a pity you did not come ten minutes later. Then I should have finished my investigations."

"Your burglary, you mean. I've a good mind to call the police."

"My dear man, I *am* the police."

"I am justified in shooting you."

"If you did, you would surely regret it. Remember, young man, you're not in England, you're not in France; you're in Monaco."

"Does that justify *you*?"

"When the welfare of our beloved Principality is at stake, I am justified in many things,—even in the examination of private strong boxes."

"Assassination too, I suppose."

"Oh no! I draw the line at that. In the Principality we strongly disapprove of all violent measures."

"What about the balcony, and the attempt to fire the house?"

"I assure you, on my honour, I had nothing to do with either. Of course, I am unable to answer for the zeal of my subordinates. They are Monegasques and patriots. You can understand their point of view. They believe that one man's life weighs as nothing against the welfare of the community. They would willingly sacrifice their lives for their country; but they prefer to sacrifice some one else's life. They are a crude and violent race. You must excuse their ardour."

"So you know nothing of those two attempts."

"Officially, no. Of course, privately I have my ideas. I did not go into the matter very closely. You see I have a sense of delicacy, of tact. I am modern in my conceptions; I deprecate the gentle art of assassination. But again I repeat I am not responsible for the excessive zeal of my subordinates. They are just grown up children, many of them, passionate and impulsive. In the same way those whom I serve are not responsible for my acts,—this investigation, for instance. In fact, I am sure they would condemn it in the strongest of terms. Abuse of authority, they would call it, and wax duly indignant. But please put away that silly little pistol you are fingering so nervously. It annoys me. I have no sense of the dramatic."

Hugh lowered his hand and Krantz went on with his urbane smile:

"You know I saved all your lives on one occasion. One of my gentle patriots wanted to put a charge of dynamite under your rooms and blow you to the stars. Fortunately I found out in time, and prevented it. After all it would have caused a great scandal. Violence and scandal we do not like; we want everything to run smoothly in this most favoured of spots. That's what I'm here for,—to see that things run smoothly. That is why a moment ago you found me attempting the combination of that safe. And now having failed in my mission, I presume you will allow me to go."

With that Krantz made a deep bow and passed from the room. Hugh stared after his retreating back as he leisurely descended the narrow stairway.

3.

Now that Hugh's gambling fever had abated he found himself looking at the players with apathy, even with disgust. He was purged, not by loss, but by gain. The thought of the fifty thousand francs he had wrested from the bank was like honey to him. Never would he give them a chance to win it back. The Casino itself had also ceased to interest him. Incidents that had been at first exciting, now appeared monotonous. The human debris no longer fascinated him. The spectacle of the squirming, scrabbling mob bored him. The systematizers with their fatuous convictions aroused his contempt; the besotted votaries of the game, his pity. More than all he hated the careless rich who squandered in an idle hour what would have kept many a widow from misery and many an orphan from shame.

More than ever he thought of that little cottage at Villefranche, between the spent mountains and the dreamy sea; and of that Panhard he was going to buy at a bargain price. He confided his discontent to the professor.

"I'm getting awfully fed up with Monte. We can't go on indefinitely. Isn't it time that you speeded up the system a little?"

"You are right," sighed the professor, "but it fatigues me so, and the atmosphere of the Rooms aggravates my catarrh. Why will you not play? You are well instructed now."

"I don't want to. As I said before, I don't hate the Casino. While I wouldn't move a finger to prevent their ruin, I wouldn't go out of my way to accomplish it. Then again, if I played, I should want to play for myself, not for society. To hell with society! It never did anything for me. Up to now I've had to fight and struggle. It is by sheer luck that I've got a little working capital and I mean to make the most of it. I'm only a selfish practical individual. I've no consuming wish to benefit mankind, to do the 'leave the world better than I found it,' sort of thing. If ever I have enough to keep me in modest comfort, I'll stop work and spend my time painting. No, I fear I'm no philanthropist.... How much do you want to win for your schemes before you proceed to give the Casino the final knock out?"

"Fifty million."

"And we have only ten. Heigh ho! I tell you I don't think I can stick it out."

"I quite understand. Try to endure it two weeks more and then we'll see."

Hugh continued to accompany the professor and to watch him with monotonous certainty make his seventy or eighty thousand francs a day. His association with the old man had made him quite a celebrated character. He shone with a reflected radiance, a moon to the old man's sun. He was supposed to be a partner, a sharer in the colossal fortune, the professor's heir and successor.

Many of the players were leaving Monte Carlo, for the season was over. Mr. Tope had returned to his Kentish cottage and his roses. The Calderbrooks, not being able to afford the mountains, had convinced themselves that Monte was even more charming in summer than in winter. The father looked tired, but amiably acquiesced.

"Of course," said Mrs. Calderbrook, "we don't promise to stay. If we have a bit of luck at the tables, we might take a month or two at Chamounix."

The tall Brazilian with the spade-shaped beard was still a dominating figure in the Rooms. He wore great, horn-rimmed spectacles of a yellowish colour and walked up and down in an impeccable costume of white serge, his hands behind his back, his carriage that of deliberate dignity. He looked at the women harder than was necessary, though he repulsed all their efforts to speak with him. Once Hugh saw him turn to stare at the tall female in grey. In spite of the growing heat she continued to wear her veil and remained as mysterious as ever. She came less frequently, but still seemed to have lots of money.

Of the old crowd there remained only MacTaggart and Mr. Gimp and they made their exit from the scene in a very sensational manner.

4.

As MacTaggart had already paid him two thousand francs, Hugh insisted on cancelling the debt between them. MacTaggart was over eight thousand francs ahead, and continued to play with hundred franc counters. Curiously enough, his luck began to leave him as soon as he gambled entirely for himself.

"It's fair playin' auld Harry wi' ma nerves," he said. "The ither day I near fented at the table. After a' they years, I'm thinkin', I'll hea tae gie it up. Ma system's willin' but the flesh is weak. I'm gettin' that every time I put a stake on the table ma hert dings like an alarm clock. An' ma temper, I don't know whit I'm no' capable o' daein' at times. It's as if I had a kind o' a brain-storm. There's whiles I'm fair feart for masel'. I often think that if I wis once mair back in ma wee shop in Strathbungo, I'd never want tae see a roulette wheel for the rest o' ma days."

"What kind of a shop had you?"

"Im a taxidermist, and though I say it masel', there's no' a better. It's a nice quiet trade, soothin' tae the nerves. That's whit's the matter wi' me, ma nerves."

MacTaggart would probably have stayed until he had lost all his gains, had not a kindly fate stepped in and settled the matter for him.

He had been playing for three hours,—losing all the time. His head ached, his nerves were raw, his temper near to the breaking point. He wanted to smoke a cigarette in the atrium, but had to leave some one to take down his numbers. Beside him was a lady who was playing occasionally. She looked hot and very tired. MacTaggart asked her if she would mind occupying his seat for half an hour. She gladly consented, and he rose to give her the place. At the same moment, a red, truculent-looking Englishman on his other side, quickly put a louis on the table in front of MacTaggart.

"I claim the place," he said sharply.

MacTaggart turned and glared at him. "But I'm givin' the place tae the leddy," he said.

"The place is mine," said the man. "You rose and I put down my money. I appeal to the *Chef du Table*."

The latter nodded. "By all the rules the place is monsieur's; monsieur has put down his money, marking the place."

MacTaggart was angry. He knew the croupiers, did not like him, that they always decided against him if possible. He sat down again.

"All right," he said, "in that case I'll jist keep ma place. I'll sit here till Hell freezes over before ye get it."

The face of the Englishman grew very red. His voice rose nastily.

"But I insist on having the place. This man rose and I put my money down. The place is clearly mine."

"Yes," said the *Chef du Table*, "it is evident that the place is monsieur's."

"I'll see ye dawmed firrst," said MacTaggart, sitting square. "There's no force in Monte Carlo 'ill budge me from this spot. Tak' awaw yer dirrty money...."

He started to push away the man's louis that lay in front of him.

"Here, don't touch my money. Don't dare to touch my money," the Englishman exclaimed.

MacTaggart's reply was to take the louis and flip it back at him. Every one was aghast. It was unheard of, an outrage. One of the lymphatic lackeys recovered the money and handed it to its owner, who was boiling over with rage. There is no knowing how the row might have ended had not a player opposite risen to catch a train, and the *Chef*, with great presence of mind, promptly claimed the place for the Englishman. The situation was saved. *Tant Mieux*. That mad Ecosais looked quite dangerous.

MacTaggart and the red-faced man sat opposite each other, and muttered, growled, and glared. Then the second incident occurred. Just as the ball was about to drop, MacTaggart pushed a placque to the croupier. "Passe, please."

But the croupier did not hear him correctly and threw it on pair, and at that moment the ball fell.

"*Vingt sept, passe impair et noir.*"

"But I telt ye tae pit it on passe," said MacTaggart.

"No, monsieur said pair," declared the croupier.

The *Chef* Was appealed to. "Monsieur should have seen that his money was rightly staked," said the *Chef* looking annoyed.

"Pay me," cried MacTaggart, rising and clenching his fist.

He was ignored and the ball started for the next spin. Then MacTaggart did something unprecedented, something outrageous. He took up one of the *rateaus* and jammed it in the bowl of the wheel.

"By Goad," said MacTaggart, "I'll stop the bloody game till ye pay me."

At this moment the red faced man came in to the discussion. "I knew he was a crook," he jeered. "Turn the beggar out."

MacTaggart stared at him. For a moment he could not believe his ears, then a great glow came into his eyes and he swung the *rateau* and brought it down on the man's head.

"Let me get at him," he roared, "I'll show him."

The *Chef* laid a detaining hand on his shoulder, but MacTaggart swung round and caught him on the chin. The *Chef* went from his high chair like a ninepin. Shouting something in Gaelic, MacTaggart sprang on the table. Two croupiers tried to hold him back; but, using the *rateau* like a claymore, he rapped each on the head and with a leap was on the man with the red face.

"Turn me oot!" he shouted. "It wad tak a dizzen o' the likes o' you tae dae it."

He had the big man down and was pounding him with both fists, when four of the lethargic lackeys threw themselves into the fray. MacTaggart saw red. He ran amuck. Right and left he struck in Berserker rage. His long arms were like flails before which men went down; croupiers, attendants, inspectors, all staggered back beneath his blows. A superintendent who ran up to see what was wrong, received a punch that landed him on his back. As MacTaggart burst through the doorway into the "Hall of Gloom," the director of the games rushed up.

"Look out," said the big Scotchman, "or as sure as my name's Galloway MacTaggart I'll fell ye tae the floor."

The director did not look out and was duly downed. Then a group of lackeys, by a concerted rush, succeeded in mastering him. They knocked him down and hung onto his heaving arms and legs. They lifted him to carry him to the door. The MacTaggart was conquered.

But was he? No, not yet. From the other end of the "Hall of Light" a shrill yell suddenly split the air. It was something between the execration of a college football coach, and the war whoop of a red Indian. A little white-haired gentleman was covering the intervening space in great leaps and bounds. He roared and whirled his arms, his eyes aflame, his very hair bristling with fury. It was Mr. Gimp.

The attendants released MacTaggart, and turned to face this new foe. The fight began all over again.

It was Homeric, for Mr. Gimp had once been a bantam champion of the ring. There were bloody noses and broken teeth; there were curses and cries of pain; there were black eyes and bruised ribs before the indomitable two, overwhelmed by numbers, were carried to the door. The fray had lasted a quarter of an hour.

"Weel," said MacTaggart that night as they sat in Quinto's, "I'm thinkin', Gimpy, auld man, we've lost oor tickets. We'll no' daur show oor faces in that place ony mair."

"No," said Mr. Gimp, "the spell's broken at last. I'm a free man. To-morrow I'm off to the land where the handshake's warmer."

"An' me fur Strathbungo. Eh, man, they got us oot, but it took a score o' them tae dae it. An' by Goad! we laft oor mark on every mither's son."

CHAPTER THREE

TEMPTATION

1.

Hugh continued to be haunted by thoughts of Mrs. Belmire. At times he felt he would throw up everything to follow her; at others he consigned her to the devil. He had resolved to let her make the first advance and carefully avoided meeting her.

One day on returning home, Margot handed him an envelope bearing the initials M. B. He was not altogether pleased and put it in his pocket until he should be alone. He tore it open later and read:

"How could I be so horrid to you the last time we met? Can you forgive me enough to meet me this evening at Ciro's at ten o'clock? It will probably be adieu, I am leaving for Vichy on Friday."

The humility of the note touched him. She had put herself in the wrong. Nothing like a show of indifference with women, he thought. His vanity was flattered. A sentiment of generosity akin to tenderness glowed in him. Quite eagerly he awaited the evening.

She arrived a little late, wearing a very exquisite evening gown. She rightly believed that her shoulders and arms added to her charm. She took his hand in a firm, good-fellow grip. As she sat down he was conscious of the perfume she affected. She seemed to him to be stunning, the real thing, a *femme de luxe*.

Her manner was subdued to the point of mournfulness. It was one of her favourite moods and was in harmony with the melancholy of the restaurant. The orchestra played dispiritedly. Two teams of professional dancers shimmied in a forlorn fashion. Even the waiters looked listless.

"This place will be closing soon," she sighed. "Monte is dying. All the right sort have gone already. I feel almost like a derelict. I'm bored to the verge of tears. For God's sake do something to console me. Buy me a bottle of Cliquot."

When the waiter brought it in its silver bucket of ice, the bottle looked very comforting. As they sipped, she grew more cheerful.

"Thank goodness I'm going. I say, why don't you come, too? Do the giddy round,—Paris for the Grand Prix, Deauville, Biarritz,—one meets the same crowd at all these places, the world that lives to enjoy itself. Let's enjoy ourselves."

"I don't belong to that world. I'm a quiet chap. I want a quiet life."

"And I—I want a gay one. But I'm lonely. God! at times I'm so lonely, I could shoot myself or get drunk. I say, let's get drunk to-night."

"You're joking."

"Yes, I suppose I am. But that's just how I feel. I don't know why. Perhaps its because I won't see you again. Oh, I say,—be a priceless darling. Do come."

He shrugged his shoulders. He felt her power, the melting appeal of her eyes, the caress of her hand. Passion was invading him. He wanted to seize her, crush her, hurt her. "Why not," he thought, "a month of that gay life! It would cost a good deal, but perhaps it would be worth it. A delirious month...." Then he heard himself saying:

"No, it's no use. I can't go."

She stamped her foot pettishly. The spell was broken. After a little she resumed:

"Well, if you won't come with me, you won't refuse to help me. I'm in debt all round. I owe quite a lot of money to the pension, too. I don't know how much. I have no head for figures. I'm like a child in financial matters. I say, dear boy, you'll lend me a bit, won't you? I've counted on you, you know."

He winced. His lips tightened.

"How much?"

"Oh, a little bunch of *milles*. Ten or twenty will do. What does it matter to you? You're rich. You're making millions. You're not stingy, are you?"

He felt the time had come for an explanation. "Look here," he said, "you're all wrong. You assumed from the start I was a somebody and had something. I'm really a nobody and I have nothing. You might even call me an adventurer. I came here broken in health and practically penniless. Now I am strong and fit again. And I have some money, fifty thousand francs, which I managed to wrench from the Casino. That's all I've got, I swear it. I'm not mean, but I've known bitter poverty and don't want to know it again."

She was looking at him in sheer amazement. He warmed to his subject, and spoke with a gusto that was almost malicious.

"That money means life to me. It means a home, a chance to make a living by healthy, agreeable work. I'm going to buy a car. Next year if you're here and you see me standing in line waiting for a job, you can hire me. Now you know me. That's the sort I am, a penniless adventurer. I should have told you before, but I enjoyed being with you so much that I postponed the confession. Well, that's over any way. And now what are you going to do?"

For a full minute she was speechless. Then she said breathlessly:

"But you are making millions, you and that old man. Every one knows it. You are partners...."

"No, not partners. I never touch a *sou* of what he makes."

"But ... he's like a father to you. He'll give you anything you want. A million if you ask. I am sure."

"I don't intend to ask."

"I don't understand," said Mrs. Belmire.

"No, I don't think you do; I don't think you can. I'm sorry, but ... Hullo! there's that fellow Vulning. By Jove! he's coming in here. Drunk as a tinker, too, I'll swear."

She shrugged her beautiful shoulders. She sat silent, her chin propped on her hands, staring into vacancy with stormy, scornful eyes. Yes, she was lovely. Now that he had told her everything he was half sorry. She was lost to him. She would turn on him presently, and call him a most unmerciful bounder. Well, he deserved it. He waited. He felt sorry for her, she seemed so bowled over. Then suddenly she turned to him, fixing him with an intense gaze.

"I counted on you. Oh, how I counted on you!"

Tears and reproach were in her voice. At that moment he almost yielded, almost promised her the money. Even as he hesitated, his attention was attracted by Paul Vulning.

Vulning was standing at the bar. He was dressed in a golfing suit and looked as if he had been on a long debauch. His face was puffy and muddily red, his cheeks and chin bristly; his eyes fishy when they were not wild. He stared round the room, and recognized Mrs. Belmire, but he did not notice Hugh.

"Hullo! Marion," he cried. "Come on, old girl, and have a Scotch."

She did not pay any attention, but continued to brood, her chin in her cupped hands. He shouted once more.

"Here, don't be haughty. You weren't always too proud to drink at a bar. Well, I'll come over and join you."

Carrying his glass unsteadily, he made his way towards them.

"Brute!" said Hugh.

"Don't take any notice of him," said Mrs. Belmire contemptuously. "He's always beastly when he's in that state."

Vulning halted.

"Excuse me. Didn't notice you had a fellow. Never mind. We're all pals here, ain't we?"

He sat down unsteadily. "All pals.... *Damn you!*"

He had suddenly recognized Hugh, and he bent forward with a snarl like that of an angry dog.

"You bloody whipper-snapper.... Bah!"

Hugh restrained himself with difficulty, and sat tense. The frown on Mrs. Belmire's face deepened. Vulning's snarl gradually relaxed to a sneer. He meant mischief.

"You're looking rippin' to-night, Marion. 'Pon my soul I never saw you looking so stunning."

He put out a rather dirty hand and patted her white shoulder. She drew back.

"Don't touch me, you beast!"

Hugh broke in tempestuously. "Don't do that again, you dog, or I'll knock you down."

Vulning gave a sneering laugh, then suddenly grew fierce.

"Why shouldn't I do it if I choose? What's it got to do with you, you young whelp? What can you do?"

"I can make you respect a lady in my presence."

"Respect! Lady!" Vulning, burst into a roar of laughter. "That a lady! *That!* Why, man, she's been my mistress. She's been the mistress of a dozen men I know. She's anybody's woman. Respect! Her! Oh you young fool! You poor flat.... *Ach!*"

He choked. Hugh had clutched him by the collar and was shaking him savagely. Vulning struck out wildly, but Hugh hurled him to the floor and stood over him.

"Come on," said Mrs. Belmire wearily, "I'm going."

She went to the door alone, pulling her cloak over her dazzling shoulders. Hugh hesitated, then followed her.

"I'd better see you home," he said.

"Home!" she laughed bitterly. "I had a home once. I don't suppose I'll ever have another."

"Was it true? What he said?"

Her voice was hard, scornful. "Yes, all true. What would you? I must live. I was brought up to do nothing. My husband died leaving me only his debts. Try to understand! Put yourself in my place. Men are brutes. A woman must prey or be preyed on. You are the first decent, clean man I've met since ... oh, ever so long. And you've never suspected?..."

"No, I didn't think *that* of you. I suppose it was because I didn't want to think it. I thought you were foolish, worldly, of limited means but straight, quite straight. I swear I did."

"And now that you know you will never see me again?"

"I don't know. I must think it out. We have both been deceived in the other."

"Yes, we must both think it out. Here's the pension. Good-night."

"Good-night."

2.

Two days later Hugh persuaded the professor to play more rapidly, with the result that in less than two hours the old man had won nearly two hundred thousand francs. The effort exhausted him and he retired to his bed for the day. He intended

to repeat the performance the next morning.

When Hugh returned, he found Margot laying the table for lunch. He noticed that her hands trembled. Though quiet and reserved as always, she had a strange sullen set to her mouth and a resentful look in her eyes. Presently she said:

"A lady came to see you this morning."

"A lady! Here! Who was it?"

"A haughty English lady,—with dyed hair."

With some annoyance Hugh applied this description to Mrs. Belmire.

"What did she say?"

"I did not let her in. She took me for the domestic. I was scrubbing the kitchen and not very tidy. I said you were out and I had not the faintest idea when you would be in."

"Yes?"

"She then said: 'Tell him I will dine at the Carlton to-night at eight, and expect him to have dinner with me.' I bobbed my head and answered, 'Yes, ma'am.' Then she said, 'Do you think you can give that message correctly, my girl?' I answered again, 'Yes, ma'am. I think my intelligence will be equal to the strain you are putting on it.' She then offered me a franc but I refused it."

"Damn it! I'm sorry she came.... I mean I'm sorry you were put in such a position."

"I think I'd better go away. Is that the lady you go about with so much?"

"How do you know I go about with her?"

"I've seen you; lots of times. She's a bad woman, I tell you. I know all about her. She's ruined lots of men. She'll ruin you, too."

The girl seemed to be trembling with suppressed rage. Hugh became angry.

"I'm quite capable of taking care of myself," he said coldly.

"Are you going to see her to-night?"

"I don't see what that's got to do with you."

"Because if you do, I won't stay here. I'll leave to-night. I swear I will."

"You seem determined to create an atmosphere of unpleasantness. I don't like it. I'll go and get lunch elsewhere."

He ate at the Bristol. Later, he took a walk, went for a swim, had tea at Scapini's, and strolled about the "Cheese." He could not get the thought of Margot out of his head. What had got into her? It was none of her business whom he went with. He would not let any one exercise a control over his actions. As for her going away, it was an empty threat. She had said the same thing before. What did Mrs. Belmire want with him? It would be safer, perhaps, not to see her again. It was playing with fire....

At seven o'clock, nevertheless, he went home and changed into his evening clothes. As he was going out Margot stood by the door.

"You're going, then?"

"Yes," he said curtly.

"Very well, then, I warn you; you won't find me here when you come back."

"Do as you please. You are entirely mistress of your own actions."

He passed her, slamming the door.

3.

He found Mrs. Belmire waiting for him. She had reserved a table in one of the alcoves and looked very bewitching.

"This is my farewell supper. I had intended to invite some other men; then I thought it would be nicer, just we two."

Mrs. Belmire's invitations to supper always included the privilege of paying for it. She seemed to have made up her mind to be the most charming of hostesses. She ordered an exquisite brand of champagne and kept Hugh's glass filled. She talked vivaciously, with long deep looks into his eyes, and little caressing touches of her hands. She nestled close to him, so close that it was disconcerting to look down on the delicious curves of dazzling flesh, emerging in such radiant and insolent beauty from a gown that sheathed her to the bust in front, and was cut to the waist behind.

It was a gala night. There was a gay crowd of dancers; brilliant Chinese lanterns were strung closely overhead, and the walls and columns were covered with fanciful decorations of coloured crêpe paper.

"Don't you love it all?" she sighed. "Light, love, laughter,—what a part they play in life."

He was inclined to agree with her. The triumphant wine was singing through his veins; the mad music was goading him to a frenzy of happiness; the dazzling shoulders and gleaming arms of Mrs. Belmire were pagan in their beauty. The whole combination, wine, woman, song, was for him. Every fibre of his will was weakening in this atmosphere of sheer delight.

"She's got me going," he almost groaned. When she turned away her head he emptied his champagne on the floor.

Seeing his glass empty she plied him with another. "You don't drink anything," she said. "Come, it's a poor heart that never rejoices. Let's abandon ourselves. It's so jolly nice to be together like this. I wish it could last forever."

The champagne was taking possession of his sense. He saw her through a roseate mist, a wholly voluptuous, desireful creature. He had drunk nearly two-thirds of the wine; more would be fatal. To avoid real intoxication, he stimulated a slight false one.

"No more of the damned stuff," he said roughly. "My head's all buzzing with it. It's poison. The tears of widows and orphans, the widows and orphans the old professor's working for...."

She leaned forward eagerly. "I heard you made quite a lot to-day."

"He made nearly quarter of a million ... for his widows and orphans."

"Why for them? Why not for you, for us?"

"What do you mean?"

"Wouldn't you like to be rich? Wouldn't you like to have a life like this always,—flowers, music, good wine, delicate food, a life of luxury?"

"No, I wouldn't. I want quiet and simplicity. I don't want to be rich."

"Oh, you make me lose patience. You say you would like to be a painter. Well, why not study,—Paris, Rome and so on?"

"That takes money. I haven't got it."

"Yes, you have. All you want. Millions!"

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you later. Have some more wine."

"No, no. I've had enough. You want to make me drunk. Come on, let's leave this cursed *bordel*. My head's splitting. I want fresh air."

"Poor boy! You want to lie down a bit. I say, come and stretch, *chez moi*. You can smoke a cigarette and have a snooze if you like. It's quiet there."

He would have broken away, but she held his arm and called a *voiture*. It was exactly ten o'clock when they left the restaurant and descended to the Pension Pizzicato. Once in the open air the fumes of the wine affected him with sudden drowsiness.

"Look here," he said, "I do believe I'm a bit squiffy. Perhaps I'd better lie down on your sofa for half an hour."

"That's a good boy. Come on."

He remembered descending unsteadily from the *voiture* and stumbling up to her room. They met no one on the way. He threw himself on her divan and closed his eyes.

4.

When he opened them again she was bending over him. She wore a lilac peignoir that clothed her loosely. As he looked at her, surprised, she said:

"My dear boy, how's your poor head? You know you've slept nearly two hours. And look who's here,—Mr. Fetterstein. He came just a few minutes after we did. We've been chatting."

Fetterstein was comfortably seated, smoking a huge cigar, and drinking a whiskey and soda. He grunted amiably to Hugh.

"Yey, boy! Some snorer too, hey, Mrs. B.? Well, feelin' better?"

"Yes, thanks. I'm all right now."

"Have a cigar?"

"No, thanks."

"Well, if you'll excuse me I'll hit the hay. I'm not the night-hawk I used to be. Gettin' old, hey! I'll leave the rounder game to you young bloods. Good night, young chap."

When he had gone Mrs. Belmire came impulsively to Hugh and knelt by the side of his chair.

"My poor darling! Are you really feeling better? We talked low so as not to disturb you. Old Fetterstein's not a bad sort. You mustn't mind him. You know he wants me to go to Vichy with him. He will pay all my debts."

"Are you going?"

"I don't want to. I want to go with you. Let's go to Venice. It's a dream."

He looked at her in a dazed way. She put her arms around his neck.

"Oh, come. You're the only man I love in all the world. In a few more years I will be *passée*; but now I am at my very best. Look at me. Don't I please you? Take me. I'll be everything to you as long as you like. When you tire of me, I'll go. I'll be yours, all yours. I'm not fickle. I'll love you, you alone. You won't regret it. We'll live in places that glitter and glow; we will drink to the full the wine of life. Oh, take me, take me...."

"I don't understand. How can I do these things? I'm not a man of wealth...."

"Oh, yes, you are, if you like. There's the old professor. You know how to play as he does. You can get hold of his books, copy his figures. We'll go to San Sebastien, Buenos Ayres, everywhere roulette is allowed. Play, play for yourself. Become rich. Life without money is hell. Come! you'll do it. Won't you, won't you ..."

She clung to him. He looked at her with something like horror.

"You want me to *steal* the professor's system?"

"Yes, if you want to put it that way. Why not? He's old, half mad. Charity begins at home. Why not?"

"Never!"

"You will ... you will...."

She seemed to be holding him with all the strength of her body; she kissed him like a mad thing. He could feel her hot panting breath on his face, see her eyes burn into his.

"No, a thousand times no!"

She was like a splendid animal mad with passion. He rose and wrenching her arms apart, backed away from her, a look of repulsion in his eyes. She saw it and knew she was defeated.

She crouched by the empty chair, her head dropping on her outstretched arms. She seemed to be sobbing.

He paused by the door. Something forlorn in her attitude touched him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "If I were mad for love of you, I would do anything you asked me, but ... I'm not. I can't go with you because I don't care for you in that way. I realize it now. Perhaps I should have known it sooner. Please forgive me."

She rose and faced him.

"Forgive you.... You poor fool! Did you think I meant it? Why, I was only acting. Did you think I cared for you? It's only money I care for, money, money. I offered myself to you and you refused me. You are the only man who ever did that. It's that that hurts. You've wounded me in a way time will never heal. I hate you, hate you! Oh, I could kill you. Go!..."

She pointed to the door, then turning, once again dropped beside the chair. She was really crying now, shaken with great rending sobs.

He left her. As he passed in front of the dark Casino, the pinkish face of the clock showed it to be one in the morning. All the way downhill to the Condamine he did not meet a soul. There was no moon; and the quietness was almost eerie.

The passage leading to the house was as dark as a tunnel of anthracite. He plunged into its blackness, then stopped short. A man was blocking his way. Instinctively his hand went to his hip pocket for his automatic. Assassins....

Then a second man, darting from behind, gripped his arms. He struggled madly; but the first man, closing in, struck at him with something hard, and he remembered no more.

CHAPTER FOUR

ARREST

"Where am I?"

About him were bare, white-washed walls; the light came by grudgingly through a small barred window that gave on rock and shrub. He struggled to a sitting position on the pallet bed on which he lay. The place reeled round and round. He groaned, and put his hand to his head. It was bandaged. It ached atrociously. What had happened? He tried to think, but thinking was painful. Memory returned in gleams and flashes. Bit by bit the evening before came back to him. But how to account for his present position? He gave up the effort and lay down again.

A man entered, a rather grim, brown man in a kind of uniform.

"Monsieur has awakened?"

"Yes, what place is this?"

"It is the detention room of the Monaco Police Station."

"But why am I here?"

"Monsieur was arrested only this morning."

"Arrested! Good Heavens! Why?"

"Ah! that is not for me to say. Monsieur will be brought before the examining magistrate in an hour. Will monsieur take *petit déjeuner*?"

"Bring me some strong coffee. It may buck me up."

The coffee cleared his head wonderfully and helped him to realize his position. He had been arrested last night by those two men in the dark entry. They certainly had used him roughly enough. He would make a deuce of a row about that. The whole thing was outrageous, an error or else a dastardly plot. Then he became uneasy. Anything might happen here. He was at the mercy of the powers that be. They might throw him into one of the dungeons of the Castle. Sinister forebodings invaded him.

Presently two policemen came for him, and he walked between them to a large room where three men were sitting at a curving desk. Their backs were to a double window but he was placed in the glare of the strong light.

The three men were dusky Monegascans. They wore black frock coats and black bow ties. The centre one was severe and stout, the one on the right severe and thin, the third was young, intelligent and amiable looking. It was evident they were important personages in the judiciary system of the Principality, probably the examining magistrate, the state attorney and the chief of police. The stout one addressed him curtly.

"Your name is Hugh Kildair?"

"Yes."

"You inhabit a room on the third floor of the Villa Lorenza?"

"Yes."

The magistrate consulted his notes. There was a silence. Hugh saw six piercing eyes fixed on his face.

"Can you account for your movements from ten o'clock until midnight yesterday evening?"

Hugh reflected that his movements during that time consisted of somewhat stertorous respirations on the sofa of Mrs. Belmire's sitting room, and hesitated. But after all, he thought, he had no need to be reticent as far as Mrs. Belmire was concerned. He resented those damned descendants of Saracen pirates, though. What had they against him?

"I don't understand," he protested. "What have I been arrested for? It's an outrage. I'll appeal to the British consul."

The youngest of the men interposed smoothly. "You do not seem to realize the seriousness of your position, monsieur. You will do well to answer the question."

Hugh was impressed.

"Well," he said, "I was with a lady, if you wish to know."

"Kindly give us her name."

"A Mrs. Belmire, an English lady."

The three exchanged glances. The thin one shrugged his shoulders. The pleasant one smiled meaningly.

"She is known to us," said the fat one. "Will you be so good as to tell us where and how you passed the entire evening."

Hugh repressed his growing indignation. He answered sullenly enough:

"I met her at eight at the Carlton. We had dinner. At ten we took a *voiture* and went to her hotel. There I fell asleep on her sofa and awoke about twelve. I remained till nearly one, when I left for my room. In the dark entry of the house where I live, my way was barred by a man.... But then you know more than I do about what happened from then on."

"Why did you attempt to draw your pistol?"

"I was nervous. In the past few weeks there have been attempts to injure me."

The pleasant looking man nodded confirmation to this. The thin man then said:

"We had better get hold of the English lady at once. She is not the most desirable of witnesses, but ... if what monsieur says is supported, he has an undeniable alibi and we can release him."

"Release me! Of course, you will. What have I done, tell me. What am I charged with?"

"There is no charge yet. You are arrested on suspicion only."

"Of what?"

The three looked at each other. Then the fat one bent forward dramatically.

"Of murder."

"Good God! Whose murder?"

The lean one fixed his piercing eyes on Hugh's face.

"*Professor Durand was murdered in his room last night, between ten and twelve.*"

All three watched him closely. He was dazed by the shock. He stared at them blankly.

"Horrible!" he murmured. "The poor old man ... murdered!..."

"Yes, stabbed to the heart."

"But who did it? Why have you arrested me?"

"Because the concierge says he saw you go up to the old man's room a little after ten, and leave a little after eleven."

"Me!"

"Yes. If you can prove that you were elsewhere, then the man must have been mistaken. We'll see the English lady at once."

But alas! a telephone call to the Pension Pizzicato informed them that Mrs. Belmire had left early that morning with Mr.

Fetterstein in a high powered car. Destination unknown.

"Hum!" said the magistrate, "that makes it bad for you. We are willing to release you if you can prove an incontestable alibi. We don't want any trouble here. But if you cannot we must hand you over to the French authorities."

"Hold on," said Hugh. "Fetterstein was there too, in the room."

"You mean Monsieur Fetterstein, the multi-millionaire American?"

"Yes, the same."

"Ah!" All three looked impressed.

"If only Monsieur Fetterstein would testify in your favour that would end the matter as far as you are concerned. He is well known to us and much esteemed."

"But can't you find him?"

"That might be hard. There is all France to search. Cannot your friends here hire a lawyer, get some one to help you,—a detective?..."

Hugh considered. "Perhaps Monsieur Krantz would help me."

They looked surprised; Hugh went on:

"Will you let him know the position I'm in? If any one can find them he can."

The chief of police nodded. "He's already interested in the case."

The magistrate talked with the others in the Monegascan dialect. Finally he said:

"We will see what we can do. In the meantime you must remain here. We will investigate the affair thoroughly. If you are innocent you need have no fear of the result. That is all I can say for the present."

Hugh was conducted back to his cell, and left to his own reflections. He sat for a long time in a state verging on stupour. The professor murdered,—that was the thought that drove all others from his head, made him forget even his own plight. The professor murdered! But by whom? There were those who had reason enough to want the old man out of the way; there were those who would rejoice at his death. But assassination! No, they would surely draw the line at that. Krantz had a drastic way of dealing with criminals, but he would never stain his hands with the blood of honest men. Still, he had admitted he could not always keep his subordinates in check.

If, then, it had not been the act of an irresponsible tool of Krantz, who else had an interest in disposing of the professor? As he lay through the long day he pondered on this. How slowly the time passed! He thought sadly that all his friends had gone. MacTaggart, Gimp, Tope, he was sure they would have hurried to his aid. Margot, too! Why had she not come? She must know by now where he was. A strange longing to see her came over him. It would be more comforting to see her than any one else.

In the evening to his surprise Krantz arrived. The detective entered with a smile of cheerful mockery that was rather irritating to a man in Hugh's position.

"Hullo," he said, laughing as if it was quite funny, "you've got yourself into a nice mess."

"Have I?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it? Here's your concierge swearing you were in the old man's room at the time the murder was committed. You say that you were elsewhere, but you cannot produce your witnesses. You name two people who have left the country, gone goodness knows where. Doesn't it strike you that if they should not come back to testify for you, you will be in a devilish awkward box?"

"Look here, Krantz, you know I didn't do it."

"Of course, I know it," said Krantz smilingly.

"And you know who did do it."

The face of Krantz grew very grave. "Hum! I'm not so sure of that."

"But what was the motive?"

"Robbery, of course. Didn't they tell you that the safe was opened, all the papers taken? He had better luck than I, whoever he was."

"And the system?"

"Stolen. That's unfortunate. I wish I knew who he was."

"Whoever has it can't use it," said Hugh. "It's in cypher, and there's only one man who can decipher it."

"Who's that?"

"Me."

"That's interesting. Humph! I'll remember that."

Krantz thoughtfully tapped the floor with his cane for a full minute. Then he rose.

"I'm going to help you if I can. I'll try to find your two witnesses so that you can establish your alibi. But if I get you clear, and should ever want your aid (in an honourable way, of course) you'll help me?"

"Yes."

"All right. Don't worry. Good night."

The visit of Krantz cheered Hugh and he was able to get some sleep. But the next two days crawled past miserably. Except for the warders with his food no one came near him; again his fears took shape. What if Mrs. Belmire and Fetterstein could not be found! Mrs. Belmire probably hated him and might be glad to revenge herself on him by keeping out of the way. But no, he thought, she was too good a sport for that. There was Fetterstein, too. Everything must come right. The time seemed so long.

On the fourth day he was again ushered into the bureau. The stout magistrate was at his desk and beside him sat the chief of police. He smiled benignly at Hugh.

"Everything has been explained," he said, "as far as you are concerned. You are released. You need have no further fear. We regret exceedingly we have been obliged to put you to the inconvenience."

He bowed with a gesture of dismissal, and Hugh lost no time in leaving the room. As he emerged from the police station a voice hailed him:

"Hullo there! Sorry we didn't know you were in such a hell of a fix or we'd have got here sooner. They connected with us at Marseilles and we came right on in the car. We've just been and interviewed the old guy. You bet we soon straightened things out. By the way, allow me to present you to Mrs. Fetterstein."

Hugh stared. Fetterstein with a hearty laugh was indicating a lady who was arranging her motoring veil. It was Mrs. Belmire. She looked radiant.

"Yes, we were married in Marseilles yesterday. Oh, I'm so happy! He's really such a nice old thing. You've no idea. We're going to Italy for our honeymoon. So sorry we didn't know you were in trouble, or we'd have simply flown to the rescue. He's made an affidavit, or something of the kind. Well, all's well that ends well. Now we must be getting on. Come, you precious old dear. Good-bye, Mr. Kildair. Hope we'll all meet again."

Hugh had no time for congratulations. They sprang into a great cheese-coloured car, and were gone, leaving him in a state of utter bewilderment.

He made his way slowly back to the house he called home. Forebodings assailed him. The concierge had gone, no doubt dreading awkward explanations. Looking up Hugh saw that the windows of the professor's room were shuttered. So also

were his own. To find his room so dark, so silent, struck a chill to his heart!

"Margot! Margot!"

No reply. He pulled aside the grey curtain. Her bed had not been slept in. He searched everywhere for a note from her. Nothing! Had she carried out her threat? Had she left him as she had said she would?

He went slowly down stairs and asked the tenant of the room below for news. The woman shook her head.

"The *petite blonde*? No, I know nothing of her. She disappeared the night of the crime."

CHAPTER FIVE

TRAPPED

1.

The next three days were more miserable to Hugh than those he had spent in prison. He missed Margot keenly. He had become so used to her; she had waited on him so devotedly; had made herself so essential to him in a hundred little ways. Her sudden desertion of him when he most needed her filled him with dismay.

He felt injured, too. He had done a good deal for her. He had always been a perfect brother, respectful and courteous. If she had been a real sister, he could not have thought more of her. If he could get her back he would be even more considerate. He would take her to the cinema, to tea sometimes, even for a drive occasionally. The trouble was, if he went about with her, people would jump at wrong conclusions. Well, in future, let 'em jump. He would buy that cottage and she should keep house for him. He wondered if it would be possible to legally adopt her as a sister. Then she could live with him until she found the man she wanted to marry. Why not?

Where was she? In Paris, no doubt; taking up the weary struggle once more. She would surely write soon, then he would go and fetch her. Why had she left most of her clothes, he wondered? All the things he had bought her? Perhaps she did not want to take them. The sight of her abandoned garments made him lonelier than ever.

She must have left just before the crime. If she had been there, it might not have happened, she always kept such a watchful eye on the old man's door. How shocked she would be. She had been so fond of the professor, fussing over him, doing things for him. Poor man! So that was the end of all his grandiose schemes. And the system was useless, for only he, Hugh, had the key. Well, he was glad it had been stolen. He had always hated it. There had been something so uncanny about it. Although it was always successful, it seemed to bring misfortune on all connected with it.

He felt the shadow of the tragedy penetrating even to his room. The *conciierge* who had identified him as the murderer, had discreetly gone on a vacation; but Hugh had gathered dubious details of what had happened. About ten o'clock the assassin had mounted to the old man's room. The *conciierge* had seen him enter, but had not seen him leave. About midnight the occupant of the room below, a Casino employé, had heard groaning; but by the time the door had been opened the old man was dead. He was lying face downward in a pool of blood with a knife stab just under the ribs. The safe was open and empty; the room ransacked.

That was all Hugh could learn. It was vague and confusing enough. The Monaco police seemed to be in no hurry to clear up the mystery and probably would allow it to swell the list of the Principality's undiscovered crimes.

Oh, for a word from Margot! He was growing anxious about her. Then one day the postman handed him a letter.

2.

It bore the post-mark of Monaco. He tore it open and read with amazement the following:

"My dear Cousin:

"You will no doubt be surprised at this manner of address, but various things have led me to conclude that the above relationship exists between us.

"My uncle was Gilbert Kildair, the well-known artist, who, I find according to the records of the Municipality of Menton, was duly married to Lucia Fontana on the nineteenth of October, 1898.

"After his death she went to England to see if his family would not do something for her and her son; but they had quarrelled with him and refused to recognize her as his wife.

"My mother was a Kildair, and struck by the curious resemblance between us, I made inquiries with this result.

"I know that up to now your feelings towards me have been hostile, but I hope that in view of our newly discovered

relationship, you will let bygones be bygones. After all, blood is thicker than water, and already I feel an interest in you that exceeds the warmth of ordinary friendship.

"I would like you to visit me at my Villa. If it suits you, my car will await you at ten this evening at the Church of St. Devoté. Do run you up. Please do not fail me.

"Your cousin,

"PAUL VULNING."

Hugh had to read this extraordinary letter over three times before he understood the significance of it. To his amazement succeeded disgust. He had no desire to be related to Vulning. His dislike for the man was invincible. There was also his resentment towards his father's family. He did not want to have anything to do with them. They had refused to recognize his mother, and had never shown the slightest interest in himself. Vulning was typical of them, arrogant, selfish, supercilious. Why then this sudden interest on his part? Why did Vulning recognize him now, want to take him up? Hugh was puzzled.

He decided to go to Vulning's villa; there could be no harm in that. He might gain some information about his parents. He did not like Vulning any the better now that he knew he was a cousin. Still there was no reason they should not be decently civil to one another.

He was glad to learn that his father had been a well known artist. That accounted for his own modest talent and his joy in playing with colours. His mother ... his poor mother ... perhaps she was one of the Fontanas of Monaco, the famous Fontanas. He must go over to Menton and look up the register. The letter suggested to him new and engrossing lines of thought. He awaited the evening with impatience.

At ten o'clock the carmine car was waiting, breathing softly, with great glowing eyes. The chauffeur touched his hat and Hugh leapt into the seat beside him. How he loved a car! This was a Hispana Suiza and the one-eyed chauffeur drove like a demon. He climbed the steep serpentine hill, nursing his motor with infinite delicacy. The engine roared triumphantly; the lights of the town fell away; the world widened gloriously. They rose with a steady, panting urge, toward the mountains and the stars.

Soon they were well in the belt of orange groves and the road became more difficult to follow. The chauffeur was driving at a slow pace, the way twisting and turning. Hugh could hardly believe that any one lived in such a remote place until he remembered that Vulning's villa was the highest on the hillside. It was ideal for any one who loved seclusion; the view must be superb. Presently lights swooped towards them, and the wheels of the car ground in the gravel. They had arrived.

There is always something mysterious about the approach to a lonely house at night. The sense of mystery at Vulning's villa was heightened by the great garden that encircled it. The vast velvety blackness, with its suggestions of pines and cyprus, and its rich sullen silence was almost aggressive. Against the mountain the tall house loomed faintly. It was terraced on three sides, with a flight of steps leading up to the front entrance.

As he mounted them the door opened and a man awaited him. Hugh was surprised to see it was Bob Bender. Bob smiled in his sly, deprecating way.

"How are you, sir? Mr. Vulning's expecting you. He's in the library. Come this way."

He led Hugh down a long unlighted hall and halted before a door. The air was stale and heavy.

Then the door was opened and Hugh found himself in a large sombre room, panelled in dark wood; over what appeared to be a bay-window hung heavy crimson curtains. The window was evidently open, as the curtains trembled slightly. By an oak table in the middle of the room stood Vulning with a curious smile on his face.

As the two men faced one another the resemblance between them was more striking than ever. Both were tall and slim and straight. Both had the severely regular features of the type that used to be known as the English governing class. Their hair was of the same light chestnut and brushed smoothly back. But while Hugh's eyes were black, those of Vulning were blue; while Hugh's face was frank and boyish, that of Vulning was cynical and blasé. There appeared to be a dozen years of difference in their ages.

For a moment there was an awkward pause, then Vulning held out his hand with a rather exaggerated cordiality.

"Come on, now, be cousinly. I know you are prejudiced against me; but, hang it all, I've suffered more at your hands than you have at mine. Let's forget it, bury the hatchet, shake hands. Come, be a good sport."

Hugh complied reluctantly. Cousin or not he could not overcome his repugnance to this man.

"You were doubtless surprised," Vulning went on pleasantly. "I was, too, when I made the discovery. It was our mutual friend, Mrs. Belmire, who put me on the track. It is really a very curious coincidence. However, we won't dwell on that. I asked you up here to speak about quite another matter. Won't you sit down? You'll find that arm-chair quite decent."

Hugh took it, but Vulning remained standing.

"Now," he continued, "I am afraid I am going to surprise you a second time. To make a long story short, a few days ago there came into my hands, in a round-about-way, certain documents with which you are doubtless familiar. It was with regard to these I wanted to see you. Look...."

With that Vulning extracted from the inside pocket of his coat a rolled mass of manuscript, and laid it on the table, keeping his hand on it.

"You know this, eh?"

Hugh was speechless. He sat staring at the document. The cover had been torn away, but he recognized it at once.

"The system of Professor Durand," he gasped.

"Precisely. It's all here. It was from his safe, and has come into my possession; how—I cannot for the moment explain. Now what I want of you is this...."

Vulning bent forward eagerly, his eyes gleaming.

"You and I alone know of this. I have all the documents that refer to the system, but I am forced to confess I can do nothing with it. You, I believe, are the one man who can decipher it. Now I want to propose a partnership between us. You will translate this manuscript. We will work the thing together. We will get a hundred million francs out of the bank. We will share fifty-fifty. That is generous,—too generous. But then we are cousins. Well, are you on?"

Hugh sat as if transfixed, staring at the folio. The sudden sight of it, combined with the impudence of the proposal, quite took away his breath. Vulning watched him keenly.

"Takes you some time to realize it. I told you I would surprise you."

Hugh started up. "But," he cried, "these documents do not belong to you. They were stolen. The professor intended to leave them to me after his death. I was to publish them. It's a sacred trust. Here, give them to me...."

He made a grab for the documents; but Vulning withdrew them quickly, and at the same time jerked a small revolver from his pocket.

"No, you don't," he sneered. "Stand back. I've got you covered."

"You've no right to these papers," Hugh protested hotly. "I'll go and tell the police."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. Don't be a fool. It's a fair offer I'm making you. You translate this and we'll work together. Come!"

"I refuse."

"You refuse. You surprise me. An easy chance to make fifty million francs. Think of all it means, man,—wealth, luxury, beauty. We are getting it all legitimately from an institution that deserves no better treatment. Consider again. You'll translate this?"

"I tell you; no!"

"May I ask why?"

"Because ... Look here, how did those documents come into your hands?"

"Never mind. I told you we would not go into that."

"You have some connection with this theft. You ..."

Then a light burst on Hugh. The man for whom he had been arrested—

"It was you who stole them.... And—Oh, my God!... you damned villain! It was you, you who murdered Professor Durand."

Vulning's face went white; he seemed about to collapse.

"No, I didn't," he stammered. "Not that. I swear I didn't do that. Look here, I'll be quite honest. I confess I took the papers. The professor admitted me in the dusk, thinking it was you. He was working, and the safe was open. I asked to refer to the system, and he brought it to me. Then he saw who it was. We struggled, and I gave him a touch of chloroform, a mere touch, not enough to harm him. When I came away he was sleeping like a baby. I took the papers, closed the safe and left very quietly. That's all I know. He was found later, stabbed to the heart. I did not do it. I swear to that."

Aghast, incapable of action, Hugh stood staring at him. Then as quickly as he had weakened Vulning recovered himself, and started forward, tense, tigerish.

"I've told you too much," he snarled. He covered Hugh with his revolver.

"You dog! I hate you. You refuse to give up what you know,—well then, there's only one thing left,—to make you. Ho! there."

At his shout the door was thrown open. Bob Bender and the one-eyed chauffeur rushed in.

"Quick. That rope in the corner! Tie him up. Steady there, you young hound; or I'll shoot."

The chauffeur and Bob Bender threw themselves on Hugh. In spite of Vulning's threat, he struggled fiercely. It was not until the chauffeur had pinioned and tripped him that he fell heavily. The three men held him down, and trussed him so that he could not move. He lay helpless, gazing up at them and panting painfully.

"Ah," said Vulning, "that was hard. Let me get my breath...."

He regarded Hugh malevolently. As he lit a cigarette, his eyes were sinister in their cruelty.

"He refuses to do what we want, boys. There's only one thing left, regrettable though it is; we've got to make him. Prop him up against the wall."

They did so. Hugh glared at them.

"Go on," he gasped. "You murdered the professor, Murder me too."

"I think we'll get what we want out of you without that," said Vulning. "Close that window, Bob. He'll probably scream. Charlot, you know your job."

What were they going to do? Hugh's eyes followed them fearfully. He watched Bob Bender go to the window and remain some moments fumbling at the latch. He saw the villainous-faced chauffeur leave the room and return with a pair of powerful pincers in his hand. Meanwhile Paul Vulning sat down on the edge of the table and inhaled his cigarette. He was evidently enjoying the scene and proposed to play with his victim as a cat does with a mouse. Well, Hugh resolved, he would not cry out whatever happened. At least Vulning should not get that satisfaction from him.

The chauffeur caught Hugh's hand, and, gripping the end of his thumb with the pincers, began to squeeze. Hugh felt the nail crack. The pain was excruciating. His breath came quick; his eyes started from his head. He choked back his groan of agony. Vulning was grinning now, the grin of a devil. It was that grin that nerved Hugh; not a sound passed his lips.

"Harder yet," hissed Vulning. "Make him scream. Begin on another finger. Get a good grip. Squeeze! Remember, there

are ten of them."

He was carried away by a passion of cruelty and trembled with a strange joy as he watched Hugh's face. The pain was so atrocious that Hugh almost fainted. Never mind! They should not make him give in. They should kill him first.

"Here, let me do it," said Vulning. "You're too easy."

Hugh felt his nail bursting under the continued pressure. He closed his eyes. His breath came in long gasps....

Then suddenly in that tense and thrilling silence he heard a voice ringing out, high, harsh, metallic:

"Hands up, all of you.">

CHAPTER SIX

THE ESCAPE

1.

The three swung round and jerked their hands above their heads. A very tall man stood in the doorway. He had a spade-shaped beard and a coppery complexion. His hair of a glossy black was brushed smoothly back from a long, retreating forehead. His large nose was like the beak of a bird, and his black eyes glittered. In his outstretched hands he held two large automatic pistols. Hugh recognized to his amazement the supposed Brazilian diplomat, Doctor Bergius.

"Keep your hands up, gentlemen," said Doctor Bergius warningly; and with a careless air he lowered his pistols and entered the room.

At his heels trooped three others. The first, no other than the dashing Italian Castelli, was in evening dress, but handling his revolver as if accustomed to its use. The other two were the most blood-thirsty pair of ruffians Hugh had ever seen. One was huge and hulking, hairy like a bear. A short beard almost covered his face, and his hair, bristly as that of a worn scrubbing-brush, came down to meet his bushy eyebrows. His companion was a very small man, spare, active and hairy as a monkey, with a lean and withered face and slit eyes that twinkled with malice.

"Come on, Golaz," said Doctor Bergius to the tall ruffian. "You can look after the old fellow. Golaz, gentlemen, is my knife-man. In fact he used to be a pig-sticker. He is rather an enthusiastic specialist. He'd as lief cut your throat as look at you. Wouldn't you, Golaz?"

The ursine man grunted in a pleased way. He took out a murderous-looking knife and going up to Bob Bender, who was standing very straight, with his arms in the air, made a playful pass with the knife across Bob's scraggy throat. A little spot of blood appeared. Bob shuddered. Then Golaz gave him a little dig in the ribs with the needle point of the knife. Bob shivered.

"Golaz is really an artist," said the doctor. "I have the greatest difficulty in restraining him. Now let me introduce another of my pets. Advance, Gamba."

The simian man came forward grinning.

"Gamba's specialty is strangling," explained Doctor Bergius. "His work is slower but not less sure. Once let him get those hairy hands of his around your throat, and you'll have to kill him to make him let go. You love to get your fingers round a windpipe, don't you, Gamba?"

Gamba grinned broadly, clutching and gripping with his hands in a suggestive manner.

"All right, Gamba, you can account for the chauffeur. As for you, Castelli, I leave you the Englishman. Now that these preliminaries are all settled I can take a smoke."

With a sigh of satisfaction Doctor Bergius sank down in the big arm chair and lit a cigarette.

"Ah," he sighed again, "what would life be without the soothing weed? You can have women and wine, Castelli; I would not exchange them both for nicotine. This is a comfortable den, Vulning; I feel quite at home already. Ha! I see you have the papers there. Castelli, hand them to me." The Italian took the system from Vulning's hand and gave it to the doctor.

"Thank you. I imagine it's all here. Also ..." he turned to Hugh, "it's translator. Excellent. You know, Vulning, you've given me a lot of trouble. We were both on the same errand, only you went out by the door just as I came in by the window. What a pity you closed that safe. How was I to know it was empty? There I was struggling to open it, when the old man woke up. Golaz had to take his case in hand. The methods of Golaz are not refined but they are effective. Well, now to business."

Doctor Bergius turned over the leaves of the system. "Here it is in my hands at last, the key that opens the golden gates of wealth. I say, Vulning, I'm sorry for you. You worked hard for this. I'm not such a bad chap after all. I'm going to take you in with us. You and Castelli can be on the same footing. The others can rank with Golaz and Gamba. Do you accept?"

Vulning nodded sullenly; the other two with alacrity.

"Good. You may lower your hands. And now let us come to this young man you have so beautifully bound, and I fear, so sadly maltreated. Your methods are primitive. I think I can show you a better way to make him listen to reason. Golaz, bring in the girl."

Hugh started. He had fallen forward; but, by turning his head painfully, he could follow the movements of Golaz. He saw the big cut-throat disappear into the hallway. He heard a low moan and it seemed his heart forgot to beat. With straining eyes he watched the doorway. Yes, his worst fears were realized. Golaz entered with Margot in his arms. Her hands and feet were tied; her eyes closed, her hair streaming to the floor. She did not seem conscious of what was happening.

"Put her down," said Doctor Bergius. "And now suppose we begin by trying this instrument of torture on those rosy little nails. It may be more effective with our obstinate friend here. Golaz and Gamba, hold her. Castelli, you can wield the pincers."

But Castelli hung back. "No, Master," he said with a shrug, "I have no stomach for that. A man, yes! A woman, well ..."

"All right, Castelli. I know your softness of heart where the weaker sex is concerned. Vulning, to you will fall the honour."

Again Paul Vulning took up the big pincers, and the points closed over the girl's thumb-nail. With a piercing scream she opened her eyes.

"Hear that?" said Doctor Bergius to Hugh. "That's only a beginning. If necessary we'll crack her ten little nails like hazel nuts. Then if you don't do what we want, I'll hand her over to Golaz and Gamba to work their will on her. You know what that means. On the other hand if you consent, if you tell us the meaning of all this, you will both be well treated. You will perhaps be kept in close confinement for a few weeks, but after that you will be released. By then I hope we shall be ready to depart with the spoil. Shall we begin again on the girl?"

Hugh shook his head. His face was stamped with horror. "No, no," he cried hoarsely. "I'll do anything you want."

"That's a sensible lad. Seat him at the table and release his right arm. Vulning, have the goodness to fetch me pen, ink and paper."

Vulning brought them from a little card table that stood in front of the bay window. Doctor Bergius rose and bent over Hugh.

"Now," he said in his harsh metallic voice, "what we want you to do is quite simple. You will put on that paper all the symbols in those documents with their meanings. After that we will shut you up while I make the translation. If you forget anything and give me needless trouble, I shall have to deal severely with you. Also I will hold you responsible for the subsequent working of the system. So you see I want you to take your task very seriously. Now, go ahead."

Hugh was placed facing the curtained window. He took up the pen and began to write. Doctor Bergius paced up and down. Every now and then he would look at the document in his hand and then at the symbols Hugh was writing. The page was soon covered with them. Hugh strained his memory. Had he forgotten anything? Were they complete?

As he paused for a moment, his brows pursed in thought, the eyes of all were fixed on him. The doctor stood with his back to the bay window, and as he struck a match to light a fresh cigarette, he laid the precious documents down on the little card table. Then in the tense silence the striking of the match startled Hugh, and he glanced up.... What was it he was seeing?... *Behind the doctor a long sinewy hand was passing between the crimson curtains. It reached towards the little card table; it clutched the bundle of papers; it disappeared. But in that swift moment Hugh saw that the little finger of the hand was missing.*

2.

The silence was almost painful. Hugh wondered how long it would last. Suddenly Paul Vulning pointed to the empty table with a cry.

"The system! It has vanished."

Swift as a flash Doctor Bergius looked down. Then he rushed to the window.

"Quick," he shouted, "I saw some one leap from the terrace. All of you in pursuit. We must recover it at all cost."

He dashed out, Vulning, Castelli and the three others following him. From the darkness Hugh heard shots and much shouting.

"Scatter. Search the garden. Fire only if you're sure."

They had all gone. He was alone with Margot. He tried to see her, to go to her. He twisted around and tumbled from his chair.

Could he believe his ears? As he lay face down he heard a voice address him.

"Quick, sir. I'm goin' to cut the ropes."

It was old Bob Bender. He cut and slashed to such good purpose that in a moment Hugh and Margot were both free.

"There's not a moment to lose," whispered Bob. "They're hunting out in front but they may return any minute. You must escape by the back. Come, I'll show you the way. Buck up, missy, you've got to make an effort."

Hugh supported the girl, and Bob piloted them along the dark hallway. At the foot of a flight of stairs Bob opened a door. The pure air of the mountain caressed their faces.

"Take to the woods," whispered Bob. "Climb high, make a wide circle. I'll slip back and get that paper you wrote. Then I'll join them in the hunt. Good luck to you. Krantz is a wonder. The Casino is saved."

3.

Taking the girl's hand Hugh led her through the darkness, down a narrow flight of stone steps, and along a steep pathway amid the shrubbery. He heard sounds of the pursuit from the other side of the house and once the sharp crack of a revolver. Once too, some one came panting along the pathway towards them. He had scarcely time to pull Margot into the deep shadow of the bushes before a burly form pounded past. Trembling and terrified the girl clung to him until the footsteps were drowned in silence.

Once more he dragged her on. At the end of the pathway, they came to a small door set in the high wall, secured by a rusted bolt that at first resisted all his efforts. Suddenly it shot back, and they found themselves on the mountain side.

From the door a steep trail led to higher altitudes, and up this he hurried her. Rocks tripped them, and thorny bushes clutched at them, but spurred by fear they stumbled on. Even when the tiny donkey-path faded out and they found themselves on the raw and ragged flanks of the mountain, they continued to climb and climb.

Several times he thought Margot was going to give out, but a few words from him inspired her with a new courage. In the last of these pauses he listened acutely. The silence was absolute. They must be safe by now. They had been climbing for nearly an hour. He urged her to make one more effort, but she was unequal to it and entirely collapsed.

Lifting her in his arms he carried her to where a huge overhanging boulder formed a shallow shelter and laid her down. Resting her head on his knee, he covered her with his coat. Then with his back to the rock he waited for the daylight.

With the first brightening of the dove-grey sky he saw that they had climbed further than he had reckoned. They were on the slope beneath the Tête-du-Chien; above them towered the great bluff, its beetling front steel grey, stained with cinnamon, and around them, as if the greater gods had pelted it in sport, huge boulders heaped in fantastic confusion. Below them the olive groves were saturnine; the roofs of the Condamine a sullen crimson, and the sea's immense tranquillity painted with a pale fire.

He looked down at the white face, pillowed on shining hair. Poor girl! How desperately exhausted she must be. Her sleep had been troubled by fits of trembling; and dry nervous sobs had awakened her half a dozen times. He had soothed her with assurances of safety. He aroused her gently and pointed to the brightening sky.

"Look!"

"But you are chilled through," she said. "You are shivering. You should not have given me your coat."

They rose stiffly, their faces haggard in the dawn. Slowly and painfully they descended the mountain.

"What happened," he asked, "that night?..."

"I don't know. I never understood. It was very late; I heard a noise in the professor's room and tried his door; it opened. All was dark. There was a curious smell. Again I heard a noise. I was afraid he was ill. I hurried to his assistance. Some one caught me from behind, and a hand covered my mouth. I struggled, but I had no power. They bound and gagged me. Just as we were going away one of them flashed an electric torch on the floor. I saw the professor lying face downward. It was horrible...."

"Yes, I know. They killed the poor old man. But what after that?"

"A very strong man carried me in his arms; we descended from the window by a rope ladder. Below they had a closed-in car. We went up among the mountains, before we stopped at a lonely house. They lifted me down, and carried me to a room. I was locked in, a prisoner. Oh, they treated me well enough. There was a peasant woman who brought me my food and was kind to me. But the time was long, for I was terrified, and so anxious about you. I thought I should go mad. Then last night they put me in the car again, and brought me down. You know the rest."

"What shall we do now? I suppose we had better go back to our room."

She shook her head. "Nothing can make me spend another night there. The very idea horrifies me. No, I want to go far away from here, very far. If you don't mind, I will get my things, stay at a hotel to-night, and to-morrow morning leave for Paris."

"I quite understand. But ... how about that cottage at Villefranche? Won't you come there with me?"

Again she shook her head. "No, not now...."

"Once you wanted to."

"Once, yes. Once I had a dream.... That's finished now. I've been a foolish girl. I did lots of thinking when I was alone up there, and I see my way clear. It's a lonely way but perhaps I'll have my share of happiness. Yes, I'd better go."

He felt that she was right, and did not try to dissuade her.

"At any rate," he said, "you'll let me lend you that money, the two thousand we had such a fuss over?"

"Yes, I'll borrow it gladly, and I'll pay you back. I bless you for all you've done for me...."

Next morning he saw her off at the station. As she leaned from the window of a third class carriage she tried hard to keep back her tears. He remembered their arrival at this same station, and how he had followed her. He would miss her painfully. A last handclasp and the train bore her away. A loneliness came over him that was almost a heartache.

"That ends another chapter," he said to himself. "Perhaps I'll never see her again. Ah! little girl, may the gods bless you and make you happy."

And with that he went sadly away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AN INTERLUDE

1.

About the end of May he bought the cottage near Villefranche. It had pinkish walls that dripped roses and a long generous garden dropping to the beach. There he had a little boat pulled up on the shingle and lay for long hours in its shadow, watching the dreamy glimmer of the sea, and listening to the musical splash of the waves. The velvet monotony of sea and sky tranquillized his spirit.

He used to rise at four every morning, and work in his garden through the cool hours; then go for a swim in the bay, floating lazily on the milk-warm water, blinking at the brightness of the sun. In the evenings he would fish from his boat, pulling softly home in the starlight. He became soaked with sunshine, as brown as any of his peasant neighbours, and just as carelessly happy. He learned to look on life with quiet eyes.

It was pleasant to think that he could go on like this for twenty years. He needed so little; his garden supplied him with fruit and vegetables, the sea with fish. By selling some of his produce and keeping chickens and rabbits, he could make the place self-supporting. He had infinite time to dream and paint. If he painted patiently and sincerely during twenty years surely he could achieve something.

This was the future he sketched out for himself. One thing was lacking; he missed Margot. If only she were there, it seemed to him his happiness would be complete.

But she was back at work with Folette. She had taken her old room again, the little mansard room, overlooking the Boulevard Montparnasse. She wrote to him quite often, and always that she was very happy.

Often as he lingered in his garden, he would look up and imagine her standing in the doorway of the cottage in a frame of roses. She seemed to complete the picture so perfectly. What a pity she was not there. Well, one can't have everything. True, he might ask her to marry him. But the idea of marriage dismayed him; it seemed so irrevocable. Romance ended there, he told himself. He was only twenty-three and a lifetime is long to spend with one woman. An early marriage is a mistake, so every one said. He missed her companionship awfully, but there! ... no doubt in time he would get used to the loss of her!

2.

It was curious how far away Monte Carlo seemed. Unfamiliar mountains heaved up behind him; another topaz hoop separated him from the gloomy rock and the glittering point. Sometimes he would sail his little boat far out, and from the shadow of his sail, watch the poisoned paradise. It seemed to him like a dream picture, rising in terraced beauty from the azure of the sea. The Casino glittered like a heap of jewels, and the mountains brooded in violet abstraction. All was loveliness,—creamy beach and cradled harbour, palms and olive groves, snowy villas gleaming in green gardens, and shining slopes of pine. He gazed at it with rapture,—then shuddered at the thought of all that lay behind.

For Monte Carlo may be all things to all men, the most adorable spot in the world or the most hateful. And to him, filled with the moral strength that is born of peace, the place was increasingly detestable. Its beauty was the fatal beauty of a glorious courtesan, its people parasites living on the folly and depravity of mankind. From prince to page-boy they were dependent on that great temple of chance into which poured streams of gold from all the world. Its white range of palaces were to him the symbol of all that was weak and wanton in human nature.

As he sat in the shadow of his sail he recalled them all so plainly, the spendthrift and the starveling, the derelict and the degenerate, swirling round in the eternal circle of that greater wheel which symbolizes the whole, unable to extricate themselves, being drawn nearer and nearer to that vortex which is ruin.

He detested it all now and saw it with other eyes. He had escaped its lures. Never again would he set foot in its polluted halls.

Then one day a shadow fell across his path and looking up he saw Bob Bender.

3.

Bob, rusty and creaky as ever, looked singularly out of place in his radiant garden.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, rubbing his hands together with a rasping sound, "for interruptin' your horticulturous provocations."

"Not at all. Glad to see you."

"Thank you, sir. You've got a tidy sorto' place 'ere. Now if I was you I'd bank up that celery a little more, an' them artichokes want cuttin' back. Awful things artichokes is to grow on you, if you gives 'em a chance."

"What do you know about gardening?"

"Most all there is to know, I expect, considerin' that I was once in that way myself. Indeed I 'opes some day, if ever I can scrape up enough money, to buy a little place I know out 'Ampstead way. But there, I didn't come 'ere to talk of gardens; I came over on quite another matter. Krantz sent me."

"Krantz!"

"Yes. You see that Doctor Bergius 'as got something up 'is sleeve. We can't quite make 'im out. 'E's a great one, 'e is. There ain't a greater international crook on the Continent to-day. 'E was ragin' mad because Krantz got the system away from 'im, and now 'e swears 'e'll get even, and do the Casino one in the eye."

"That reminds me," said Hugh, "What happened that night after we got away?"

"Oh, they thought you'd got at a knife with your free 'and and cut the ropes. I joined the chase and 'eaded 'em in the wrong direction. You see my bein' with Vulning was an idea of Krantz's. He suspected that Vulning 'ad the papers and got me to approach 'im. I pretended I'd fallen out with Krantz; and after a bit Vulning told me 'e 'ad the papers. It was me suggested 'e get you to translate 'em. Krantz was to come to your rescue. But we didn't bargain on the other gang. However, it came off all right."

"What do you want of me now?"

"Well, you see, I'm no longer in the confidence of that crowd. The doctor distrusted me from the first. There was the business of the window for one thing. Why didn't I 'appen to fasten it properly? Anyhow they won't 'ave anything to do with me now; and I can't get to the bottom of the game they are playin'. But I do know they are 'avin' an important meetin' to-morrow at Vulning's villa. It's at two o'clock. There will only be Vulning and the doctor and Castelli. Now we were thinkin' if we could get Vulning out of the way, and you could take his place...."

"What!"

"It's really very simple, sir. You see you're so extraordinary like 'im any way. Just a touch of make-up and you'd be perfect. We'll give you a key to the villa and you can change into some of 'is clothes and receive the other two in the library. You can close the curtains and darken the room. Then you'll deceive them, 'ear their plans and let us know."

"But I'm risking my life.... If these fellows suspect, they'll shoot me like a dog."

"It's true there's a lot of risk; but Krantz says 'e'll pay you ten thousand francs if you get the information 'e wants."

"I'd rather not. I swore I'd never set foot in the Principality again."

"Krantz says that, if ever 'e asked a favour of you, you promised you'd do it."

"That's true.... Well, tell Krantz ... I'll do it."

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE PLOT

"Cher Comerade:

There is something which weighs on me and of which I have been trying to write to you since several days.

You have heard me speak of Florent Garnier. Twice has he asked me in *marriage*, and a week ago he sought me out and demand me for the third time.

He is more prosperous than ever. He has a grand auto, and a villa near the forest of St. Germain. On Sunday with Jeanne we drive out to see it, and it is truly charming. Only he says he is so lonely there all by himself....

What am I to do? I think I am the most unhappy girl in all Paris. It is a great chance for me, and Madame Folette, Jeanne and the girls tell me I am crazy to refuse. Which is quite true because I am all alone in the life....

I do not ask your advice because I know you will tell me to take him too, and I don't like when you do that. All the same I think you are right, and this time it is for the best that I shall tell him ... *Yes*.

I hope you are well, and happy, and think of you very, very often.

Votre petite soeur adoptée,

MARGOT.

Florent wishes we marry on the seventeenth September so that in that day you must think of me and wish me happiness."

It was quarter past one when Hugh received this letter; it was half past when he jumped into the carmine car and told the chauffeur to drive him to Vulning's villa.

"Keep to the blind side of that chap and he'll never know you," Bob Bender had said. "What with Vulning's coat and hat and them yellow glasses he's wearin' lately any one would take you for his twin brother. The chauffeur's had one or two drinks too much anyway,—we've seen to that. 'E'll 'ave all 'is time taken up lookin' after 'is car."

"And Vulning?"

"We've got 'im safe. You see there's a little girl he's been after for some time. Mrs. Emslie's daughter wot committed suicide. She's workin' as a nurse girl; but she won't 'ave anything to do with 'im. Well, we got 'er to send 'im a note sayin' she'd meet 'im at one o'clock in a room in a certain 'otel that's a bit out of the way. 'E came all right; and, while he waited for her, we simply locked 'im in. 'E's there now, 'ammerin' at the door and ragin' like a madman. We won't let 'im out till you get back."

"I'm feeling nervous."

"Don't be afraid. With that touch of make-up you're as like 'im as two peas. You'll fool 'em all right. 'Ere's a key to the front door. Now run and jump into the car as if you were in a 'urry. Take this. It will steady you."

Hugh took the small flask of brandy that Bender handed to him, walked quickly to the car and leaped in. The chauffeur did not even look at him. He touched the button that started the motor, moved into gear and the car shot forward.

As Hugh left the town below him his uneasiness increased. His excitement seemed to mount with the mounting road, his heart pounded like the straining motor of the car that bore him on. He took a pull at the brandy flask, and felt better.

They were now among the olive trees and still climbing. A sleepy quiet brooded around them. When they drew near the solitary house Hugh wanted to leap out and make for safety, but it was too late to draw back.

As the chauffeur drove the car around to the garage, Hugh mounted the front steps and opened the door. A rush of stale air met him. The hallway was dark and dirty. Vulning did not seem to have a caretaker and probably only slept there

once in a while. The rooms leading off the hall were shuttered and dark. Hugh went into the library, threw back the shutters and unclasped the window. The light leaped in like a wild thing. He looked carefully out of the window. It gave on the terrace with a balustrade about three feet high. Below was the road leading to the garage, and beyond that dense shrubbery. He closed the window without clasping it, then drew the heavy curtains, plunging the room in mysterious gloom.

Once more he went out into the unlighted hall. How quiet and dark the house was! His footsteps awakened echoes everywhere. He went upstairs to where a door, slightly open, showed a chink of light. It appeared to be Vulning's bedroom. The bed was unmade, the room untidy. He took off his overcoat and drew on a dressing-gown he found lying over a chair. On the tiny table at the head of the bed was a small automatic pistol. Seeing that it was loaded, he put it into his pocket.

He felt horribly "funky," but a glance in the mirror reassured him. His sunburnt skin had been made up to resemble Vulning's sallow one; little crowsfeet were round his eyes, and cynical lines about his mouth. His hair was in the middle and brushed back like Vulning's. When he put on Vulning's yellow glasses it would have taken a very clever man indeed to detect the substitution. If only his confounded nervousness would not give him away! He wound a silk muffler around his neck, noting as he did so how his hands trembled. That would never do! He took another big swig at the brandy flask. Courage glowed in him, even to the point of recklessness. He was ready to go down and face them.

As he descended the stairway somewhat unsteadily he saw that his guests were already awaiting him. How quietly they had come in! He had not heard them. Golaz and Gamba were in the hall and glowered at him with fierce and restless eyes as he passed. In the darkened library Castelli and the doctor were talking in low tones, bending over the table on which lay a large plan. They turned as he entered.

Hugh shivered as he shook the large hairy hand of Doctor Bergius. How he hated this man. Those deep set eyes were profound with cruelty; that dense blue-black beard concealed a face that might be that of a fiend incarnate; his large fleshy lips of a bright unnatural red, set in that black beard, gave a singularly repulsive impression. When he smiled it was with a grin, callous, relentless, orientally cruel.

He smiled now, and Hugh was glad of his yellow goggles. They concealed the fact that his eyes were black instead of blue. He was glad, too, of the drawn heavy curtain. It seemed to him that even with all his precautions Doctor Bergius was regarding him with a curious fixity.

"Ah, young man," he said in his metallic voice, "you have kept us waiting. There is so much to be done and we have so little time. Castelli, close that door."

Hugh nodded sullenly. He dared not trust himself to speak. Once again Doctor Bergius regarded him curiously. He did not seem satisfied. He went up to Hugh and stared at him very hard. Hugh's heart began to thump.

"I am discovered," he thought, and his hand went to his pistol.

But the Doctor turned away with an expression of contempt. "Pah!" he said. "You've been drinking again. I hope you're not off on one of your bouts."

Hugh shook his head. He affected a certain surly stupidity. "No, no, doctor," he said thickly, "only a touch of brandy. Got sore throat. Caught a chill on the golf course. Felt shaky. Took it to steady me, clear my head."

"Well, it must be the last until to-morrow evening. After that you can go to the devil your own way. Promise me that now,—the last."

Hugh nodded sulkily.

"That is understood. Your part in the programme is a small one, but important. You must have all your wits about you. If you fail you may throw out the whole plan."

"All right. I'll keep off the stuff."

"Good. Now to business. Look!... Here's a plan of the Casino."

Hugh showed an eager interest. In order to see it better he edged round to the side of the table nearest the window. He

had Doctor Bergius on his right, on his left Castelli. The plan showed the entire ground floor of the Casino, the different rooms, the entrances, the windows, even the tables. Here and there were traced lines and figures in red, with names in Italian.

"You already have an idea," went on Doctor Bergius, "of what the great plan is. It is something unheard of, unthought of, magnificent in its audacity. Only a man of genius could have imagined it, perfected it in all its detail. Only one man living could have done it. That man is myself. It is what the Americans call a 'hold up.' *We propose to hold up the Casino.*"

Here the doctor paused to give effect to his words, then continued:

"To do that, you realize, is a project of the greatest gravity. But I have arranged everything; and it should go like clockwork. In the first place we need lots of men. I have a band of about sixty, all desperate characters, recruited from the slums of Genoa. They are supposed to be a touring athletic club, all wear the same caps and ties. You may have noticed some of them already. They have been here for some days and have visited the Casino in the morning when it is open to all visitors. Besides this we have secured admission cards for about a score of them. They know the ground. Every man has his part and is drilled in it. Each is of proved and desperate courage, will carry two six-chambered revolvers, and know how to use them. Ah, my friend, it is a marvellous conception. You should have been present at our rehearsals."

"What is my part?"

"Your part, my dear Vulning, is very simple. We have got a day ticket for you in the name of a Swedish gentleman. You will wear a heavy blonde beard and be completely disguised. This is for your sake. You see with what consideration we treat you. At six o'clock in the evening you will enter the Casino. That is the hour of affluence when all the tables are working, and the visitors have left their money behind. There should be several million francs in sight."

Here the doctor paused and rubbed his hands crisply.

"But before going any further, I will explain my ideas as to the division of the spoil. Each of our men has been promised five thousand francs. For that they would risk their lives a dozen times. Golaz and Gamba are to have a hundred thousand francs each. You and Castelli will have five hundred thousand. I will be modestly contented with whatever is left. Is that understood?"

Castelli nodded. Hugh followed suit.

"Agreed. Now, Vulning, for your *rôle*! You enter the Casino, I say, at six o'clock precisely, disguised as a Swede. You go straight to the table next to the refreshment room. It has been arranged that a man will rise and give you a place. You will sit for a few minutes, then suddenly, ..." the doctor paused, and took from his pocket a revolver, "you will rise to your feet. You will take this from your pocket, and, holding it to your head, you will fire.... Ah! my friend Vulning, don't start. It will only be loaded with a blank cartridge. It will do you no harm. Then having fired you will collapse and slip under the table. That's all you have to do for five hundred thousand francs. Easy, isn't it?"

"And what happens then?"

"What happens then?..." Doctor Bergius raised both hands exultantly. "Ha! I will tell you. That is the signal. Every one in the rooms will hear the shot and rush to the table. You know them. They will crowd around and push and jostle. They will want to get a glimpse of the suicide. There will be a mob. The attendants will be making frantic efforts to get out the body. Every one's attention will be distracted.... Then it is that things will *begin* to happen."

Doctor Bergius grew more and more impressive.

"We will have a dozen of our own men in the small room with the Opium Dream on the ceiling. Behold! it will be empty but for them. Everyone else will have run to see the suicide. Only the croupiers will have remained at their posts. Everything will be easy. Six of our men will hold up the croupiers while the others throw open the windows. If you remember, there are four windows giving on the terrace near the band-stand. My men will be waiting down below. They will swarm up. To protect them I will have a cordon of men running down to the sea. There I will have waiting also two very fast steam launches."

The doctor seemed to see it all. He spoke as a man inspired.

"After that it will be easy. A rush, a great drive. We will sweep them all before us. They will be like frightened sheep. Think of it! There will be forty of us all armed to the teeth. Can't you see them flying before us? We will herd them all into the refreshment room. Castelli with twenty men will control the main rooms; Golaz with ten men will take the long room that gives on the terrace; Gamba with another ten will attend to the *salon privé*. We will shoot down any one that shows the least sign of resistance. There will be panic, confusion, terror. We will pen the croupiers in corners at the revolver's point. Castelli, Golaz and Gamba will run to the tables and scoop the big notes into bags. We only want the big bills."

"Hold on!" said Hugh. "What about the mechanism that automatically locks the coffers?"

"We've seen to that. An electrician in our pay has put it out of action. Everything has been thought of. In five minutes it will all be over. We will then gather in a band under the big dome, fire a final volley over the heads of the crowd and beat a retreat. Then we will drop from the windows, run to the beach, tumble into the waiting launches and ho! for Italy. It will all be over before any one realizes what has happened. Magnificent, isn't it?"

"And what about me?"

"Ah, my dear Monsieur Vulning, do not worry about your precious self. Yours is the easiest part to play. You will, of course, beat a retreat with us. We will put you ashore at St. Remo if you wish. You can then remove your disguise and return here. No one will even suspect you...." Again Doctor Bergius looked at him curiously.

"I believe you are a coward, Vulning. Look here, Castelli will go through your part just to show you. I have here some blank cartridges. See! I charge the revolver. Now, Castelli...."

Castelli stood up by the table. He held the revolver about three feet from his head and fired. Then he dropped to the floor and remained there, grinning up at Hugh.

"*Voilà*," said the doctor. "That's all. No risk for you. You lie snug under the table and watch events. Easy, isn't it? Ah, the whole conception is superb, the work of a man of genius.... *Listen! ...*" The doctor stopped suddenly, grew tense, alert. "What's that? Who's out there with Golaz and Gamba?"

Hugh, too, was listening. He heard excited voices and steps coming down the hall. He trembled and as he reached out for support his hand touched an inkwell made out of the fuse of an old German shell. The next instant the door was flung violently open and a man entered.

It was Paul Vulning.

CHAPTER NINE

THE HOLD-UP

1.

"Hold him! Hold the impostor!" cried Vulning.

Hugh dashed the brass inkwell at the head of Doctor Bergius. The doctor collapsed over the table. Castelli, who was still on the floor in a crouching position, clutched at Hugh's leg. Hugh launched a vicious kick and caught him on the jaw. With one bound, he was behind the crimson curtains, and out on the terrace. He leaped the balustrade and plunged into the shrubbery. Madly he tore on. About fifty yards away was a high wall. He leaped at it desperately. His hands just clutched the coping, and he hung, slipping and scraping, feeling for a foothold. Then his toe caught in a tiny projection, and in another moment he had drawn himself up.

Spat! Spat! went the plaster of the wall.... They were firing at him as they ran. Golaz and Gamba came plunging through the bushes. They were appallingly near. The top of the wall was covered with bits of broken glass that caught his dressing-gown, as he leaped down on the other side. As he tried to wrench it free, a brown hand reached over and gripped it. With a twist and a turn, Hugh wriggled out of it. His pistol fell from the pocket. He snatched it up and rushed on.

A few yards further he darted behind an ancient olive tree and looked back. Gamba was already astride of the wall. Hugh fired twice and he saw the man drop back. Then he ran blindly on, taking the terraces of olive trees in reckless leaps, often landing on his knees. At length he came out on the mountain side amid boulders and prickly scrub. He dodged among the rocks, and cowered behind the bushes. He was torn and bleeding in a dozen places, and his clothes were in shreds. Presently he sank exhausted.

For over an hour he lay without moving. Everything was quiet; they had evidently given up the pursuit. He rose and by a round-about route he made his way back to the Casino.

Bob Bender was waiting for him on the steps. He looked anxious and excited. He dragged Hugh through a side door.

"Quick! tell me what's happened. You're in a hell of a state. We were afraid they'd got you."

"Didn't you know?... Vulning has escaped."

"No!"

"Yes, he arrived at an awkward moment for me. I've had to jolly well risk my life for your people."

"Vulning must have got out by the window. It was over thirty feet from the ground. We never thought of guarding that. He must have made a desperate effort.... Well, did you discover anything?"

"All."

"The devil! Quick! Tell me. How pleased the chief will be!"

"There's a hold-up of the Casino planned for to-morrow night."

"A hold-up!"

"Yes. They've got over sixty gunmen. Vulning's to give the signal by shooting himself with a blank cartridge. The men are to swarm up by the windows of the small room facing the band-stand. They have two fast steam launches to make their getaway in."

"It was planned for to-morrow at six, you say?"

"To-morrow at six."

"They'll never try it now. We've got them beaten, thanks to you. It has taken you a long time to get here."

"Over two hours."

"More. Look, it's nearly six now."

"I had to make a big detour to avoid them."

"Well, there's no time to lose. They may try to-morrow after all; we must be prepared. Oh, won't the chief be pleased! We must try to find him. He's in the Casino somewhere. He has many disguises. Come...." Bob peered everywhere, but could see no sign of Krantz.

"Let's look at the windows they mean to swarm up," suggested Bob. The two men pulled aside the yellow blinds and looked down. The ledge was broad and the height not great.

"Easy enough," commented Bob. "By getting into the band-stand a dozen men could command the whole terrace. The plan's been well considered, but we'll fix it so as it can never be carried out. We've got you beaten, Mister Bergius.... God! What's that?"

Hugh looked to where Bob was pointing. On the calm sea, lying close in, were two long steam launches. They manœuvred up and down, until they were hidden by the terrace.

"Did you see them, or did I dream?"

"No, its them ... *them!*"

A sudden fear seized Bob Bender. He looked up at the clock.

"Just on the stroke of six. If only Krantz were here. I wonder ..."

The two men stared at one another, and even as they stared, a sudden shot rang out.

Bob Bender gripped Hugh by the arm and cried hoarsely: "Hear that! the signal! *They've advanced the time by twenty-four hours. If I'm not mistaken the 'hold-up' is now on.*"

2.

They turned swiftly. The people at the table had left their places, and grabbing their stakes, were running in the direction of the sound. Only the croupiers sat still. These looked at one another in a rather uncomfortable way.

"Come," said Hugh, "I want to see if it's really Vulning."

He ran after the others. The crowd was so dense, it was impossible to get near the victim. Hugh saw the lackeys struggling to extricate a limp form from under the table. The faces of the crowd wore a mixture of curiosity and awe; they pushed and jostled shamelessly, to get a glimpse of the suicide. The inspector, the floor director and the director of games hurried to the scene. It had been a long time since a suicide had taken place at the tables. It would make a nasty scandal.

"*C'est très embetant*," Hugh heard one of them say. He saw a lackey arrive with a black sheet to cover the corpse. Then a woman pushed her way out of the crowd; she was in a hysterical state.

"I saw him do it," she cried. "I was sitting beside him. It was a big blonde man, a Swede, I think."

"Look!" said Hugh, suddenly gripping Bob's arm. "It's true. There they come." Almost simultaneously there were a dozen revolver shots, and a bunch of croupiers tumbled from the smaller salon, their hands in the air, their faces sick with fear.

"This is no place for me," said Bob Bender. "They'll shoot me at sight. I'm willing to work for the Casino, but I'm not willing to lose an inch of my skin for them."

Bob disappeared and not a moment too soon. Hell seemed to have broken loose. With a rush and a roar a score of men burst from the small salon. They whooped as they ran, brandishing revolvers and firing in the air. Their swarthy faces

were lit by the savage joy of combat. They drove every one before them; if a croupier showed a sign of resisting he was felled with the butt of a heavy revolver. But few of the croupiers resisted; most of them ran like rabbits, diving under the tables.

All was pandemonium. Women shrieked and fainted; there was a general struggle to get to the doors. Hugh could not move; he was wedged in a mob of players who fought and roared and cursed, as they backed away from the bandits.

Then in the midst of the mad tumult, hushing and dominating it, a harsh metallic voice rang out. "There is no danger so long as no one resists. Go quickly, all of you, and leave the rooms empty."

It was Doctor Bergius. He was standing on the table to the right, an automatic in either hand. Around his head was bound a white bandage. Suddenly Hugh heard a report near him. A croupier had put his hand on the metal box where the big notes were kept; he collapsed instantly, shot in the head by Castelli.

Hugh was forced with the crowd into the refreshment room. He could still see swarthy ruffians pouring from the small salon and hear shrieks, shots, howls of excitement.

The centre of the Casino had been cleared, hundreds of players had been driven into the atrium, hundreds of others penned in the refreshment room. Doctor Bergius still stood there, while Castelli and two others looted the tables. The band that had worked the private rooms came running back with their booty. They were joined almost immediately by the gang that had been pillaging the main rooms. With revolvers in hands, they formed a solid mass, their eyes flashing, their teeth gleaming ferociously. The voice of Doctor Bergius again rang out:

"Stay where you are, all of you. We have men posted to command the crowd. If one of you moves from his place before a full ten minutes has passed he will be shot. This is a solemn warning."

The doctor leaped down, and his men followed him, firing as they went.

Hugh edged through the crowd; he wanted to see what was happening. The last of the rear guard had disappeared into the smaller salon. Through the open doorway he saw them descending by the window. No one had as yet dared to move. Yes, there was *one*, a woman. Hugh saw her run in from the atrium, and marvelled at her daring. Then he recognized her. It was the tall woman who always dressed in grey. As she crossed the threshold of the small salon, she fired at the two men who were balanced on the sill; they swung around and returned the fire. Hugh recognized Castelli and the doctor. Then they, too, disappeared and the woman in grey lay still on the floor.

Everything was quiet, impressively quiet. The ten minutes were up but still no one was inclined to move. Hugh was the first to break the spell. He ran across the empty hall to the nearest open window. Two launches were steaming away. All was over now. The grand *coup* had been successful. When he turned back, the lackeys were carrying the veiled woman into one of the private rooms. Suddenly Hugh remembered the supposed suicide. He ran into the grand salon. The body still lay under the table. He bent down and examined it. It was Vulning; the false blonde beard was crimsoned with blood, and his head was blown open. The revolver had been loaded with a real ball. The poor devil had put an end to his own life. Doctor Bergius had seen to it that he had saved them his share of the swag. What a joker the doctor was!

3.

Hugh was sitting in his garden the following afternoon when Bob Bender came to see him. He counted out ten bills of a thousand francs each.

"There! if we failed it was through no fault of yours. You've earned this. Now we want you to go away for awhile, disappear somewhere. We want to hush the whole thing up, choke off all inquiries."

"All right. By the way, what about that poor woman who was shot?"

"Oh, she's all right! They only winged her. She dropped to avoid further injury. But then I shouldn't say 'she.' Do you know who that was?"

"No."

"Krantz."

"The devil!"

"Yes, I was surprised myself. He's been spying on the gang for months. He'll be all right in a few weeks."

"I'm glad. I liked Krantz. I say, you don't need to be afraid of my blabbing anything. But I don't see how you are going to hush up a thing like that. How are you going to account for it?"

Bob grinned.

"We're giving out that it was the rehearsal of a cinema production."

"Well, I'll be hanged!... All right. I'll make myself scarce. I'll shove off somewhere this very night."

And three hours later he was on the boat bound for Corsica.

END OF BOOK FOUR

BOOK FIVE

The Man Hunt



CHAPTER ONE

THE VALLEY OF THE GOLO

1.

In the glimmer of early dawn, the big boat swung slowly into the harbour. Under the lightening sky the steel grey waters changed to steel blue; and the dark mysterious land smiled into friendliness. The grey cubes piled against the mountain brightened into tall houses still locked in sleep. Presently, with a fore-glow of citron, the clear rim of the sun cut the sea-line; and the sea became jade green. The air was diamond pure; the mountains took on colour; and Bastia awakened to another careless day.

High caserne-like houses, massive-walled and stucco-fronted; shabby shops half a century behind the times; mustiness and age; cigarettes, vendetta knives, and goat-flesh,—these were some of Hugh's first impressions of Bastia.

He found a room in a tall hotel near the upper end of the town. It had vast rambling corridors with many doors, none of which were numbered, and to find his room he had to count each time the doorways from the head of the staircase. The interiors of all the rooms were alike in their simplicity. Each had high yellow walls, and a ceiling painted with a design of flowers and fruit, a bed, a *commode* with water-jug, two cane bottomed chairs.

Bastia soon bored Hugh. Its streets seemed gloomy and sordid, its people sunk in tradition. There was nothing to do. The first morning he wandered up and down buying the numerous brands of local cigarettes. In the afternoon he craved a cup of tea, but it seemed to be unknown. Finally at a big café he found a brew which tasted like *tisane*. A single gulp sufficed.

At his hotel the food was very bad. The place was run on casual lines by a family of Corsicans, swarthy, hairy, oily, with a suavity that signified nothing. At his special request they procured him butter, but it looked so much like axle-grease that he did not have the courage to discover what it tasted like. At dinner he had a ragout of very young lamb that tasted quite good, until the smallness of the bones suggested to him that the lamb had been still-born, then he ate no more.

In his overwhelming loneliness he thought that he would write to Margot. He went to the so-called *salon*, dipped a rusted pen hopefully into a dusty ink-bottle. Alas! it was dry. Discouraged, he rose and sought the streets again. A few cheap cinemas were open, the bills displaying cowboy pictures,—strong, silent, wooden-faced men and romping, sunny-haired heroines. The streets were badly lighted and suggested nocturnal adventure; but the frequent display of the vendetta knife in the shop windows was an incentive towards virtue. He found a big, dingy café, and, ordering a liqueur, fell to sampling one after another the various brands of cigarettes he had purchased. He was abysmally bored. Bastia was the finest place in the world, he decided, to pass through without stopping.

Then he went home to his hotel. Sitting on his bed in the candlelight, he read his little guide-book. Suddenly he had an idea. He was fit, foot-loose, free,—why not walk across the island? Yes; that was it. He would tramp from Bastia to Agaccio.

2.

Next morning he bought a small, cheap valise and packed in it the few clothes he needed, also his sketching materials, as he might want to make some colour notes on the way. He planned to take about a fortnight to the trip, jogging along easily, studying the people, perhaps fishing a little, and generally enjoying himself.

This cheerful prospect reconciled him to another day in Bastia. He made the acquaintance of a tourist party that were stopping at his hotel. They were nearly all women, and their great subject of conversation was not the beauties of the island but Food,—the feasts that awaited them of fresh trout, black-birds and passionate pink wine.

"Ah! you are English!" said a vivacious French girl to Hugh. "There are so many English in Corsica, very aristocratic English. They have been coming here for years, and seem to think they have discovered the place. They rather resent us ordinary tourists. There is another Englishman in the hotel. Perhaps you have seen him. He has the room next to yours. Or he may be an American, he is so tall and clean-shaven, and he wears those funny big round tortoise-shell spectacles.

"They make people look like owls, I think. Do you know him? I ask because he seems so quiet, so retiring. I am quite curious about him."

"No, I haven't seen him. But then I haven't been near my room all day. If I see him I'll speak to him, and allay your curiosity about him."

That evening he passed the tall man in the gloom of the corridor. Hugh was about to accost him when the man brushed past him and disappeared hurriedly into his room.

"Can't be an American, after all," thought Hugh, "or he'd be more sociable. I'll look up his name in the register."

When he did look it up, he found it was Wilbur P. Hoffmann, Jersey City; that settled it.

3.

The next morning, before starting out, he sought the proprietor of the library where he had bought his guide book, and inquired the best road for his journey.

"But, monsieur," said the man, "it would be better to take the train to Cassamozza; it is very flat and uninteresting as far as that. There the mountains begin, and you go up the valley of the Golo. The train starts in half an hour. You have just time to catch it, if you hurry."

The idea was a good one. Hugh hurried back to the hotel, leaped up the two flights of stairs and burst into his room. He grabbed his valise, which he had packed before going out, and rushed down into the street. Within ten minutes he was seated in the train.

The first-class carriage in which he found himself was very small and very dirty. He had to rub the window-pane with a newspaper in order to see out. On the walls of the compartment were advertisements of the wine of Cap Corse, a local *aperatif*, and a liquor called Cederatine. There were three other passengers in the carriage, a fat, spectacled man and two thin, spectacled women. From their accent he thought they were German at first, but later decided they were Dutch. They did not interest him. When the train started he turned his attention to the scenery. A green level stretched away to brown marshes that in turn yielded to the grey of the sea. At the tiny stations, sheltered by eucalyptus trees, peasants laden with baskets got in and out. Hugh attached a strap to the rings of his valise so that he could sling it from his shoulder. He had packed it with bread, cheese and fruit, a tin billy and a packet of tea.

He had decided to walk for two hours after reaching Cassamozza, then lunch in the open, so that it was with a sense of cheerful adventure that he descended at the little station and started out on his long tramp. How hot the way was! As he strode up the valley of the Golo the sun was scorching, the road a dazzling white; below him was a furious torrent, now dashing in dazzling foam amid great boulders, now swirling greenly in gravelly pools. It delighted him; it was so pure, so wild, so free. There was the *maquis*, too. It rose on either hand, clothing the mountain sides with rich dark green. It was pathless, dense, the best cover in the world. Here in the old days bandits had defied the forces of law and order; but now, doubtless, they were all dead.

With every step he realized more and more that he was advancing into the land of legend and history. He passed a hoary shepherd, who might have stepped from the pages of romance. The old man had a long beard and was dressed in brown corduroy. On his head he wore a picturesque *beret*, and strapped to his back was a huge blue umbrella and a gun. He was leaning motionless on his long staff, gazing over a flock of black-haired sheep that mottled the hillside. Hugh felt the poetry of it—the mountains soaring to meet the sky, the white torrent roaring in his ears, the solitary shepherd, white-bearded as a patriarch of old.

He was becoming hungry, furiously hungry, and he thought with joy of the simple fare tucked away in his valise. He climbed down to the river, and in the shadow of a great rock made a cheerful fire of driftwood. Now for the tea. Confound it! What was the matter with his valise? His key refused to turn in the lock.

"That is the worst of these cheap bags," he complained; "the key always jams when you are in a devil of a hurry."

He was ravenously hungry. His mouth watered even at the thought of bread and cheese. Damn the thing! It was a pity to break the lock but there seemed no help for it. Another effort. There, it was yielding. Bravo! it had suddenly burst

open.... Good God!

He stared blankly at what he saw. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. No, he was not dreaming, he was not mad ... they were there, dozens of them ... packets tightly tied, neatly arranged, numbered.... *Thousand franc bank-notes*. There seemed to be a hundred to a packet, and there were twenty-eight packets. Nearly three million francs! What could it all mean? Still staring at the wealth in his possession, he sat down and tried to think. The Golo roared in his ears. Between two grim grey boulders it crashed; it swirled and eddied into a great green pool. In those pure depths could be seen the darting shadows of trout.

Three million francs!

He breathed the perfume of the *maquis*. He saw it carpeting the broad valley, rising to the mountain ridges that met the sky. Yonder like a carved figure the patriarchal shepherd stood motionless by his flock. It was like a dream.

Three million francs.

Yes, there they were in that little valise. He looked closely at it; it was not his valise. It was quite different from the one he had bought, bigger and finer! He had taken it by mistake. How could he have made such a blunder? It had been in his room.... Or had it been in his room? Ah! that was it. In his furious hurry to catch the train he must have entered the wrong room....But whose? Why, whose but the tall American's; Wilbur P. Hoffmann's. Now he was getting at it. He had rushed into the room adjoining his and carried away the American's valise. It was not such a strange thing to do, after all. The rooms were all alike, the doors unnumbered. He had not examined particularly his valise when he had bought it; and it was little wonder that he had not noticed the difference. Yes, he had carried away another man's valise containing nearly three million francs. What should he do with it? Go back to Cassamozza and telegraph, of course! The tall American must be in a devil of a stew. But what was Wilbur P. Hoffmann doing packing three million francs around in a hand valise? It was a rum affair....

Hugh realized suddenly his own position. It was dangerous to be carrying such a treasure in this wild, primitive country. Few men would hesitate to kill him to gain possession of it. Even now some one might be watching him. Half fearfully he looked around. Then he closed the valise with a snap. Some one *was* watching him. It was a peasant lad who had bobbed up from the other side of the big boulder.

"Hullo," said Hugh.

"Bon jour, monsieur."

The lad drew nearer. He carried a long cane fishing-rod and had a canvas wallet slung at his back. He wore an old army tunic on which was sewn the yellow ribband of the military medal. He also limped badly. His age was about that of Hugh, and his face was olive tinted and bold featured.

"How is the fishing?"

"Not bad, monsieur. A little too clear. Still, look...."

Opening his satchel he showed Hugh four fine trout.

Suddenly Hugh remembered that he was hungry.

"Listen," he said, "I've walked from Cassamozza, and I've forgotten to bring anything to eat. I'm dying of hunger. I suppose it wouldn't be possible to cook these?"

"Nothing easier, monsieur. I generally cook a fish or two for lunch. See...."

He took from his wallet a small frying-pan and a bottle of olive oil.

"Already you have a fire made. We will cook these in no time, and you will see how nice they will be."

He soon had the fish simmering on the fire. He produced a piece of coarse bread and even some salt. When the fishes were cooked Hugh laid them on a flat stone. He ate with his hands, stripping the bones with his fingers. What matter! There was lots of water to wash in afterwards, all the Golo a giant finger-bowl at his feet. He had never tasted fish quite

so delicious.

"There! I feel better," he said at last. "Now for a good drink at the river and a smoke."

He produced cigarettes and the two smoked comfortably.

"Been at the War?" asked Hugh.

"Yes," said the lad. "Verdun. I got wounded in the leg there. It still bothers me. Two of my brothers were killed. There's not a family here but lost some one. You know we Corsicans are brave. There were no braver men in the French army than our regiments. But they don't like the Corsicans in France. The French generals sacrificed us."

He shook his head sadly.

"Ah! poor Corsica. It is the forgotten island. So rich, yet so neglected. We are supposed to be savage, but there is no people so kindly. But we are poor, oh, so poor. Look at me. I have not a *sou*. And I will always be like this, poor, ragged, ignorant. It is hard."

"What would you do if you had ... say three million francs?"

"Ah, monsieur, you jest. That is all the money in the world. Why, I would buy my old mother the cottage she lives in; then I would go to Paris and get an education. I would live like a fine gentleman. Ah! Paris. I was there once. What a time I had! I shall never forget it. Well, now I must catch some more fish for our supper this night."

Hugh tried to give him a bill for five francs, but the lad drew back proudly.

"No, monsieur, we are a hospitable people. We do what little we can to make the stranger welcome. I thank you, but I can accept nothing." He limped away in his rags and Hugh did not see him again.

4.

Once more Hugh climbed to the road. He would go on, he decided, to the next station and telegraph there. What a beastly nuisance! He would have to return to Bastia. That American, who was he? Even in that brief moment in the corridor there had been something vaguely familiar about him. What if he were a criminal fleeing from justice! What if... Good Heavens!... Hugh stopped short as the great idea flashed on him. Could it be?... Could it be that Wilbur P. Hoffmann was ...

He tore open the valise again, and fell to examining the notes. Some pencil markings confirmed his suspicion.... Was it Doctor Bergius? Absurd! Yet why not? Doctor Bergius with his beard shaved off, his head cropped, would not look very unlike Wilbur P. Hoffmann. He had noticed, even in the obscurity, the man's large, beaklike nose. Conviction grew on him. Yes, the tall American was Doctor Bergius. Here now was a pretty mess. What was he to do? The Casino had been robbed of three million francs. He was alone with the booty in the savage heart of Corsica; he could not return it to the robbers, and to return it to the Casino ... hum! That didn't quite appeal to him either. He had not much sympathy with the Casino. They could well afford to lose it. It would be better to hand it over to some deserving charity. In the meantime what was to be done? He could not carry the stuff round. He must dispose of it for the moment. That was it. He would hide it. He had been hearing for some time, as he walked, the roar of a great waterfall, and saw it about three hundred yards further on at the head of a very wild and solitary gorge. Climbing over the rocks, he reached the base of the cliff where the white shaft of water plunged into a deep pool. He found that the rock over which it fell shelved back into a low cave. He crawled in; it was quite dry. He took out the bundles of bank-notes, and wrapping them in his waterproof coat, bound the parcel tightly with stout cord. Then he crawled still further into the cave and jammed it into a fissure of the rock.

"There! It's safe," he said. "It can remain in that cleft a thousand years and no one will find it."

He crawled out cautiously, and, after reconnoitring to see that no one had observed him, continued on his way.

CHAPTER TWO

IN THE "MAQUIS"

1.

Amid the gorges of the Golo the white road wound on and up. The *maquis* encroached on it, frowned on it shaggily. Once or twice Hugh plunged into the perfumed cover and explored it for a few yards. The landscape lay sunny and still.

On the other side of the road, all strength and joy, the river leapt like a living thing; it charged the boulders, it flashed in foam, it gleamed in green pools. Sometimes he saw peasants with cane-poles tempting the unsophisticated trout.

He came on other ancient shepherds, with big flocks of black sheep, or goats. They always bowed profoundly, then resumed their statuesque pose. From time to time he passed cottages with red tiled roofs. Sturdy children, peach-skinned, with dark, glossy hair, and bold black eyes, came out to stare at him. A poor, proud, self-reliant race.

Beside each house was its own private graveyard. Often the tombs were walled, so that the dead were better housed than the living.

Sometimes the road dived into groves of cork trees. They had all been stripped of their barks, the new growth showing by its colour and depth the number of years since each tree had been scaled.

Hugh found the way full of interest, and would have been very happy indeed, had it not been for the thought of the money. It haunted him. Why had Doctor Bergius brought it here? Had he given the others the slip, or were they all here? If they were, then heaven help him! They would soon be on his trail, and would never let up. They were relentless. In this lonely seabound island how could he escape them? In spite of the bright sunshine and the reassuring tranquillity of his surroundings, he shuddered.

High up in the folds of the hills he saw grey mountain villages, each clustered about a tall church, and looking so still, so dreamlike, that it was hard to believe anyone lived there. Nearly all the women he met were dressed in black with black silk scarfs knotted around their heads. He remembered that in this land the period of mourning is seven years, so that it is rare for a woman to be out of black.

He had passed many round rings of stone on the green sward. He asked a stalwart farmer what they were and was told that they were threshing floors. They still used oxen to trample the corn as they had done ever since the time of the Romans. Then as the sun was setting, he met a caped and bearded shepherd, leading home his flock, and carrying a lost lamb in his arms.

It was evening when he reached Ponte Lecchio and found a lodging for the night. His room was large and lofty, quite bare except for a large crucifix on the white-washed wall. As he was dropping off to sleep he thought of Margot. She must be very busy preparing for her wedding. He ought to write to her, and give her his fraternal blessing. But somehow he couldn't. Of course, what she was doing was for the best. He hoped she would be happy and all that sort of thing. He had always advised her to marry, and now she was doing it; yet somehow it made him melancholy.

"I'll get over it," he sighed dolefully; "I'll forget all about her."

In the morning he resumed his tramp. He had luncheon at a place called Omessa, in an *auberge*. He ate slices of the raw ham of the country, Roquefort cheese made on the neighbouring farms, figs and walnuts, all washed down with the rich wine of the country. Thus heartened he continued his way. As he neared the station of Omessa he heard the train whistle. He loitered to let it pass. He bought a couple of oranges from a woman squatting on the platform beside a great round basket full of them, then stepped back into the grimy waiting room. He was idly peeling one of the oranges when the train drew up. The window of the waiting room was plastered with timetable bills, but in the narrow space between them Hugh peered out.

Suddenly his heart seemed to lift in a sickening way. At the door of a first class carriage were three men,—Castelli, Golaz and Gamba. They were after him. As he stared through the narrow chink he saw Gamba descend and buy some oranges. Then a fourth man came from the back of the compartment. It was Wilbur P. Hoffmann. The supposed American

looked up and down the platform. His face was worried and anxious. Hugh's suspicion was correct. That hard, grim face, dominated by its beaklike nose, was none other than Doctor Bergius.

"Take a look round the station," cried the doctor to Gamba. "He may be here. We cannot afford to take any chances."

Hugh had just time to rush from the waiting room by the back door as Gamba entered. He heard a step on the wooden floor, and knew the little man was coming after him. How could he escape? At the end of the station house was a small stone building into which he darted. He pulled the door shut, holding the handle with all his strength. Around him were brushes and a ladder. Under his feet he heard the crunch of coal. He was evidently in the closet used by the caretaker of the station. As he held the door, he heard a step outside and Gamba seized the handle, cursing volubly. Hugh held on grimly. Although Gamba supposed the door was locked, he made another effort to open it. He had powerful hands had the Strangler. Hugh felt the handle gradually turning in his grip. Another instant and Gamba would conquer. Then the train whistled, and Gamba hurried off.

Hugh waited a full ten minutes before he emerged from the closet. The train has gone; he saw it puffing far up the valley. There was no one on the platform. He was safe.

For the moment at least. The train was bearing his enemies away, but to-morrow they would return. When they discovered he had not arrived at Agaccio they would double back. They were like a pack of blood hounds on his trail and the hunt was only beginning. He was entirely at their mercy. He must use his wits and trust to Providence.

2.

Before he reached Corte the weather had changed; clouds had collected, and a fine rain was falling. He found a poor room in a large, unsanitary hotel, but dined decently on an omelette and some fried trout.

Corte in the drizzling twilight was very depressing. An old fortress stood on a rocky point against a savage mountain. Clammy scarfs of mist wreathed the peaks and trailed down the passes. Hugh wandered about the muddy main street, halting on the greasy pavement to peer down dark and ruinous courts. Seen under that cowl of sky, through the curtain of soft rain, Corte was indeed a joyless and discomforting place.

He sought his room, and spent an uneasy night between damp sheets. He was sorry now he had not made for Bastia and hid there until a boat sailed. The thought of the doctor and his band of desperadoes frankly terrified him. Well, he would go on now, and trust to luck.

Next morning the rain had ceased, although it still threatened. It would be better, he thought, to lunch by the wayside; and he bought some cheese, fruit, bread and a bottle of wine. Thus provisioned he started up the mountain road that was to take him on the next stage of his journey.

Ever since he had left Cassamozza he had been climbing steadily. He had left behind the lemon and orange groves, and now was steadily mounting to a land of oak forests and ravines. The flocks of sheep had given place to herds of goats, and the *maquis* was growing more and more aggressive. Down in the dim valley, like a silver tape, was the Tavignano meandering to the sea. On the other side of the valley were two precipitously perched villages. He passed many little roadside shrines, and one or two old lime kilns. Here and there were bearded goat-herds in long black cloaks, standing as motionless as scarecrows in a wheatfield. At noon he sat down on the edge of the *maquis* and ate his luncheon.

He was just finishing his meal, when he paused and listened. Surely he heard the faint chugging of a motor.... Yes, yonder it was, a small car cautiously descending the mountain road. Some instinct made him draw back into the bush. Well he did so, for it was the four men who were hunting him, Castelli driving with the doctor, Golaz and Gamba behind. Hugh saw their eyes searching the road on either side. Now they were looking at the very spot where he lay. But the brush was thick, and they passed slowly on. A narrow escape!

They must have started early that morning from Agaccio. He knew they would have little difficulty in tracing him on that island where strangers were rare. It was just a question of time, of getting his location narrowed down. They would learn that he had stopped at Corte and had taken the road to Agaccio. Then they would turn back to search for him, inquiring at every house and village on the way. Beyond him was the little hillside town of Venaco. They would inquire if he had passed through. Well, he would not pass through; he would take to the *maquis* and go round.

All afternoon he kept to the *maquis*, avoiding villages, hamlets and even houses. He scrambled over rocks, stumbled through brush. He flattered himself that not even a peasant had seen him. He kept close to the road, his ear ever alert for the far off sound of a motor.

He was making slow progress, but he could see no other way. By now they must have traced him to Corte, and learned that he was but a few miles away. Doubtless they had asked the peasants to look out for him, even offered a reward. Perhaps at that very moment a score of stalwart Corsicans were scouring the bush for him. He had but one slim chance of escape, that of lying low, working his way to Agaccio and catching the boat for Marseilles.

He decided to sleep that night in the *maquis*. Under the shadow of an overhanging rock he found a place that was quite dry and screened by the foliage of an oak tree. He made a tiny fire, ate what remained of his food, and smoked a good deal. If only he had had a blanket he would have been fairly comfortable.

He arose with the dawn, stiff and sore. He took to the road, thinking he would meet no one at that early hour. He was ravenously hungry and felt reckless. When he came to the solitary house of a shepherd, he ventured to approach it and ask for food.

It was a two storied house with plastered walls, and a red tiled roof. An outer stairway led to the upper floor where the family lived; the ground floor was used as a stable.

As he knocked at the rough door he told himself he must seem rather a sorry sight. A night in the *maquis* had not improved his appearance. If he had only been wearing the corduroys of the country ... but he was in a brown Norfolk jacket, grey flannel trousers and a panama. He was not surprised when the bearded and spectacled old man who opened the door stared at him with astonishment.

"Can I have something to eat?" he asked.

Corsican hospitality is proverbial.

"*Entrez donc, monsieur*," said the old man.

Hugh entered. The house consisted of but one big room meagrely furnished. Hams hung from the rafters, and at a small stove a woman, surrounded by a brood of half-clad children, was preparing coffee. The old man offered him a chair.

"The place is yours, monsieur. Make yourself at home."

He ate some bread and drank his coffee, then rose to go. The old man detained him. In half intelligible French he began to relate the family history: they were miserably poor; his son, the father of the small brood, only worked at intervals. They had a garden, some goats, pigs, chickens, a few cultivated acres. Praise God there was always something to feed the children. Would monsieur like to taste their home-cured ham? Ah! now he must insist.

There was a heavy step on the outer stair and the old man went quickly to the door. Hugh heard hurried whispers then the step descended rapidly. The old man returned, and continued to cut the ham. He offered it raw after the fashion of the country. Hugh would have preferred it cooked, but under the circumstances he thought it best to bolt it down as it was. Then he rose again and said he must be on his way.

Again the old man tried to detain him. "Why not stay a little and rest yourself? There is a nice warm bed, and we have goat's meat for dinner. You must see how good it is."

The old man almost hung onto his arm. His eagerness seemed very suspicious, so Hugh gently detached himself and bade good-bye to the family. As he went up the road, he saw them all watching him from the doorway.

No sooner was the house out of sight than he took to the *maquis*. His fears were justified, for about an hour later two cars passed very slowly. The first, the small green one he had already seen, contained Castelli, Golaz and Gamba; the other, a big powerful grey, driven by a chauffeur, held Doctor Bergius. They had heard of him, no doubt, at the house of the shepherd, and were patrolling the road. But, hidden as he was in that dense jungle of *maquis*, they had little chance of finding him. He imagined that they must have telegraphed to Bastia for the big grey car.

About two o'clock he saw the two cars going back in the direction of Venaco, and once more ventured to take to the road. As he passed a dismal farm a man and a woman paused in their work to regard him. He wanted to ask them for

food, but their manner was so strange that he decided it was wiser to go on. When he was a little way from the house, he saw the man leap on a mule and ride off in the opposite direction. Evidently the whole countryside had been warned, and every one was on the look-out for him. It would be only a matter of time before they cornered him. Once again he took to the *maquis*.

Rain had begun to fall. The underbrush was drenched and he was cold and wet. Still he pushed doggedly on. His despair gave him strength and he covered quite a distance. He cut off a big bend in the road by going straight through the bush. As he was in the midst of the *maquis* he heard again the sound of a motor. Climbing a rock he peered cautiously over the country. Close to the road a number of peasants were moving back and forth. They were beating the bush for him.

Still more cautiously he moved forward. Half an hour later he came out on the road once more. Not far away he heard the beaters crashing through the brush. Soon they must find him. He peered around carefully ... then his heart leaped.

Standing by the side of the road was the little green car. It was empty. Castelli and the others had gotten out and were searching for him. He looked up and down the road. There was no sign of them.

Then a desperate idea came to him... Yes, he would do it.

CHAPTER THREE

IN THE MOUNTAINS

Once more he looked up and down the road. Still no sign of any one. Now was the moment. He sprang to the little green car and spun the handle. Would it start or not? The motor breathed gently. Exultation flamed in him. A good car and a good road ... the devil himself could not stop him now. He leapt to the seat, jerking off the brake and giving her gas at the same moment. Then he heard a shout from behind, and turned his head sharply. About a hundred yards behind him Gamba had come out of the *maquis*.

There was no time to lose. The little man was running like a deer. How about the gears? Hugh looked down at the gate in which they worked, a four-speed gear box. They must go the usual way,—front, back, cross and front, back. Quick, Gamba was getting closer! He jammed in the first speed, and the car moved slowly forward. Second speed! He was going faster now, but Gamba was still gaining. Third speed! He heard close behind him the hard, panting breath of his pursuer. Gamba was running like the wind. Quickly he shot into high; and at the same instant he heard a heavy thump on the back of the car. Gamba had jumped and was hanging on behind.

The car was going at a fair speed now. If he only could get rid of that grinning little devil behind all would be well. Gamba was hoisting himself up. Soon he would be in the car, and then.... Hugh looked back once more. The man was waist-high above the hood. In another moment it would be too late. Ha! there on the floor by his feet was a spare can of petrol. That might do. He reached for it and with all his strength flung it over his shoulder. It must have caught Gamba square on the face, for he heard a crash and a howl. When he looked again Gamba was gone. He had a brief glimpse of him sprawling on the road. Then on and on at increasing speed.

Suddenly from the *maquis* he heard a shout like the hoarse bellow of a bull. Before him, on a snag of rock, was the burly figure of Golaz. The man shook huge fists at him in impotent rage. The rock was about twenty yards away from the road and Hugh knew he could pass it before Golaz had time to descend. He put on a burst of speed. The car leapt forward.

What was Golaz after? He had bent down and was wrenching furiously at the rock. He detached a great fragment of it and stood with it poised above his head. What a ferocious figure he made against that savage background, his dark face distorted with rage!

Instinctively Hugh slowed up. He knew what was coming. A car is a hard object to miss, and that great rock crashing down on any part of it, would hopelessly wreck him. There was no way of avoiding it; the road was narrow with thick brush on either hand. Nothing but to dash forward and take his chance.

He opened the throttle to the full, and the little car answered like a living thing. It seemed to pause for an astonished moment, then bounded forward so swiftly that it almost seemed to leave the ground. At the same instant the great stone came crashing down.

Would it hit him? He heard a snarl of rage from Golaz and a dull thump on the road behind him. Yes, that admirable response of his engine, that sudden spurt of speed had deceived the man. The great stone had missed by a hand's breadth.

"Oh, you gallant little beast!" breathed Hugh to the ear. "You're a thoroughbred. You'll save me yet."

Behind him Golaz continued to roar and wave his arms. Hugh had a flash of intuition that his danger was not yet over. He was right. From the *maquis* about a hundred yards ahead, darted the figure of another man ... Castelli. He stood in the centre of the road with his automatic pistol, and waited. Hugh was reckless. He must pass that man. A wave of hate surged through him; Castelli was trying to kill him; well, then, he would try to kill Castelli. He would run him down.

The car was going at full speed, rocking and bounding in its leaps. Castelli drew a little to one side and with a quick twist of the wheel Hugh swerved and bore down on him. The man saw his intention and sprang away. That leap saved Hugh; a bullet struck and starred his windshield; another whistled past his head; a third punched a harmless hole in one of his rear mud-guards. Then he passed out of range. He was free ... free.

Once more exultation flamed in him. The road, ever climbing higher, followed the folds of the mountains. Sometimes, as he looked ahead, it would seem to come to an end and the careening car be about to leap into the vast void of the valley.

But as he drew near, it hooked sharply round, and with a wrench of the wheel he was safe on a new stretch. Below him, far, far below, he could see the white bed of the Tavignano, the river like a blue ribbon tangled amid the boulders. He seemed to be in the clouds, and rising, rising to the top of the world. He stopped the car for a moment to consult his map.

Good! It was only three o'clock, and not more than some eighty kilometres to Agaccio. If nothing happened he could make it by nightfall. True, they might telegraph to the police, and have him stopped at some wayside village. No, that was not likely. They did not want to have any dealings with the police. Once at Agaccio he was safe.

He was about to start again, when he heard a sound that checked him. With a hand on the wheel he listened intently. From far down the valley it came, the faint tick-tock of a straining motor. He ran his eye along the sinuous curve of road that was like a white tapeline tacked to the mountain. Yes, there it was, about two miles away, the long grey auto racing in pursuit.

"If they want to catch me, they'll have to do some giddy going," he muttered, as once more he slammed on his speeds.

The little car, panting with eagerness, ate up the road. If only it had been a straight road he could have launched forward, but the hair-pin bends baffled him. As he swung around them, a swerve of a few inches would have shot him a thousand feet into the valley below. Ahead of him the mountains rose like a solid wall, gaunt and stupendous. They seemed to crowd around him, to close him in, to block his way. Clouds cloaked their higher summits and the drizzling rain had grown chill and dispiriting. The increasing stickiness of the way made careful driving more and more necessary. Dizzily on his right rose the mountain; on his left sheerly dropped the valley. A skid would be fatal.

Nervously he slackened speed, but even as he did so his heart seemed to contract. On the bend of the hill below he saw the grey car. It swung madly round a corner and strained on with relentless energy. That chauffeur must be a demon. The four men were urging him to greater speed, bending forward with fierce excited gestures. They were not more than half a mile behind and every second the distance was lessening. Once more Hugh gave the car gas and she leaped forward.

They should not capture him. That would mean torture, death. He knew them. They were exasperated now beyond all reason. They would show him no mercy. And they were gaining on him, gaining relentlessly, inch by inch.

It was getting gloomier, he noticed,—and more chilly. Yet in spite of the increasing cold, great drops of sweat beaded his brow. With hands tensely clutching the driving wheel he glared at the glistening road ahead. His motor was going with a steady roar; and the car was bucking and plunging in a maddened frenzy of speed. He was near the top of the long valley, and soon would be dashing into the dark defiles of the mountains. But before he could reach them he would have to pass over a long bit of straight road. It was on this, he feared, the final tussle would come.

He had not gone more than a third of a mile when he heard the grey car come around the corner behind him. They were now on the same stretch, running for every last ounce of power in their motors. The grey car roared down on him like the wind. It must be doing eighty miles an hour to his forty. With his foot jammed hard on the gas-pedal, he clutched the bucking wheel. The car bounded and rocked beneath him. It was all he could do to keep it on the road. The hillside was a blur, the wind screamed in his ears.

With every spin of its great engine the grey car was gaining. He dared not look around, but he felt sure that the four men were reaching forward, revolvers in hands, tense, grim, implacable. The giant panting of their motor drowned the roar of his own. He could do no more, ... he was at his full burst of speed.

He watched the road rise sharply before him. It was on that long slope he would be caught. He knew it. As he struck the rise, his speed dropped. Not so that of the grey car, it seemed to come on faster than ever. It roared like an angry monster; its panting deafened him...

What was that? A bullet. They were near enough to shoot; they had him! He crouched low as another bullet sung past his ears. In a moment more he would jam in his brakes, stop the car brutally, leap into the *maquis*. He had a revolver; he would sell his life for a grim price. At least two of these devils should pay!

Then he heard another report, and his heart gave a leap of joy. Could it be the bursting of a tire? Yes, he was right. There were shouts, curses, furious exclamations, then silence. On he hurtled, hardly believing in his luck. He could no longer hear them, and at the head of the valley, he slowed up and looked round. The grey car had come to a standstill. The men had gotten out and were busy fitting on a new tire. That would take them ten minutes at least. He had already gained

nearly a mile. In ten minutes he could do another five. Let him only have six miles between them, and, with luck, he would beat them yet. He put on speed again.

How marvellously the road was mounting! Great craggy peaks soared up on every side. Dark ravines yawned beneath him. Ahead was a cloud-mass, heavy as a sponge. The rainy drizzle had thickened to a downpour. The car now splashed through pools of water, now slithered over stretches of mud. Then the forests began to close in on both sides of the road and give him a sense of security. The country had completely changed. The road descended into dripping oakgroves, and spanned dark gullies, down which brawled angry torrents.

Then it began to climb again, and the oaks gave way to pines. He had been travelling for nearly an hour, and had heard no sound of his pursuers. What had happened to them? Perhaps something worse than a damaged tire. He must be far ahead of them by now. He was rapidly mounting to the Col of Vizzavona. According to his map, when he had crossed the divide, he would drop down into Agaccio. Only let him surmount the Col and he could coast downhill for the rest of the way. He should make Agaccio by dark. For the third time that day he glowed with exultation.

It was getting very cold. The pines were chill and gloomy. The rain seemed to sting.... What was that just ahead, that patch of white? Surely it could not be snow? Yes. It was a short stretch, quite shallow. The car bounded through it easily. But look, another, broader, deeper! The car slid a little this time, and his heart sank. Then he saw the road was clear, and his hopes rose again. He mounted a ridge. He must be in the very heart of the mountains now. The mist rolled and dipped, cloaking the stark peaks that ringed him round. Surely he could not go much higher.

Again the road dropped swiftly. At the bottom of the dip, his car plunged into a great drift of snow, a foot deep and half melted. For a few yards it struggled on, then slackened speed and came almost to a standstill. Desperately he strove to force his way through; his wheels were whirring and slipping in the rain-rotted snow. He could not budge. He realized that it was useless.

Jumping out he reconnoitred the road ahead. It was filled with drifts, snow without a break. He never could get through. Stalled! Hopelessly stuck! Going back he tried once again. The car struggled gallantly, but to no use. He looked at it ruefully.

"Bless you, you gallant little beast," he said. "You've served me more than nobly. Now it's got to be good-bye."

Then he left the road and plunged into the forest.

CHAPTER FOUR

IN THE FOREST

1.

He intended to remain in the cover of the forest, even, if need be, to spend the night there. In any case he would keep well away from the road and work through the wild country to Agaccio. Fortunately the forest was an open one. On the heights were pines, in the hollows oaks. Under the trees the rocks were covered with moss or a short growth of fern. There was nothing to impede him save the frequent gorges and brawling streams, and he made good progress. He was wet through; but in his excitement he felt neither cold nor fatigue, not even hunger.

Then, as night drew near, he began to be conscious of all three. The prospect of passing the hours of darkness in the forest daunted him. He might become crippled with rheumatism, perhaps contract pneumonia. He was afraid.

So presently stumbling on a narrow trail, he followed it eagerly, even breaking into a run. It was well defined and must lead to some habitation.

It had grown dark and he could hardly see the path. Several times he lost it and stumbled into wet fern. He went on more cautiously, drenched, shivering, discouraged. Would the trail never end? It went up and up, climbing deeper into the savage fastnesses. He was so tired, so miserably tired; he longed to lie down and rest. But that would be fatal. He must struggle on. His heart failed him, his weakness increased. Perhaps the little trail led nowhere. Despair seized him. Just as he was about to succumb, he saw a light. It was streaming through the shuttered window of a house, a house so near he almost blundered into it. He found the door and knocked. A step; then a voice asked:

"Who is there?"

"A traveller. I've lost my way. Please let me in."

A heavy bolt was drawn, and the door opened cautiously. A tall old man holding a lamp over his head, stood in the doorway. His face was in the shadow, but Hugh could see that it was round and jovial. The man looked at him for a long moment, then said:

"Ah! my poor monsieur, you are indeed in a plight. Excuse me that I did not open sooner. But there are bandits about, and one has to be careful."

He led Hugh into a bare room in which there was a long table and some rough benches. It was like the public room of some country *auberge*, hard, primitive, nakedly clean, but its cheerlessness was vanquished by a huge fire that blazed in the great open fireplace. The old man set the lamp on the table.

"Welcome, monsieur. My name is Pascal Martini. I keep a place of public entertainment; you have fallen well."

"And I am a tourist," said Hugh. "I was going to Agaccio in a car, but got stuck in the snow near the summit, and followed a trail that led me here."

"It is good," said Martini. "If you had followed the road you would have gotten waist deep in snow. It has lasted now for three days, the storm. And to think that down near the coast they have oranges and peach trees in blossom. It is wonderful, our Corsica. We have three climates in so small a space. I regret that we are giving you at this moment a taste of its most unpleasant one. You are wet through. If you will condescend to wear some of my poor garments I will give you a complete change."

Hugh expressed his gratitude, and, standing in the glow of the blazing logs, stripped and rubbed himself with a rough towel. He felt the glow return to his frozen limbs. He put on the woollen shirt, stockings, and the corduroy breeches Martini handed to him.

"The costume of a hunter," said the inn-keeper. "It is chiefly hunters and fishermen who come here. Sometimes woodcutters. Occasionally bandits."

"Where am I?" asked Hugh.

"About five miles up in the mountains behind Vizzavona. Later in the year hunting parties come and my place is always full. Now there is no one. I am indeed glad to see you. But I waste time. I must prepare you some supper. You must be ravenous."

"I am rather."

"Ah, my poor monsieur! And I have no meat in the house. What a misfortune. All I can offer you is fish, fresh mountain trout. Come, you shall see. I will catch them fresh from the water."

He lit a pine torch at the fire, and taking a scoop-net in his hand, led the way to the back of the house where Hugh heard the roar of the stream.

"In the dark you cannot see," said Martini; "but it is really very picturesque here. The back of my house is level with the face of rock that falls to the stream. It forms a very deep pool that I call my fish-pond. I stock it against the time when I have many guests. At the upper end is a small waterfall, and at the lower I have a grill so that the fish cannot escape. You can hear the roar of my waterfall. I love it. It is something alive in the deadness and silence of the forest. In the night I awake and hear its friendly roar. I have been a sailor, monsieur, and it reminds me of the sea. In the morning I strip and stand under it. I brace myself and let it crash down on me; it beats and stings. In the coldest weather it is only pleasantly bitter, a hearty tonic.... Now, if monsieur will wait here, I will descend the rock and get some fish."

As Hugh looked down, he thought how strange and wild was the scene. The old man bent over the water and the flare of his torch revealed the mysterious depths of the pool, and the white curtain of the waterfall. Overhead was the harsh foliage of the pines. The inn-keeper scooped round in the coppery eddy of the water, and presently climbed back up the face of the rock. In his net two silvery trout were leaping and gasping.

"There! I have already supped; but I expect you can manage both."

2.

Hugh always remembered that evening before the glorious fire. He smoked old Pascal's tobacco, and listened to his yarns. The inn-keeper had voyaged far, and could talk of many lands, but always he brought the conversation back to Corsica.

"It is the vendetta that makes the bandits," said Pascal. "They are not bad men as a rule. But they have made their kill, and from then on are forced to live beyond the clutches of the law. Very often it all arises from a political brawl; for we Corsicans are fiery politicians. That was the case with Angelo Rocco, who lives in a cave five kilometres from here. They say he had quite a future before him in public life. But one night in a café the heady Corsican wine was flowing, words ran high, pistols were drawn, an opponent of Rocco was shot; and Rocco had to take to the mountains. He belongs to a very old and distinguished family, too. Every one sympathizes with him; even the gendarmes let him alone. He often comes here. He can have all I've got.... But, of course, they are not all like that."

Hugh saw the inn-keeper through an increasing veil of drowsiness. As he leaned forward to prime his pipe in the glow of the great fire Pascal was a striking figure, a tall, strong, hearty old man with thick grey hair and a pleasant smile on his ruddy face. Then suddenly a shadow seemed to fall on it; it grew grim, even sinister. The tone of his voice changed.

"No, they are not all like that. Monsieur, I, too, am involved in a blood feud. It is for that I sailed the seas for half a lifetime; for that I now shutter my windows at night. Yet it was long ago, that last vengeance. It was a younger brother of mine who fell. He was only a child, playing on the doorstep before my mother's eyes. A dark man came out of the mountains and shot him even as he rushed to her arms. 'Bad weeds are best uprooted young,' the murderer said cynically, and went away...."

Pascal rose suddenly. His face was convulsed with passion, his hands knotted. He seemed transformed into a savage beast.

"I'll get him yet," he cried. "He's an old, old man now, but I'll kill him like a dog. Yes, I'll get him yet...."

Then the inn-keeper gave an uneasy look at his shuttered windows and added: "That is, if he doesn't get me.... But here I am, I am yarning away about my own affairs, and monsieur is so weary, he drops asleep. Pardon me. Come, I will show you to your room."

He conducted Hugh up a steep stairway that gave on a narrow corridor.

"Here are three rooms. I will give you the middle one, which is the biggest. It looks out over the valley. To-morrow you will see the red fire of the sunrise on the snowy peaks."

When he had gone, Hugh opened his window. The night air was icily pure; it smelled of snow and pines. He breathed it quietly for a time. Against the dark blue of the higher heavens rose the black blue of mountain pinnacles. In savage majesty they soared among the stars. He heard the continuous roar of the little waterfall.

Then a melancholy born of the absolute solitude came over him. He longed for the lights of the city, the comfort and security of the streets of Paris. Why Paris? Perhaps because Margot was there. He thought of her with a sudden poignant sense of desire. He was tired of adventures and unrest. He wanted to settle down ... a placid life ... always. Margot would shield him from the worries of every day, be like a buffer, make him a home. She was that sort. He didn't want a wife he had to fuss over; he wanted one who would fuss over him.... But it was too late to think of Margot. She was marrying another man. He had lost her.... In a profound mood of gloom and regret, he wearily undressed and went to bed.

He awoke with a curious sense of fear, a strange stiffening of the scalp. Surely he heard the sound of voices. He sat up with beating heart and listened. Yes, voices and the sound of feet crushing through the crisp snow.... With a leap he was at the window.

CHAPTER FIVE

HUNTED DOWN

His worst fears were realized.

In the eerie half-light he saw four black shadows draw near to the house and a knock at the door followed. He heard Pascal grumbling as he got out of bed. Then the inn-keeper's voice:

"Who is it?"

The answer came in the harsh metallic voice he knew so well.

"Travellers from Vizzavona. Open quickly. We are cold."

Pascal was unbolting the door.

"Pardon, gentlemen. I did not expect guests at so late an hour. Please to enter."

He heard them stumbling into the big room with the fire, then again that grating voice.

"Ah! you have another guest?"

"Yes, a young man who arrived this evening."

"These are his clothes, no doubt, drying by the fire?"

"Yes, he was very wet."

"Then he is sleeping, perhaps. We must not make a noise."

"Yes, he was very tired. He went to bed early, directly after supper. That makes me think.... Do the messieurs want anything to eat?"

"No, we have supped. We are tired, however. We would sleep. What rooms have you?"

"There are three upstairs, but the young gentleman has the middle one. I can give you gentlemen the others."

"Good. You will take one, Castelli; I the other. The two men can sleep here by the fire. Now, patron, if you have some good brandy, a drop might not be amiss."

Hugh had heard enough. He crept back hastily, locking his door. He must escape from this house, and quickly. He began to dress in the clothes Pascal had given him. With a groan he remembered that he had left his revolver in the pocket of his coat. Too bad, that!

Fully dressed, he went to the door and listened again. Doctor Bergius and Castelli were being shown upstairs to their rooms, one on each side of his own. He heard them enter, then Pascal descend the stairs again. All was quiet.

He opened the window very softly and peered out. It was a drop to the ground of about twenty-five feet. He dared not risk the fall. Then his heart leaped. At the side of the window was a rain pipe running from the roof to the ground. It would be easy to slide down that. He did not know their plans, but they would wait, no doubt, until Pascal had gone to bed before attempting anything.

A long silence.

Now there were stealthy steps in the corridor and whispering. With his ear to the door he listened. His hearing was unnaturally acute, and he distinctly heard Castelli:

"Gamba, where is Golaz?"

"Waiting by the door, Master."

"Right. Our man is trapped. He can't escape this time. You and Golaz watch to see he doesn't descend by the window. If the inn-keeper interferes, settle him. And mind, we must take the Englishman alive. No reckless shooting. After we've got what we want out of him, you can do as you please. Now go."

Again a long silence.

Hugh thought, "They suppose I am asleep. Soon they will try my door."

He waited. Ten minutes, a quarter of an hour passed. Everything was still. One might have thought that all the house slept.... Some one was gently trying the handle of his door, turning it softly first one way and then the other. He heard a harsh whisper: "Locked."

Again he heard the grating voice of the doctor. "I thought so. Well, there's nothing for it but violence. Put your pistol to the lock and burst it."

Crash! In the silence of the house the explosion seemed terrific. There was a splintering of wood and the lock was torn from its fixings. But the bolt still held, and though Castelli shook and hammered on the door it would not open. Again he heard the voice of Doctor Bergius.

"Brace yourself against the wall of the corridor. Come, we'll both put our strength into it."

Hugh heard the door strain, crack. It was stout and still held. But it could not last long. In another minute it would give way. He ran to the window and leaned out. Then he drew in sharply, for from the darkness two bullets shattered the pane. Golaz and Gamba were on watch down there. No escape that way.

He wheeled around, desperate. The door under the combined weight of Castelli and the doctor was beginning to bulge, to crack. In another minute they would be in the room. He was trapped, unarmed, helpless. He was lost.

Then suddenly the pressure on his door ceased. They had paused to listen to what was going on below. The inn-keeper had jumped out of bed and run into the kitchen.

Hugh heard him cry: "What's wrong! *Nom de Dieu!* What's the matter? Ho! there, you two fellows!... Why, they're gone. Ah! the door's open...."

Daring another shot Hugh leaned from the window. Golaz had taken up a position behind the door and as the inn-keeper came out, threw his arms around him. In that bear hug of a grip, Pascal was as helpless as a child. He gave one great, hoarse cry, then Gamba had him by the throat.

The three were locked in a silent, deadly struggle. All at once Hugh heard again the ominous crack of the breaking door. Now was his time, now or never. He would slip down the pipe and then ... leave the rest to luck. As he climbed out on the sill of the window he heard a cry of alarm. Golaz and Gamba had seen him. They still gripped the inn-keeper. When he slipped to the foot of the pipe he, too, would be seized and held. No, that way was madness. What to do then?

There was another way ... up! The eaves of the house were only a few feet above his window. That was it, the roof.

So instead of slipping down the iron pipe, he wriggled upward. He clutched the gutter that collected the rain. It held and with a fierce jerk he pulled himself level. A second later he was sprawling on the slope of the roof.

From below came a howl of baffled rage. Golaz and Gamba were cursing both him and themselves. At the same instant Castelli and the doctor burst into the room. Soon came the voice of Doctor Bergius from the window.

"Where is he? Have you seen him?"

"Yes, the roof. He's on the roof."

"Oh, you fools, you cursed fools! Why did you let him get away again? What have you got there?"

"The inn-keeper. He tried to interfere."

"Seems to me he's lying suspiciously still. Hold on, I'm coming down."

There was a pause; then again the voice of the doctor. "Gamba, you little devil, the man's dead!"

"Yes, Master," said Gamba humbly, "I'm afraid I squeezed a little too hard."

"Bah! well, too late now. Take the body and throw it into the stream at the back. People will think he was drowned. Where's the Englishman?"

"One can't see him. The angle of the house hides him. But he's up there all right."

"Very well. You two men dispose of that body; Castelli, you run back a bit and see if you can see him."

Hugh realized that, where he lay flat on the snow-covered roof, he was an easy mark. A belated moon gleaming through the cloud-fleece, would direct their aim. On the other side of the house was darkness and the protection of the stream. He must gain that. Keeping his feet in the gutter he worked along the roof till he came to the end of it, then gripping the slate edge, desperately he pulled himself up until he was astride of the ridge.

A shot whistled past him. That would never do. Castelli could pick him off as he crouched low on the ridge. He allowed his body to slip a little way down the side next to the stream. Thus hidden from them, half embedded in the snow, he clutched desperately at the angle of the ridge and waited. What would they do next?

Everything was very quiet, a quiet full of menace. Beyond a doubt they were carrying out some fresh scheme. The suspense was too great to be borne; he must know at all costs what they were doing. With a great effort he drew himself up and peered over.

He saw a sight that filled him with terror and despair ... the head and shoulders of Gamba, appearing over the edge of the roof. Stealthy and catlike the little man was climbing with no apparent effort. Now he was sliding like a monkey along the gutter, now he was drawing himself up to the peak, now he was astride the ridge. Hugh stared into his black vindictive eyes, saw his lips parted in that grin of incredible evil, the revolver held ready in his hand.

"Don't shoot, Gamba," he heard the doctor say from below. "Get him alive. Make him come down."

Gamba bent over and seized Hugh by the arm; behind the pointed pistol, his eyes glittered malignantly.

"Come," he hissed.

With a sudden wrench Hugh freed himself from the hand that gripped him, and as he did so, he felt himself sliding. He clutched desperately at the angle of the roof, but in vain. The snow on which he lay was slipping, slipping. Gamba clawed at him frantically. Too late! the whole snow mass crashed down like a miniature avalanche. Helpless, turning over in the descent, Hugh went with it, down, down over the edge of the roof into the black depths below....

He felt himself rushing through space. His one agonizing thought was: "When I stop falling what will I strike? Is this the end?" Then ...

He plunged into deep water. Instinctively he broke the force of his descent with his arms and legs; but even then he struck the rocky bottom forcibly. He rose quickly to the surface.

He realized that he was in the fish pool, swirling round and round. He put out his hand and clutched at an object. Ugh! It was the dead body of the inn-keeper. Horror and fear maddened him. With half a dozen swift strokes, he had gained the opposite bank. He clutched hold of some bushes and pulled himself out.

The men had rushed around to the back of the house, and were firing into the black pool. It was so dark that they did not see him as he staggered up the rocky bank. He heard Doctor Bergius shouting in violent anger:

"Gamba, I'll flay you for this. By God, I'll kill you. He's escaped us again."

Yes, he was safe—at least for awhile. He stumbled through the darkness of the forest, half crazed, walking like a blind man, fear and despair urging him on.

It seemed to him he must have walked for hours, over rocks, through bush, knee deep in streams, always climbing. His hands and feet were torn and bleeding. At length he could go no further....

Some one was shaking him, telling him to get up. Reluctantly he roused. Above him were a pair of grim, scornful eyes and a face stern as Fate.

Over the hills the dawn was breaking.

CHAPTER SIX

THE OUTLAW

1.

"Who are you?"

The voice that addressed Hugh was rich and imperious.

Hugh looked at the strange face with startled eyes. "A hunted man," he answered.

The other laughed. "I, too, am a hunted man. Come, you are faint with cold and fatigue. I will give you shelter."

Hugh clutched his arm. "Don't let them get me," he said with a shudder.

The other laughed scornfully. "Don't be afraid. With me you will be safe. Come."

He lifted Hugh to his feet, and, half supporting him, led the way up the rocky path.

"You see the door of my home?"

"No, I see nothing."

"Yonder black hole in the mountain side. That is my front entrance. Incidentally there is a back one for my private use, and only known to myself. But maybe you have heard of me. I am Angelo Rocco."

Hugh started.

"The ... ah! Celebrity?"

The man laughed again!

"Do not be afraid. You are no enemy of mine, and he who is not my enemy is my friend. Come, you shall bear witness to a bandit's hospitality."

They reached the mouth of the cave.

"See," said Rocco, "from here I can overlook the whole mountain side. If twenty men came to take me, I could shoot them all down before they reached the door. If fifty came I could shoot half, and the other half would look for me in vain. But then no one troubles me. It is understood if I keep out of the way they will leave me alone."

They crossed the threshold of the cave. For some distance it was well lighted by the circular entrance. Blankets were hung over the walls; furs were strewn on the floor. A hammock swung from staples fixed in the rock. On either side were two long *banquettes* of oak, and near one of them a black cupboard, on the door of which hung a large ivory crucifix. Rocco threw open one of the *banquettes*.

"Look! there are some dry clothes. Change into them. Wrap some of these blankets about you, and lie down. I will make a fire and give you some hot soup."

Hugh did as he was told. He had almost dropped off to sleep when Rocco brought him a big bowl of soup. It was rich and meaty. After he had drunk it, he could no longer fight against his drowsiness and closing his eyes, slept as he had never done before.

2.

He awakened gradually, and with a growing sense of tranquillity. The cave was brightening in the light of another dawn. Outlined against the sky and framed in the circle of the doorway he saw the superb figure of Angelo Rocco. The bandit turned and greeted him.

"A moment ago," he said, "I saw a shadow moving at the edge of the pine wood. Ha! there it is again." He snatched up a rifle and fired.

"There! that will frighten him, whoever he is. If he means no harm, let him come out into the open. Now I will give you some breakfast. My friends keep me supplied with food from the city. I shoot game, but once in a while it is good to eat civilized food."

They had a breakfast of coffee, bacon and bread. Afterwards they smoked, and Rocco talked. Hugh watched him in admiration. Never had he seen such a perfect man. He was tall, strong and springy as a panther. He had ebony black hair, and a clipped beard and moustache, which did not conceal the strength and character of his face. His fine lips had a haughty twist and his dark eyes were full of stormy fire. He moved with grace, carrying himself like a king.

"You must stay here for some days," he told Hugh. "Rest your nerves. I am glad of a guest. With me you will be safe."

He rose, looked keenly over the mountain side, then came slowly back.

"I see no more shadows. For a time at least we have driven off your wolves. Who are they?"

Hugh gave an account of the fight at the inn. When he came to the death of Pascal, Rocco's face grew dark.

"They killed him, the devils! My good friend, Père Pascal. And who is there then to avenge him? You know, here in Corsica, a life must pay for a life. I had no wish to kill another man. There has been too much killing. But my friend ... my old friend ... well, we will see."

After that Rocco grew restless. He strode up and down the cave, constantly stopping at the door to stare out. At last he said to Hugh:

"If you do not mind being alone, I will go down into the forest. If any one should come, you must retreat by the passage to the left. In case you want to sleep I will show you where you will be safe."

A jut of rock nearly closed the passage, but further on it opened out again. At the end of fifty yards it appeared to come to a stop. Rocco held up the light he carried, and showed Hugh a cleft high up in the rock. It was lined with furs and formed a kind of natural bunk.

"Here is where I sleep when the gendarmes are in the neighbourhood. You will be safe here. If you should be further pursued, you have only to roll over that boulder at the far end. Under it you will find a hole down which you can lower yourself. It leads to a subterranean gallery which has many branches and where no one can find you. Only be careful not to get lost. And the boulder too,—I fear it may be heavy for you to move. But I do not expect to be long absent. In the meantime I do not think any one will trouble you."

3.

As he descended the mountain, the bandit kept well under cover. Hugh watched him till he disappeared into the forest. From the mouth of the cave a magnificent panorama outspread. The mountains looked as if they had been hacked out by an angry god. Their flanks were naked. Moving cloud masses scarfed them for a moment, only to be rent aside again, and reveal new vistas of desolation. The vast abyss of the valley was packed with pines.

The time passed slowly and Rocco seemed to be long in returning. At noon Hugh relit the fire and cooked himself some food. He found that one of the *banquettes* was stored with provisions, the other with clothes. Rocco had things well arranged.

When he had finished eating, he let the little fire go out, and sat gazing over the valley, dreaming away the hours.... Margot would be married on the seventeenth, that day week. The thought made him miserable. He felt he would give anything to prevent the marriage. He tried to analyze his feelings. He wanted her and yet he did not want her. He wanted her because another man wanted her; or rather, while he didn't want her himself he did not want any one else to get her,—a most dog-in-the-mangerish feeling. He told himself that it had all worked out for the best. She would probably be happier with the other man. He envied him. Margot was a jewel of a girl, sweet, gentle, devoted. She would make a ripping little wife. He was sorry he did not love her, at least not in the mad, passionate way that mattered. He just

couldn't care for people in that crazy, headlong fashion. He was a cool, unsentimental sort of a chap. Or was he, really?...

Heigh ho! the time was long. What was keeping Rocco? What a pity about that man, condemned to pass the rest of his life in a prison of infinite earth and sky. He looked around at the few primitive comforts of the cave. There were some books, all on political economy or sociology. Yes, a great pity! A man of force and ability sacrificed because of a youthful excess of ardour. His friends said that Rocco had fired in self-defence; but the friends of the dead man were in power. All at once Hugh had an idea, a fantastic idea. Yes, that was what he would do....

Heigh ho! again. The time was infernally long. It must be about three in the afternoon. How still the mountainside was. Nothing moved. Suppose he slept a little! Taking a blanket, he crawled along the dark passage to the left, climbed up into the cleft and curled snugly in his blanket. Heigh ho!...

4.

He was awakened from a sound sleep by hearing some one moving in the outer part of the cave. The bandit must be wondering what had become of him. He was about to jump down from his perch and greet Rocco when the thought came to him:

"Perhaps it is not he after all. I must be cautious."

He crawled along the narrow passage, and peered around the shoulder of rock that blocked its entrance. Then he drew a deep, gasping breath, for this is what he saw:

Seated on one of the oak *banquettes* was Doctor Bergius. He was leaning forward in an attitude of fatigue; his eyes—so wide open that their yellow pupils looked like rings—glared at the rock behind which Hugh was peering. Hugh thought himself discovered; fear paralyzed him. From the darkness he stared back at the doctor. But it was evident the doctor did not see him, did not see anything in fact. His stare was that of abstraction; his mouth had the twist of a savage beast; his face was set in an expression of rage and despair.

Then Hugh saw Castelli, at the mouth of the cave, looking anxiously down the mountain side. He, too, looked weary and desperate. The third of the party was Gamba. Gamba alone showed no sign of hardship. The little man, compact of all that was fierce and tenacious, was hunting round the cave like a nosing terrier. Hugh started to draw cautiously back when suddenly he heard a hoarse shout from Doctor Bergius.

"Castelli."

Castelli wheeled round sharply.

"Well, doctor?"

"Castelli, you and I have got to have a heart-to-heart talk. Here and now is a good time. Castelli, you distrust me."

The Italian started, made a gesture of protest. The doctor strode up to him.

"Oh, I've noticed it for some time. The others, too. All of you distrust me. If I thought there was anything in the nature of a conspiracy between you, I'd blow you to hell this instant."

The doctor was glowering down at the Italian. With a savage gesture he drew a revolver.

Castelli looked at him coolly.

"Go ahead, doctor," he said. "As a matter of fact I don't distrust you, but I can't answer for the other two. You must admit that things aren't very clear. You played all the other men false. You left them stranded on the Italian shore without a *sou* of the money. You brought it here for us to make a divide. Then you told us you had lost it; that it had been stolen from you by that fool of an Englishman in a manner you must admit to be fantastic. Can you blame them if they think you want to bilk them, too? Now, personally, I believe you; but if we don't find this Englishman and recover the money. I give you fair warning there is likely to be trouble. It's no use threatening me, doctor. Remember we are three against one, and none of us very squeamish about taking life."

"By God, it's true, Castelli. I've been outwitted, and by a fool. Aye, that's what hurts. He must have spied on me at the hotel. I could not take the bag about with me everywhere. He profited by an hour's absence, only an hour, to get possession of it. He's got it, got it all. He's hidden it till he can come back safely and get it away. That's why we've got to find him, got to hunt him down. He mustn't leave the island. He's here somewhere in these cursed wilds. He must not escape us. We've got to get him, Castelli; and, when we do, I'll torture him till he tells; then kill him afterwards with my own hands. Ha! that will be the happiest moment in my life,—when I kill the dog."

"Well," said Castelli, "we haven't got him yet! There's no use wasting time; it's evident he's not here."

"Leave no stone unturned. It was just a chance that he might have taken refuge with this Rocco. Where is the fellow? He might at least be able to give us some information."

"Gone off hunting probably. Still he's been here not so long ago. See, the ashes of his fire are still hot."

"We may as well go. We've no time to spare. Stay! as we are here, we might as well search the place. There are three passages. I'll take the centre one; Gamba can search the one to the right, while you examine the one to the left. Got an electric torch?"

"No, matches."

"All right. Go ahead."

Feeling his way along the wall, Hugh ran back into the darkness. There was not a moment to lose; Castelli was almost in the passage. He must escape. Ah! the boulder that concealed the secret exit! He reached it and tried to move it. In vain! Again he tried with all his strength. He was able to budge it only a few inches. Castelli was already at the opening. No, he could not shift this cursed boulder; he would be caught like a rat in a hole! Castelli was in the passage now, trying to light a match. As Hugh flung himself flat against the rocky wall, his uplifted hands came in contact with the ledge of the cleft where he had been sleeping. Quick as thought he drew himself up and shrank back till he was wedged into the rock itself.

Castelli was fumbling and stumbling. He was striking a fresh match every minute and swearing audibly. Hugh saw a faint glow, then darkness, then the glow again. Castelli did not like his job; but he was taking no chances. Nearer and nearer he drew. Now he had come to the end of the passage, just below Hugh's hiding place.

"*Sapristi!* My last match," Castelli muttered. He struck it, holding it high above his head, and examined the opposite wall. The light just came to the ledge within a foot of Hugh's face. Then Hugh did something for which he was proud as long as he lived. Reaching forward, he softly blew out the light.

He heard Castelli curse; but the Italian had his back to him and did not realize where the draft had come from.

"There! that's out," he exclaimed. "But there's nothing here. I'm off."

Hugh breathed freely again as he heard Castelli groping his way out. He could scarcely realize his luck. On such small things human destiny often turns. Had Castelli possessed another match he would surely have been discovered. He raised himself, confident of his safety, and listened. He heard the distant voice of the doctor.

"No sign of any one. The passages Gamba and I examined dwindled away in the rock."

"Mine, too, came to an end," said Castelli. "I felt the walls all round. Not even a rat-hole."

Then the voices ceased and Hugh heard the men scrambling out of the cave.

5.

Darkness had fallen and still Rocco did not return. The cave mouth was a ring of velvety blue patterned with stars. The air was exquisitely cold and pure. As Hugh cowered in the darkness he wrapped himself in a blanket. The silence was breathless, acute. Staring up at the blue circle of sky, he listened to the beating of his heart. Then suddenly, noiselessly, a dark form loomed up between him and the stars. It was Rocco.

The bandit walked like one very weary. He threw himself down and lit a cigarette. After he had drunk the soup Hugh heated for him, he drew a deep sigh.

"You have been long," commented Hugh.

"Yes," said Rocco; "I have done much, seen much, learned much. Incidentally I have killed a man."

Hugh gazed at Rocco in silence. After a deliberate pause the bandit went on:

"Yes, I killed him, or was the means of his meeting his death. I will tell you."

Through the mouth of the cave came the pure air perfumed with pines. Hugh wrapped his blanket around him and settled down to listen. In the darkness he could see the glowing tip of a cigarette, and from behind it hear the roll of a rich voice.

"When I left you," said the voice, "I went to the inn. I found the body of poor Pascal in the pool. There was a bullet wound in the head. They must have struck him when they fired at you. However, that does not matter. Pascal has an enemy. The crime will be put down to the vendetta. A convenient institution, the vendetta; it covers a multitude of sins."

There was a reflective pause. The cigarette glowed and faded; then the sonorous voice went on:

"I took my poor dead friend out of the water and carried him into the kitchen of the inn. I laid him on the table, straightened his limbs, folded his hands over his breast, and put a crucifix between them. Then I knelt down and said a prayer for the welfare of his soul...."

The voice was silent for a little. The round mouth of the cave was brightening, and the stars shrinking back affrighted. The voice grew tense.

"It was while I was praying that the man entered. He saw neither myself nor the body, for the place was in darkness. He went over to where your clothes were and began to search them, the pockets, the lining. It was while he was doing this that I put a pistol to his head."

A deep laugh awoke the echoes of the cave. Into its circular mouth crept the silver edge of the moon.

"I never saw a man so scared. You should have seen him jump. I backed him against the wall with his hands high in the air. I pointed to the dead man. 'You killed him,' said I. He shook his head. 'Then,' I said, 'you helped to kill him. Tell me, and I'll give you a chance for life. Otherwise I'll shoot you where you stand.' Then he told me that he had seized and held Pascal while his comrade had strangled him. 'So,' I said, 'that was the way of it. Well, you are equally guilty, but you shall have a chance for your life. Have you a knife?'"

Rocco's cigarette went out. He took his time to light another. The velvet circle cut the moon in half. Hugh could see the face of Rocco now, a pale, grim, tragic face. The bandit went on:

"'Yes, I have a knife,' answered the man. 'And can you use it?' I asked. 'None better,' said he. I marched him out of the place to the clearing in front of the inn. 'Now,' I said, 'look ... I throw away my rifle, my pistol. Knife to knife we will fight it out. You for your life; I to avenge my friend. Is it well?' And he answered me; 'It is well.'"

Rocco rose and stood before Hugh. The full round of the moon was framed in the circle of the cave-mouth. It lit up the magnificent figure of the bandit, as he went on:

"The man was a brute, but he was brave. His eyes gleamed. I could see in them the joy of the fight. He thought he had me. He drew a long bladed knife. I drew mine. There in the forest we circled round, watching each other like two cats. Suddenly he leaped. He was holding his knife like a sword, point up to strike at the belly. I caught his wrist as he stabbed. Then I dropped my own weapon. I reached round him and forced his knife hand behind his back. He was strong; I never wrestled with a stronger. We had a tough struggle; and they say there is not in all Corsica my match for strength. Slowly, surely, I twisted his knife hand behind him; then suddenly I tripped him up. He fell, fell on the point of his own knife. It went right through his back and stuck. He died quickly. You would not say I killed him, would you?"

"No; without going into details, one might say he stabbed himself."

"That's it. Damn details. I do not want to have another death at my door. Well, that's one of your enemies settled. And the

other three.... Oh, I know they came here. I was afraid they had got you; they are hunting for you high and low. They have horses and spies. The stations are all guarded; the country people warned. A dazzling price is set on your head. So much I have heard from some wood-cutter friends of mine. Alas! my young friend, I fear Corsica is too hot for you. The sooner you are out of our brave little island the better."

"What must I do?"

"There's a boat sails for Marseilles to-morrow. You must catch it."

"But how?"

"I will conduct you by a secret trail through the woods to the railway, at a point only fifteen miles from Agaccio. After that you must take your chance. See, I have brought your clothes from the inn. Now we will both sleep, for we must be up at dawn; you have a long, hard day before you. Believe me, I do not exaggerate the danger you are in. But I will do my best for you, and I hope you will get through. Now sleep...."

Hugh stretched himself out in his blanket; as he closed his eyes, the moon sailed out of the pool of sky and the cave was plunged in darkness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE LAST LAP

1.

A little after daylight they left the cave and descended the mountain. With Rocco leading they plunged into the first fringe of forest and by a little toe-trail travelled swiftly, keeping high above the valley. Hugh saw nothing but the sombre pine trunks. They encountered no one and the silence was profound. Rocco spoke little. Once or twice he stopped to listen, then, seemingly satisfied, went on at the same rapid pace. At noon they made a short halt for lunch.

They were gradually descending. The sharpness of the mountain air had given way to a softer temperature, the pines had yielded to oaks. At first the oaks had been bare branched, then they were clothed with leafage. Underfoot, too, the grey had given way to brown, the brown in turn yielded to green. They were dropping through the temperate zone to the warmer one of the coast.

It was early afternoon when Rocco stopped and turned to Hugh.

"This is as far as I dare go," said he. "I think you can manage alone. You must descend that path to the railway. You will then be about fifteen miles above Agaccio. The road almost parallels the railway. You will have to wait to travel it until the dusk, and should get to the town about nine o'clock. The boat leaves at ten. If nothing happens you should catch it. Have you any money?"

Hugh had not thought of that. He searched his pockets.

"No, they got all."

"Take this. I have no use for money as you can see." He handed Hugh a note for five hundred francs.

"Oh, I can't accept that."

"Come now. Consider it a loan. You will repay me someday."

"All right. But let's sit down and have a smoke before we separate."

They flung themselves under a tree and lit their cigarettes.

"Look here," said Hugh suddenly, "what would you do if you had a lot of money, say three million francs."

Rocco showed his white teeth in a derisive smile.

"What would I do with three million francs? Why, first of all I would buy my pardon; then I would go into politics again. I would devote my life to the welfare of Corsica. With all that money one could almost change the destiny of our people. Ah! what a dream...."

"I can tell you where you will find three million francs. You can take or leave them as you choose. Only let it be a secret between us."

"That is understood," said Rocco gravely.

Hugh described where he had hidden the money, and sketched the events which had led up to its coming into his possession. When he had finished, Rocco sat in silence; his eyes brooded sombrely, his brows below his lofty forehead knitted in thought. Hugh watched his face, that fine Roman face so full of virility and courage. Beyond a doubt he was stirred by ambitious dreams. Hugh was reminded of Napoleon. Might this, too, not be a man of destiny? Suddenly Rocco roused himself.

"I do not know. It needs reflection. It is too stupendous. I may take the money and use it for my country; but if I do not, you will be sure it will remain there untouched, perhaps forever.... But now you must be on your way. You have far to go; see, already the sun is declining. You must reach the Agaccio road before dusk, and then hurry, hurry to the boat. And

now good-bye. Good luck to you."

"Good-bye. I'll never forget you."

The two men shook hands with a long grip. As Hugh turned on the downward trail, he looked back at the tall, graceful figure of Rocco, standing erect with folded arms. He waved his hand and Rocco took off his broad-brimmed hat. Then a turn of the trail parted them forever.

2.

It seemed to Hugh that he must have taken a wrong turning, for the trail, which had been growing less and less defined, suddenly disappeared. He was lost in the forest. Night was approaching. However, by keeping on down the hill, he must eventually come to either the road or the railway. He struck into a brisker pace, and, as there was no underbrush, made rapid progress. He had been descending for perhaps half an hour, when he heard a welcome sound, the whistle of a train. A little further on the forest lifted, and the line of railway lay below him.

Less than a kilometre away, was the station; a freight train laden with logs was drawing ponderously out. He decided to let it pass, before continuing down the track. He waited impatiently. It had occurred to him that perhaps he was exposing himself too much; and he was drawing back when he heard a shout, ... a shout of fury and of triumph.

With a heart leap of fear he recognized the three men who were hunting him. What ghastly misfortune! They were on horseback too. Castelli, who had been searching the hillside with a pair of powerful glasses, had been the one to discover him. He handed the glasses to Doctor Bergius and pointed to Hugh. At the same instant Gamba leaped from his horse, crossed the railway track and launched in pursuit.

For a dazed moment Hugh cursed his folly in thus exposing himself, then turned and crashed back into the brush. It was very thick and he made progress with difficulty. At this rate he would surely be caught. Then to his joy, he came upon a little trail that descended and skirted the railway. He raced along it.

Once with panting lungs he stopped to listen. Was he being followed? He heard a cracking of underbrush; Gamba had taken a short cut and was appallingly near. Hugh tore on again. The trail broke from the forest and skirted a bluff that overhung the railway, running along it for about three hundred yards. As Hugh came out on this exposed stretch his heart sank. Here at last he was surely trapped. To his right was the steep cut to the railway, to the left the dense brush of the forest. The only way of escape was straight ahead. If only he could make the end of the pathway before Gamba reached him... Well, he must do his best.

He had gone but a short distance when Gamba crashed into the open. The little man was as fleet as a deer, as sure-footed as a goat. Hugh knew he had no chance; but with the strength of despair he pounded on. There was a roaring in his ears. The train! It was puffing and clanking below him. Gamba was gaining on him fast. As he dashed on, Hugh noticed that the bluff dipped, so that in one place it was only about ten feet above the track. If he could make this gap, leap the track and reach the gully that lay on the other side, there was a chance he might yet escape. He made a desperate spurt to gain it.

But he had reckoned without the train. As he got to the lowest point of the cut, it was passing just below him. Again luck was against him. He must wait until all those heavy wagons had lumbered by. Gamba was only fifty yards behind him. Oh, that cursed train! Would it never pass! But why wait? Why not ... ah! that was an idea. Desperate, maybe, but he would stick at nothing.... Nerving himself he leaped, and fell sprawling on the train.

Fortunately he landed between two huge logs. He was bruised and shaken, but he raised himself immediately. He had alighted about midway in the line of wagons and there were three others still to pass the place from which he had jumped. Now one had passed, then the second, then, just as the third and last wagon was rumbling by Gamba reached the point.

He hesitated, stared for a moment as if confused, then caught sight of Hugh. He looked down at the last of the passing wagons. Was he, too, going to jump? Hugh held his breath. No, Gamba could not make it. That little moment of hesitation had been fatal; even as he crouched to spring, the last wagon rolled from beneath him.

Hugh heard a yell of anger. As if dumbfounded, Gamba stood on the point of rock shaking his fists in impotent rage at the train carelessly lumbering on its way.

It grew dark quite suddenly. Hugh heard the puffing of the engine, and saw a cloud of steam with an underflow of orange. In spite of his bruises he was feeling extravagantly happy. How lucky to have jumped on the train! At the rate they were going he would be in Agaccio in an hour. He breathed freely now. Freedom, safety lay ahead. Soon, very soon, he would be on the boat for Marseilles. Then ho! for Paris.... What was the matter? They were slowing up.

Yes, they were stopping at a station. He hoped it would not be a long stop. In any case he must be well ahead of his pursuers by now ... that is, if they had not given up the pursuit. There in the dusk he lay between the two great logs, and once more congratulated himself on his escape. The air was rich with the perfume of pines, and the stars were like glow-worms in the fields of heaven.

Hark! What was that? He was horribly nervous. As he strained his ears, he fancied he heard the distant beat of galloping hoofs. They came nearer. He heard them drumming on the road that ran beside the railway track. He might have known it; his enemies were racing to cut him off. Had they arrived at the station before the train, they could have easily captured him. What an escape. And now they were drawing closer. When they got too close, he would take to the forest. Then the awful nerve-racking hunt would begin again.

In imagination he saw them, spurring and lashing their horses, straining every nerve to reach the station before the train pulled out. Would it never start? The drumming hoofs sounded very near indeed. The engine-driver lighted his pipe, and made some joking remark to the station master. At last, he turned and jumped up to his cab. Thank God! the train was in motion.

It cleared the station and gathered speed, plunging once more into the forest. And not a moment too soon! Hugh looked back to see three horsemen dash into the light, leap from their horses and run forward. Too late!...

A few miles further on the train came to another halt. Perhaps it was imagination, but Hugh thought he heard again the sound of furious galloping. He heaved a sigh of relief when once more they were under way.

Soon the lights of Agaccio appeared and the train slowed up. Hugh jumped down and made for the harbour. With a thrill of joy he boarded the steamer, and, going forward, mingled with a crowd of garlic-flavoured Corsicans.

When the boat cleared and blew her whistle it sounded to him like a hoarse bellow of triumph. As she stood out to sea he looked back at the lights of the harbour. He fancied he still heard the galloping of exhausted horses, and the curses of three maddened men. Perhaps they were there now, standing on the wharf, gazing in rage and despair after the departing steamer. He hoped they were.

"Corsica, farewell!" he cried. "As long as I live I'll never set foot on your shores again. I'm free, free once more. And now for Paris ... Margot...."

CHAPTER EIGHT

MARGOT

How strange is the romance of destiny! Four nights before he had lain in a cave in the hinterland of Corsica, listening to a brigand's tale of blood, and now, behold, he was in Paris, walking the Boulevard Montparnasse, and searching for a certain number.

He found it, an old house sandwiched between two modern ones. Looking up to its mansarded roof he saw a window alight, a window with a small balcony. That must be her room. He had heard her speak of it so often, her "Mansard of Dreams" as she called it. His heart beat excitedly; then suddenly he saw a shadow on the blind. Yes, it was her shadow, Margot's. Should he go up? He thought not. It was too late. She was probably very busy, preparing for the morrow, her marriage morn. No, he would not bother her to-night.

While he was thus arguing with himself, his feet were carrying him to the door. A fat concierge was giving a Pekinese spaniel an airing. Suddenly he heard himself asking,

"Does Mademoiselle Leblanc live here?"

"Yes, monsieur. Fifth floor. Door to the right."

It sounded like an invitation to go up, and he accepted it. As he mounted the broken stairs, his heart beat faster. Very silly this! Why should making a call on her so excite him? It was hard to believe that she was there. It seemed years since he had seen her,— far back in a somewhat uncertain past.

He found himself at the door, knocking. How his confounded heart was knocking too! *Damn!* He could hear her moving about inside. Perhaps she thought it was some one else. Perhaps when she saw it was he, she would be disappointed. She was taking a long time to open the door. He felt a great longing come over him, a great tenderness. He would take her in his arms, kiss her, overwhelm her with passionate caresses.

He did none of these things. When the door opened, he was the punctilious, rather cold, young man she had always known.

"Good evening," he said politely.

"*You!*"

She stood staring at him; her blue eyes big in her pale face; her hands up to her heart as if to still its tumult. She wore a loose black *peignoir* that showed off by contrast the pearly whiteness of her skin. Against the background of her pale gold hair her face was delicately sweet. For the hundredth time she reminded him of a lily.

"It is, indeed, you?"

She took both his hands and pulled him gently into the room. She had pinned up her hair rather hastily, and it came tumbling about her. As she raised her hands again to pile it about her head, he stopped her.

"No, leave it like that. It was like that the first time I saw you. I will always think of you that way."

She let it fall, a shimmering cape around her.

"I'm sorry," she said faintly, "to receive you in this poor shabby room. Please sit down on that chair. It's my only one."

He took it. She herself sat down on the edge of the bed, facing him.

"I hurried to get here," he told her awkwardly. "I wanted to be present at the ceremony,—even if only as a spectator in the background."

"What ceremony?"

"Your wedding, to-morrow."

"Why, didn't you know? I wrote to tell you I'd refused him."

"I didn't get the letter. You refused him... Why?"

"I don't know. I suppose I didn't care enough for him. I don't think I shall ever marry."

"And what are you doing now?"

"Working,—with Jeanne. We are taking a shop. I thought it was she when you knocked."

"Are you happy?"

"Yes, happier than I have ever been in my life."

"And I am more miserable."

"You! Why?"

"Because ... I'm lonely. Look here, Margot, I want you. I only realized how much I needed you after you went away—how much you mean to me. I say, Margot, I suppose I'm a stiff, cold sort of a chap. I can't do the sentimental stuff. I can't make pretty speeches, but I really do care for you."

"As a sister?"

"No, an awful lot more than that! I can't do without you, dear. I know it now. I knew it the moment I'd thought I'd lost you. Don't tell me I've lost you, Margot."

He leaned forward, staring anxiously into her eyes. She sat quite still, her breath coming fast.

"Marry *me*, Margot," he faltered, "Me!"

She seemed made of ice. "That's very kind of you," she said.

"Not at all, Margot. Believe me, I'm not kind. I'm humble. I'm pleading. I'll get down on my knees if you like."

"No, please don't."

"Look here...." He suddenly leaned forward. He took a handful of her shining hair and twisted it into a great golden rope, then wound it around her white throat.

"Margot," he said savagely, "if you don't say yes, I'll strangle you right here. Say yes."

"Is it to save my life I must say yes?"

"Your life—and mine."

"Well, if it's to save yours, too ... Yes!"

The tension was over. He rose. He was radiant. He laughed.

"I'll see the British Consul to-morrow; and we'll get hitched up in a few days. Now I'm going. I want to be alone, to realize my happiness, to sing to the stars. I want to celebrate, to get drunk. Margot, may I get drunk to-night?"

"What!"

"With joy I mean. I want to sit in a café by myself and let my happiness soak in gradually. I want to smile like an idiot over a café crème and have people look at me twice, and say, '*Mais ... il est fou, ce gars la....*' I want to laugh loudly at the moon, and dance the can-can by the Carpeaux fountain. Oh Margot, Margot...."

Down in the street a passing *sergent de ville* who happened to look up at the lighted mansard window, saw two separate shadows on the blind. The masculine shadow reached out to the feminine one, then the two shadows became one.

"*Ah! Ces amoureux!*" he remarked with a shrug as he went on his way.

CHAPTER NINE

AND LAST

A year later Hugh sat at his desk, reading the following letter:

MY DEAR CHAP:

I wrote to you in Menton, and the letter came back. But the other day a man in the office saw you in Paris and gave me your address. He also gave me a very good account of you; I am glad, for I have often felt anxious about you. I hope now that you have again taken up the burden of the wage-earner, you are not finding it too heavy. I've become a professional ink-slinger. You remember me as a dilettante, a trifler. I wrote whimsical essays; I cultivated an urbane humour. Then one day in a fantastic mood I started a burlesque of the German spy novel. I showed it to a bloated publisher who refused to publish it as a burlesque, but suggested that it would go as a serious effort. He thought the public would take it that way. The public did.

So now behold me, a popular author, a six shilling shocker to my credit, another half-done, and many more in my mental incubator.

Of course, on the strength of my success I resigned from Gummage & Meek. We had saved a few thousand pounds, so if literature proves more of a staff than a crutch, we won't be altogether on the rocks. Better still, a preposterously rich bachelor brother of my wife's has promised to see the two boys through school and college. In short, I find at last my dream realized. I am free to cultivate my literary cail-yaird.

I want now to find some quiet place where I can live in a leisurely way, polish my gems, and generally lead a pleasant, tolerant, contemplative life. Do you, with your knowledge of the south of France, know of such a place? The exchange rate now is so advantageous.

Please rub a little liniment on your strong right arm, grip your pen with intense determination, and favour me with a few lines.

Sincerely,

ARTHUR AINGER.

Hugh looked round the shabby but comfortable room he called his den. There was a roll-top desk, crimson-curtained book shelves, a big easy chair by the window, many unframed canvases on the walls. His eyes rested on each article with loving satisfaction.

"Good old chap," he said, "I'll answer his letter right away."

So he sat down at his desk and began;

DEAR MR. AINGER:

I am more than ashamed that I have never written to you; but so many things have happened. To begin with I have a modest apartment near the Luxemburg Gardens. I was married a year ago. My wife's a jolly good sort. You'd like her. I intended after my marriage to get work of some kind, but the unexpected happened. It seems I had a maternal grandmother living in Monaco. She had quarrelled with my mother; and though she gave consent to the marriage she refused to be reconciled. When she died it was found she had left everything to me. They had some trouble in finding me, but through the old chap who brought me up, they eventually did.

I now find myself the owner of a property in the Condamine that nets me twelve thousand francs a year, enough for two quiet people to jog along on quite comfortably. After all, I've come to the conclusion I'm one of those simple souls who want to slip through life with as little trouble as possible to themselves and to every one else.

My hobbies are cars and painting. I am the proud possessor of a little Buggatti in which I whiz the wife out to Barbizon occasionally. Otherwise I attend the École des Beaux Arts and am doing quite well. In time I hope I'll

make an averagely good artist, and occasionally sell a *croute*.

I am so glad to hear of your success. The sort of books you write are the sort I like. But then I am not exacting, and read to take my mind off the monotony of existence. Sometimes, you know, on a wet day when one can't paint and there's no billiard table, a good yarn's not a bad thing to pass the time. I imagine there's a whole lot like me.

By the way, you speak of finding a quiet corner where you can hole up and live cheaply. I have a little cottage at Villefranche which I can offer you. There's not much in the way of furniture, but you can stay there as long as you like and what with the produce of a big garden and the fish you can catch, the cost of life is reduced to a minimum.

Now don't refuse....

Hugh had got this far when Margot entered. He handed her his letter to read.

"Why," she said indignantly, "you've left out the most important thing of all."

"Oh, yes, I quite forgot about that."

"Forgot! Listen. The precious little darling! He's crying for me now."

"Yes, his lungs are better than his looks."

"I like that. Everybody says he's the image of you. Now, I must run."

"All right. I'll put him in the postscript."

Hugh added a few more words as he listened to the subsiding wails of his son and heir. Then throwing himself in his easy chair with a laugh of utter happiness he lit his pipe.

THE END

Transcriber's Note

The following printers spelling errors have been corrected:

Page 9 'semed' to 'seemed'. (everything seemed to go well)

Page 26 'kin' to 'skin'. (her skin had become smooth)

Page 46 'invention' to 'invention'. (It's my invention)

Page 52 'develope' to 'develop'. (to develop their own ideas)

Page 67 'rememberd' to 'remembered'. (she remembered the young man)

Page 87 'by' to 'my'. (get back my own soul)

Page 108 'eve' to 'eye' (Hugh saw a flashing eye)

Page 143 'directer' to 'director' (The director himself had to)

Page 261 'responsibility to 'responsibility'. (from all responsibility)

Page 281 'semed' to 'seemed'. (The girl seemed to be)

Page 300 'succeeded' to 'succeeded'. (to his amazement succeeded)

Page 322 'thing' to 'think'. (I think you are right)

Page 338 'suprised' to 'surprised'. (I was surprised myself)

Page 396 'yon' to 'you'. (you must catch it)

Other errors corrected:

Page 88 Missing section number 1 inserted beneath chapter title

Page 172 Missing section number 1 inserted beneath chapter title

Page 354 Missing section number 1 inserted beneath chapter title

Page 406 Missing 'I' inserted (don't think I shall ever marry)

Book 5 Chapter 6. Section numbers rearranged to remove duplicate number 2 and to add new number 5.

Hyphenated words have been standardised.

[End of *The Poisoned Paradise* by Robert W. Service]