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CROOKS IN THE SUNSHINE

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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CROOKS IN THE SUNSHINE

I

THE SALVATION OF MR. TIMOTHY RYAN

"Any one else for the board? Last time of asking."

The little company of gloriously bronzed young men and women, lying on the two rafts moored outside the rocky Paradise of the Cap d'Antibes' bathing enclosure, bestirred themselves lazily. Passing at a snail's pace only a few yards away was the speed boat they had been admiring half the morning. Ben Richmond, the presiding genius of the place, who had been careering round the bay for the last twenty minutes and had just slipped off the plank, came swimming towards them with long easy strokes.

"Glorious, you fellows!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "My, that old gentleman has some engines on her. I'll swear we were doing forty at the bends."

"How many times did they lose you?" a fair-haired girl enquired.

"They tricked me off once," the young man confessed. "Not so bad. The fastest aquaplaning I've ever had."

The elderly gentleman in smart nautical costume leaned over the side of the launch and repeated his invitation.

"Any one else for the board? Last round before lunch."

Ned Loyd, who had been lying prone on his back, his face upturned to the sun, rose to a sitting posture, and, all unaware that thereby he was making history in the criminal records of the world, held up his hand to signify his acceptance of the invitation.

"Guess I'll have one turn," he decided lazily. "Makes you feel like a porpoise lying here all the morning."

His sister Caroline, stretched out by his side, turned halfway towards him. She held up her hand as though to shield her face from the burning sunshine, but in reality to hide the faint shadow of trouble in her eyes. She looked steadily out towards the launch, a very magnificent affair piled with red cushions and with all the appurtenances of nautical luxury. Two very smartly dressed young women in bathing costumes and peignoirs were lying in wicker chairs heaped with voluptuous-looking cushions. A third, in pyjamas of the latest cut, was leaning over the side, smoking a cigarette. The obvious owner had turned aside for a moment to speak with the engineer.

"I wouldn't go if I were you, Ned," the girl on the raft begged. "We can't tell who the crowd are in that boat," she went on, under her breath, "and it isn't worth while risking anything. Seems queer, if you come to think of it, that they should be inviting strangers to go aquaplaning all the morning."

Her brother, however, was already in the water, swimming to the place where the board was floating. He turned on his back and waved his hand.

"I signalled I'd go," he said, "so I'd better have a short turn. The skipper's a harmless-looking old duck, anyway."

It was too late now for anything further in the way of intervention. Caroline Loyd, sitting on the edge of the raft, watched her brother clamber on to the board, listened to the roar of the engines as the launch started off, and still watched as, skilfully manipulating the ropes, he rose cautiously but expertly to his feet. In a moment they were off, Ned Loyd a graceful, swaying figure firmly established upon the board, the nose of the boat, large though she was, slightly out of the water, and a long trail of white, churned-up sea already behind them. The girl kept her face averted from her immediate neighbours, for although she had no idea why, fear, for almost the first time in her life, had come to her.

"Who owns that boat, anyway?" she asked presently. "Does any one know?"

Apparently no one did. There were a variety of rumours passed back to her from one or another of the loungers upon the rafts. A newcomer, who had just swum over from the shore, brought the latest information.

"Commodore B. Jasen, he calls himself," the latter announced, as he clambered up the steps and sank into a prone position. "They say that he is a multimillionaire and that he has taken the Château d'Antibes for the season."

A young bond salesman from Wall Street pricked up his ears.

"Commodore B. Jasen," he repeated thoughtfully. "Well, he didn't make his money down our way or I should have heard something of him."

The girl seemed to have forgotten her sun-bathing. She stood on the edge of the raft—a magnificent figure in her scanty but elegant swimming costume—shading her eyes with her hand. Not once did she look away from the boat. She watched it take a shorter run than usual towards Cannes, watched it sweep round, leaving behind a trough of water and a long trail of foam, watched the swaying figure of the man who, tense and alert all the time, gripped the cords of the plane to which he seemed somehow or other to have become permanently attached. The boat, travelling at great speed, was almost opposite, now about quarter of a mile away. She waved her arm—a significant and imperative signal—but she realised, almost as she did it, that there was scant chance of any one aquaplaning at thirty or forty kilometres an hour looking to the right or to the left. Exactly what she had dreaded happened. The boat failed to make the usual turn. It swept on towards the long tongue of land known as Mosque Point, wheeled round it and out of sight. That was the last any one ever saw of Ned Loyd, better known amongst his college friends and the new world into which he had made tentative entrance as "Lord God Ned."

It was half an hour before uneasiness manifested itself in action, during which time there was no sign of the return of the mysterious launch or its aquaplaning passenger. The blue sea was as unruffled as ever, the sunshine as fierce, the faint breath of westerly wind still gentle and imperceptible. The majority of the bathers had taken no note of the incident at all. They were either in the sea again, or were lying on the rocks anointing themselves, or had clambered up to the restaurant above. The two who were more deeply concerned—Caroline Loyd and Ralph Joslin, a slim dark young man with the complexion almost of an Indian, who had been lying a little apart from the others and had spoken to no one—were already making their way along the beach through the pine woods towards the other side of the point. The young man was only mildly puzzled. He failed to understand his companion's emotion, or to grasp why, through the wonderful tan of her cheeks, the pallor of fear had begun to show itself.

"What's your worry, Caroline?" he asked. "Aquaplaning is child's business to Ned."

"What made them drive on straight past the point?" she demanded almost fiercely. "They always set down passengers near the rafts."

"Well, I don't see that that amounts to anything," he argued. "If the old man's taken the Château d'Antibes, why they've probably gone round there for a drink. Seems natural enough to me. Every one takes a fancy to the lad—you know that. What are you scared of, Carrie? You're not afraid of Ned taking the glad eye from the women?"

"Not I," she scoffed, although there was a sob in her throat. "That isn't my business, but I've got a queer hunch, Ralph. I expect I'll be laughing at it in a few minutes. You saw the cable about looking out for the Lebworthy Gang?"

"Yes, I saw that," he admitted. "What about it?"

"Seeing that they were supposed to be coming out here," she went on breathlessly, "I think Ned might have thought twice before he picked up with a strange crowd."

Her companion laughed reassuringly.

"It's a hell of a long way from Rimmington Drive or back of Broadway to Antibes here."

"They are all such a social lot at the hotel," she went on, almost as though she had not heard him, "but no one seems to know anything about these people at the Château. Still, it isn't likely—it isn't likely, Ralph, is it?"

"What isn't likely?" he demanded almost roughly.

"It isn't likely that these people should have anything to do with the Lebworthy Gang?"

"You've been reading too much crime fiction, Caroline," he expostulated. "That crowd have had me guessing more than

once, but I'm not figuring about seeing any of them just in these particular parts. Save your breath, kid. It's rough walking this."

They scrambled across a stretch of shingle through somebody's garden and on to another beach. Then something like a tragedy confronted them. They were on the other side of the point now, but nowhere in sight of them was anything resembling a motor launch, nor was there anywhere to be seen the bobbing head of a swimmer!

"Don't you start worrying," Ralph enjoined cheerfully, as their eyes swept the empty space simultaneously. "The Château's just round the next corner. We'll have to make our way there somehow or other. There's a wall to climb and somebody else's garden to cross. Guess we'd better have telephoned."

They scrambled forwards. To avoid the wall, they entered the sea and swam—side by side and without a word to each other—the man with strong, fierce strokes and the girl with almost frenzied speed. Presently they reached a long broken cluster of rocks, over which they clambered and dropped down on to the next beach. Right ahead of them was a small harbour in which the motor boat was lying, silent and apparently deserted. By its side was also a small sailing craft and a dinghy, both moored to floating buoys. They hurried along, the girl breaking into a little run whenever there was a strip of sand. In less than ten minutes they had reached the launch. The passengers had evidently all left, for the decks were deserted and the cabin also was apparently empty. They hurried down the wooden dock and stepped on board. In response to Ralph Joslin's shout, a man in blue overalls—apparently a mechanic—thrust his head out from the cabin.

"Hello," he challenged. "Wot yer looking for?"

"Where's the man you took aquaplaning?" Ralph Joslin demanded.

The mechanic displayed a little more of himself and stretched his long limbs.

"Ask me another," he replied. "He waved his hand and slid off the plane just after we rounded the point."

"Why didn't you stop?"

"Why the hell should we?" was the surly retort. "We were only thirty yards from the shore. He got off of his own accord."

Hope shone once more in the girl's eyes. On the other hand, her companion did not appear to share her relief.

"If your passenger got off at the point," the latter remarked, "we should have met him."

"I can't help your troubles," the mechanic said sourly. "It's my job to run this boat and I don't worry about what happens to the passengers, especially when they're fools enough to go riding on them slither boards. If he couldn't swim the thirty yards between him and the point, he should never have got on the board.... Here's the Boss. You can ask him anything you want to."

The man withdrew his head and shoulders and disappeared. His questioners turned round. A very trim and precise-looking elderly gentleman, with white hair brushed back with almost meticulous care, a white moustache and benevolent expression, dressed in correct nautical attire, came hurrying breathlessly down the plank walk and stepped on board.

"What's this I hear?" he asked anxiously. "They're telephoning from the hotel to say that the young man I took aquaplaning has not returned."

"That's what we've come over about," Ralph Joslin replied. "We saw you pass our landing places and round the point. He was holding on then and going strong. We waited but nothing happened. You didn't bring him back and we've seen nothing of him."

"Extraordinary," the other exclaimed. "I should have dropped him by the raft, but I had called out a few minutes before and asked him to come round as far as the Château and have a cocktail. He seemed to me to accept, so we went straight on. When we got to the point, though, he waved his hand, let go quite in the manner of an expert, and dived. Naturally we came along home then. He was only a few yards from the shore."

The girl's eyes had never left the speaker's face. She seemed to be weighing every word he uttered.

"We have just come across the point," she said. "There wasn't a soul anywhere about."

The owner of the launch smiled reassuringly.

"My dear lady," he explained, "the point is much longer than it seems, and if you came the direct way, you might easily have missed your friend. Besides, he may have taken the opportunity of staying to examine that queer building at the end. My own guests are always curious about it. You'd better allow me to send you back in the launch to your landing stage, and when you get there, you will surely find the young man waiting for you."

"Might I enquire your name, sir?" Ralph Joslin asked.

"Certainly," was the courteous reply. "Jasen—Commodore Jasen. I am very sorry if my offer to your friend has brought you any disquietude. Tim," he went on, calling to the mechanic, "take this lady and gentleman back to the Cap landing. You can manage alone for that short distance."

The man made his way towards the engine, rubbing his hands with a piece of waste. The Commodore stepped off the launch and beamed at his departing visitors.

"You'll find him there, all right," he called out cheerily.

There must have been something crazy in her blood that day, Caroline Loyd told herself fiercely. Looking back, it seemed to her that there was an almost satanic expression in that apparently bland, benevolent face, something menacing in the simple words. She swung around to seek consolation for her companion, but Ralph Joslin had none to offer. A memory had come to him—a memory touched with inspiration—and he knew, as well as though he could see it written in the flaming blue skies, that never again in this world would he see his friend and leader, Ned Loyd.

Caroline Loyd heard all the hours of early morning strike. The long night with its anxieties was past. It had become an accepted fact now that her brother had disappeared. When the first shiver of light came from the east, she found herself standing on the balcony of her room at Cap d'Antibes. The paling stars were fading into the sky, the moon was colourless. Away eastward the morn was strangely heralded by breaking lines of cream-coloured foamy clouds with the faintest background of saffron pink. It was the one hour of complete silence in the twenty-four. She leaned forward, listening intently. A pearly mist rode on the far seas. From somewhere behind that came the faintest sounds. She clutched the balustrade and listened. Every moment it became more distinct. Now she was sure. The break in the skies eastward became more pronounced. Soon twilight was to pass and a disc of the sun would be visible. Her beautiful eyes, strained and frantically searching, sought to pierce those mists. All the time the sound continued, the dull beating of a muffled engine. Even before the first gleam of sunlight had escaped, it had slid into sight. From some errand far southwards, the motor boat of Commodore Jasen was rushing homewards towards its harbourage.

Entirely at her ease, with scant signs of the tragedy weighing upon her heart, a tragedy which hung, in fact, like a cloud over the whole of the little community, Caroline, on the following evening, waited in the shabby magnificence of the library of the Château d'Antibes for the man whom she had come to see. Her eyes were dry. There were no longer any signs of the tempest which had swept over her. The first lesson she had learned, when she had embarked upon the life adventurous, was the lesson of self-control. She had lost a good deal of sympathy at the Hôtel du Cap d'Antibes during the last twenty-four hours; every one had thought her inclined to be callous. No one realised from what a battlefield of the emotions her hyperphilosophic attitude had arisen.

Hawk-faced, slim of features and of person, Jake Arnott came into the room with his usual stealthy tread, a pantherlike effigy of a man, notwithstanding his correct dinner attire, the monocle which hung from his neck and the signet ring upon his little finger. He closed the door carefully behind him.

"And what," he asked, "does Caroline Loyd want of us?"

"Nothing of you," she answered curtly. "My visit is to Commodore Jasen."

"We have friends dining," he explained, "local notabilities with whom we wish to stand well. It is, in fact, our *début* into local society, stage-managed, I am afraid, by the local land agent, but still, important to us. The Commodore thought that perhaps I might deputise."

"The Commodore should have known better," she said coldly. "He can take his own time. I shall wait for him here."

"As you wish," he observed. "I can tell you all you want to know."

"I shall hear it," she replied, "from the man whom I hold responsible."

Jake Arnott, once, alas, graduate of Harvard, later of Chicago, now major-domo in the house of crime, turned on his heel and left the room without a word or gesture of farewell. The minutes passed. To Caroline, waiting before the half-opened window, with the flash of the lighthouse every thirty seconds travelling over the tops of the trees, and the murmur of the sea in her ears, those minutes seemed to become crystallised nuggets in her memory, each one with its measure of burning passion. When at last the period of waiting came to an end, it did so without warning. There was no sound of footsteps outside, but the door was quietly opened and Commodore Jasen stepped deliberately in. His dinner clothes were as immaculate as his yachting costume. His eyes shone with sympathy. His attitude was half apologetic, half deprecating.

"Madame," he said, "a thousand apologies. If I have kept you waiting, I regret. We have friends dining from different parts of the Riviera. It was too late to put them off, even in face of such a tragedy."

Caroline Loyd listened. She had the air of one who had come to listen more than to talk.

"I shall have to wait a great deal longer, Commodore," she said, with a peculiar smile at the corner of her lips. "I think that my feet will have to beat time through life for many years, before I gain what I seek from you. For the present, you can guess, I think, what it is I need."

"My dear lady, in any expression of my regret—"

"Do you mind leaving off?" she interrupted coldly. "We can do without all that rubbish. I want to hear from your own lips that you are the person responsible for what happened yesterday."

There was a brief silence. Commodore Jasen's face had lost its benevolent expression. There was a glint of something repellent in his eyes. It was the same light which had flashed its terrifying message into her apprehension, when he had waved his hand in sarcastic farewell from the wooden quay some thirty-six hours ago. Still he persevered.

"Do you need to come here to ask that?" he demanded. "I am the lessee of the Château and I am the person who was responsible for inviting your brother to take a ride with us upon the sea."

That, for the moment, was the end of Commodore Jasen. Something seemed to blaze out from the girl which paralysed any retort upon his part. In the duologue, for the next few minutes, he was no longer a vital factor.

"I know who you are, Samuel Lebworthy," she cried. "I know what you stand for. I know where you will end. Three years' mild detention, probably, while the others swing. You're as clever as hell—you play the show piece always in front of the tragedy to divert people's attention. You and I may have plenty to say to each other in the future, but don't waste my time to-night. Answer me in plain words—exactly what have you done with my brother?"

"He got just what was coming to him, that's all. Might come to any of us at any time," he added, critically selecting a cigarette from his case. "He got put away."

She listened with unchanged expression.

"You admit it?"

There was a look of gentle remonstrance in his blue eyes.

"Admit it? What a stupid word. It was quite inevitable. Ned knew that."

"Tell me how you did it," she begged. "Ned was a better man than you with fists or a gun, and he could have swum home from your harbour."

The Commodore reflected for a moment.

"Perhaps. But no brains to speak of. I shot him through the cabin window, with one of the new Derlicher rifles, just after we had rounded the Point. As you people were making such a fuss we fished up the body last night and took it out where no one is likely to find it. Anything else?"

"You are in a hurry to return to your guests?"

"Not particularly. I am playing bridge, but my hand is down and there are two or three to take my place. If there is anything else you have to say, let me hear it, now that we are alone together."

"Where did Ned cross your gang?" she demanded.

"My dear young lady," he remonstrated, "it is scarcely possible that you do not know. What has happened has been just in the ordinary course of events. You would have thought nothing of it in Chicago, less in New York. Ned and I got across over a certain Mr. Timothy D. Ryan, who was our fellow passenger on the steamer. We both quite naturally marked him down. There wasn't room for both of us. That's the long and short of it. We had it up against Ned already and Ned went; the better man survives."

"Are you the better man?" she asked.

"Come to me," he replied, "and I'll prove it. We might even consider giving you a small share in the Ryan business. Ned knew quite well that we always wanted you both."

She looked at him with scorn in her eyes.

"I am perfectly satisfied with my position. I prefer to work alone. One thing I do claim, however, and that is a half share in the Ryan business. If you refuse to give it me, you may regret it."

He looked at her in mild amusement.

"Just what do your threats mean?" he asked. "You are perhaps thinking of the French police? Would it be possible that you know so little of the etiquette of our profession?"

"No," she replied. "I am not thinking of the French police. There are surer ways than that."

"You have nothing of a gang to work with," he pointed out. "I know the few stragglers on whom you rely, inside out. They will take you nowhere. If you butt up against us, you will be wiped out. Come along to the other side of the street, Caroline. We'll take care of you."

She laughed in his face.

"Is this a challenge or an invitation?" she asked.

His fingers toyed for a moment with his white moustache.

"You can take it which way you like," he said. "Come to us alone, cut out those other suckers, and you shall stand in even shares with Jake and myself in all fresh business. Those little witches we shipped over from New York mean nothing to us. Who you are or where you come from, God only knows, but you're the sort of woman we want. Make up your mind to it and come along. I'll fetch you myself some time, if you don't."

On the table by her side was a glass which Jake Arnott had been carrying in his hand when he had entered the room. She caught it up and hurled it across at him. With a lightning-like dive he let it pass over his head and splinter against the fireplace.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," he complained mildly. "We pay a very heavy rent for this Château, and breakages count against us. Am I to take it that you are not—"

"You are to take it that I am your enemy," she interrupted fiercely. "You are to take it that whatever scheme you engage in, I shall do my best to wreck. You are to take it that the spirits of two people dwell in me—the spirit of Ned and my own. So that's that."

He shrugged his shoulders as he pressed the bell.

"I would rather," he said, "have had you on my side."

When, a week or so later, Commodore Jasen and his friend Jake Arnott strolled out on to the terrace through one of the mercifully opened windows of the Salle Privée at Monte Carlo, they received a most unpleasant shock. Caroline Loyd, in a most becoming after-bathing costume of embroidered white serge, was lying there, gazing dreamily away towards Italy.

"Hello," she murmured. "Where's Mr. Timothy B. Ryan?"

"What did you say?" the Commodore demanded.

"Mr. Timothy B. Ryan," she repeated. "President of the Chicago Wheat Crushing Mills. A very important man, Mr. Ryan. I thought you were here to look after him."

"What the mischief do you know about Tim Ryan?" Jake Arnott inquired, his teeth and eyes glittering.

"Oh, quite a great deal," she replied. "He crossed on the same steamer with Ned, you know, and we had some very interesting plans all arranged with him. I can't quite get your scheme, but I know that it's something very important. It means keeping him out of the way for a fortnight at least, doesn't it? Well, I suppose that might be done, but I am rather curious," she went on, with an insolent little smile, "as to how you mere men can do it. That Zeigfeld Folly show you have over at the Château won't make much impression on Mr. Timothy Ryan, I don't think."

"Curse you," Commodore Jasen muttered.

"A compliment," she acknowledged. "If I am to be cursed, I am to be feared. In this case, I should not think there was the slightest doubt about it. I am a very dangerous woman."

"Out with it," Jake Arnott demanded. "What's your game, Caroline? Come over with it."

"Why on earth should I tell you?" she answered lazily. "Ned discovered him and, if you want to know what I think about it, I believe that's the sole reason why you bumped him off. I offered to come in fifty-fifty and our dear friend the Commodore evaded the point."

"Well, what about it now?" the latter asked ungraciously.

She scrutinised her fingernails for a moment.

"I am inclined," she confessed, "to rescue him."

"Why?"

"He would be very grateful. Gratitude is sometimes more remunerative even than blackmail. He is a widower. I might marry him."

They turned their backs upon her. She followed them into the room. At the nearest table, in the most important place by the side of the croupier, sat Mr. Timothy B. Ryan, and the stacks of chips in front of him amounted to many thousands. He greeted his friends with a cheerful grin. They saw, however, with sinking hearts, his eyes travel over their shoulders, the lines of mirth fade from his face and something new appear, something which they had never previously associated with Mr. Timothy B. Ryan. There was a faint odour of perfume just by the Commodore's left nostril. He felt a touch upon his shoulder.

"Won't you please present me to Mr. Ryan? I believe a friend of mine crossed from New York with him."

Mr. Ryan rose to his feet. The fact that he had thirty *mille* upon the table and that the ball was spinning seemed to be a negligible happening. He gazed instead into the face of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life, a woman too who was smiling at him.

"I don't worry about your friend, Miss Loyd," he said, "but I am surely glad to know you."

She smiled into his face. The ball dropped into its appointed destination. Mr. Timothy B. Ryan had lost his thirty thousand francs. The incident left him unmoved. It seemed to him that he had found something far more wonderful.

"The Commodore has just invited me to have a drink," she lied sweetly. "You would not care to come with us?"

He swept his pile of chips from the table and dropped them into his jacket pocket. A few he left to mark his place.

"A drink," he confessed, "was just what I was needing."

"You're sure you are not missing the game?" she asked.

"Miss Loyd," he declared with fervour, "I am missing nothing that won't be made up to me a hundred times over in the bar there."

Her little laugh was a quite satisfactory response.

Mr. Timothy B. Ryan, comfortably established in the principal guest room at the Château d'Antibes, yawned in somewhat aggrieved fashion as he opened his eyes on the following morning to find his host standing by his bedside. It was before the hour at which he had expected to be called, and he raised himself in bed somewhat sleepily.

"You're an early bird, Commodore, aren't you?" he remarked. "I ordered my coffee for nine o'clock."

"That's all right," the other assured him. "It will arrive in a few minutes. I thought I would like just a short chat with you before you get up."

"Good for you," Mr. Ryan, who had drunk a great deal of whisky the night before, murmured drowsily. "Say, you boys got me lit up last night. I'll be the better after a swim. Any news of the lady?"

"You will probably see her during the morning," his host confided. "She has a good many friends over at the hotel and we all meet about cocktail time. Meanwhile, there's just a word or two I'd like to say."

Mr. Ryan swung a couple of rather pudgy pyjama-clad legs out of bed, stretched himself vigorously and rubbed his eyes.

"Shoot," he invited.

"Did you ever hear by any chance, Mr. Ryan, of the Lebworthy Gang? They started in Chicago, you know, and then moved to New York."

"Yes, I have heard of them," was the prompt admission. "Who hasn't? Pretty quiet they've been lately."

"That," Commodore Jasen explained, "is because they have once more changed their quarters. Chicago to New York—New York to Antibes."

Mr. Timothy B. Ryan paused in the midst of a yawn.

"Who the hell are you getting at?" he demanded incredulously.

"No one," was the suave reply. "I am telling you the truth. It saves time. You are in the hands of the Lebworthy Gang at the present moment. It will cost you five hundred thousand dollars. Not so very much for a man who must have cleaned up ten or twelve millions last year."

Mr. Timothy Ryan's mouth was wide open, his hands were clasping his knees, his position on the edge of the bed was precarious and his general appearance ridiculous.

"Are you kidding me, Commodore?"

"Not a bit of it. I am trying to save time. Explanations are so troublesome. I thought if we could finish our little business in the way I can suggest, you might enjoy your coffee, and I could probably, if you behave sensibly, devise some means of pleasant entertainment for you during the latter part of the day."

"So I am in the hands of the Lebworthy Gang, am I?" Mr. Ryan reflected.

"You are."

"And it is going to cost me five hundred thousand dollars?"

"It is."

The victim of this unfortunate circumstance scratched his head.

"How," he asked shrewdly, "do you expect to get that money from me at all, and how, having got it, do you expect to keep my mouth shut?"

"Pertinent questions," the Commodore admitted. "I will answer you as briefly as possible. We start with some knowledge of your affairs, you see. Here," he went on, drawing out a cable form from his pocket, "is a despatch written out to your firm, which will be handed in this morning at Monte Carlo."

"Streak of bad luck here. Cable five hundred thousand Barclay's Bank, Monte Carlo. Timothy B. Ryan, Château d'Antibes."

"Good," Mr. Ryan approved. "That's the first step. The half million dollars will be cabled over, all right. How do you expect to get the bank to hand the money over to you?"

"You will endorse them over to us upon persuasion."

"And keep my mouth shut afterwards?"

Commodore Jasen shrugged his shoulders.

"There are men who like to live," he reflected, "and there are others who prefer to die. You may be one of the others. There were one or two in Chicago. There were two in New York."

"You mean you would put me away?"

"Nothing in this world," was the emphatic declaration, "would be more certain. You might," he went on, "bring some slight inconvenience upon us, you might even force us to change our habitation, although that I think very doubtful, but there is nothing surer in this world—and you know it, Timothy Ryan—than that your days upon this earth would be numbered. You would be lying somewhere under the sunshine with a bullet through your heart, or somewhere deep down in the Mediterranean, surrounded by curious little fish with unpleasant masticatory habits. No one is ever alive twenty-four hours after the Lebworthy Gang has doomed them to die."

"Well, well!" Mr. Ryan murmured thoughtfully.

"You have to make the choice," his host went on. "I believe you are worth something like twenty millions. You have to make your choice whether you will go on living with nineteen million five hundred thousand or leave twenty millions to your legatees, whoever they may be. To a reasonable man, the choice should be simple."

"Could I have my coffee and a bath on this?" Mr. Ryan asked.

His host touched the bell.

"You can indeed," he assented.

A sombre-looking manservant answered the summons—of French appearance but with an American accent. He arranged a breakfast table by the side of the bed, but Mr. Ryan pointed to the recess in front of the window.

"Guess I'll taste a little of this Mediterranean breeze," he decided. "It will cool my head off."

"You can now prepare the bath," the Commodore directed, "and put out some suitable clothes for Mr. Ryan. Perhaps you would prefer a bathing suit?"

"That goes all right with me," the latter agreed, stumping across the room. "Coffee smells good."

The servant, evidently a well-trained one, produced a dressing gown in which the visitor robed himself. The Commodore drew up an easy-chair on the other side of the window. Together they looked out on the very pleasant view—the little harbour below with the famous motor boat and sailing craft, and beyond the open sea.

"Nice spot this," the prisoner observed, as he poured out his coffee.

"Charming," his companion agreed. "Very expensive to rent, though," he went on, studying his finger nails.

"I have struck some expensive hotels," Mr. Ryan confided, as he buttered a piece of toast, "but five hundred thousand dollars for bed and board—for how long?"

"A week with pleasure," his host suggested.

"Well, even for a week that's a little stiff. Besides which, the great inducement I was promised never appeared."

"Surely Zoë and Laura have their attractions," the Commodore remonstrated.

"The usual Broadway stuff," his guest criticised. "I can pack that sort of rubbish in my own satchel any time I come across, if I want to. But the other—" Mr. Ryan kissed the tips of his pudgy fingers out of the window, towards the hotel where Caroline Loyd was at that moment also looking seawards and making plans. "You might send the cable, anyway," he decided. "I guess they'll get it at opening time this morning. Something like six hours behind, aren't we? They'll toot the money across. Between now and then, I can make up my mind whether I part or whether I take on the Lebworthy Gang."

Commodore Jasen smiled.

"You are the type of man, sir," he said, "with whom I like to transact business."

Commodore Jasen proved himself rather a severe gaoler, for it appeared that his guest developed a headache during the morning, and it was the Commodore who sat with Caroline Loyd at one of the tented tables in the open-air bar at the Cap, and sipped a wonderful concoction of orange juice at a few minutes before luncheon time. Caroline, in the opinion of every one there, had that morning surpassed herself. Her pyjamas were the most delicate shade of pearly pink, their cut was the last degree of elegance. From the shine of her burnished hair to the modified polish of her toe-nails, she was the most perfect thing that the Cap d'Antibes could produce.

"What have you done with my admirer?" she asked querulously.

"He is awaiting a despatch from New York," was the urbane reply. "As soon as it arrives and our little piece of business is transacted, it will give us all the greatest pleasure to have you dine and meet him again."

"I wonder," she reflected, "what it would be like to dine at the Château."

"We should do our best to make it agreeable," her companion assured her.

"Yes," she meditated, "I am sure you would do that. You made his last few hours agreeable to Ned, didn't you?"

Commodore Jasen showed every desire to be tolerant.

"You know perfectly well that Ned asked for it," he pointed out. "He was already upon the black list, and we knew for a fact that he had invited our friend Ryan to visit him at your hotel, although he was quite well aware that we had our own plans for the entertainment of that gentleman. You must admit that it was stupid."

"Yes, it was stupid," she agreed. "I warned him."

"We do not wish," the Commodore continued emphatically, "to run these unnecessary risks. We do not wish to have to proceed to these extreme measures. Year by year crime is becoming more civilised. We try to make a fine art of it. We must have money. We collect it from those who can afford to pay, and we prefer to cut out the rough stuff altogether. On the other hand, when the necessity arises, you know very well what our reputation is."

"Yes, I know," she admitted.

"We can be, and often are, absolutely and entirely ruthless," the Commodore confided, a queer unpleasant expression tightening up the lines of his face. "I talked it over with the others when we made this move. We are going to work peaceably if we can, but if any one doesn't want that sort of treatment, if there is any one who hesitates to come across with what we want, Chicago and New York won't have anything on Antibes."

"And what about Mr. Ryan?"

"We are hoping," the Commodore proceeded gently, dropping his voice a little and exchanging a benevolent smile with a group of passing acquaintances, "that there will be no trouble. We do not wish for trouble. What we want is half a million dollars."

"And none for me," she grumbled.

"Naturally not," was the firm reply. "You can leave your friends and come to us altogether on reasonable terms if you wish. Otherwise—hands off!"

Caroline drew a little sigh and smoothed the silk of her pyjamas petulantly.

"I consider that Ryan *was* our business," she declared.

"Possession," the Commodore remarked amiably, "is nine tenths of the law."

The under concierge from the hotel had paused at their table. He addressed Caroline.

"There is a telephone message for Madame from Marseilles," he announced.

For a moment Caroline frowned. She glanced swiftly at her companion to see if he had overheard. He was watching with dreamy eyes the flight of some seagulls.

"Is the message put through down here?" she enquired.

The boy pointed to the telephone booth.

"It is here, Madame."

Caroline rose to her feet.

"I am wanted," she said. "Afterwards it is luncheon time. Au revoir, Commodore."

He rose and bowed gallantly.

"Au revoir, Miss Loyd."

The presiding genius of Barclay's Bank, Monte Carlo, was evidently of a hospitable disposition, for a portion of the floor space of the bank was devoted to a long table covered with copies of the latest journals and maps and surrounded with easy-chairs. The public, clients of the bank at any rate, were invited to treat the place as a sort of club, and as the chairs presented a very good vantage ground for pouncing upon the manager, or under manager, when he passed that way, the unspoken invitation was freely accepted.

Mr. Timothy B. Ryan and Commodore Jasen sat, on the following morning, side by side at this table. They had cleared a

little space in front of them and an official had deposited there a blotting pad, ink and pens. Mr. Tunney, the bank manager, introduced to big business, was always at his best.

"Yes, we received the credit before closing time yesterday," he admitted. "Everything seems to be in order, Mr. Ryan. What can we do for you?"

"Our friend," Commodore Jasen explained, "has been exceedingly unfortunate at the tables. I daresay you have read of the high play at Juan and at Palm Beach? Mr. Ryan has been a heavy loser at both Casinos, besides losing here. I have been supplying him with money to the extent of my means, but although I don't call myself a poor man, he has, I confess, finished me off. His first desire, now that his money has arrived, is to pay his debts."

The manager produced a book of blank cheque forms and laid them on the table.

"If Mr. Ryan likes to give you an open cheque," he said, "we can cash it at once, or you can open a deposit account with us, Commodore. You bank at Lloyds, I think?"

"I do for the moment," the other assented. "Mr. Ryan's desire is to transfer the whole amount of his credit into my name."

The bank manager was startled.

"The whole amount?" he repeated.

"Well, I guess so," the American sighed. "Might leave twenty thousand dollars for some sort of side show."

"I should like a draft payable in Rome for one hundred thousand dollars," Commodore Jasen continued, "one payable in Paris for two hundred thousand, one payable in London for a hundred thousand, and two millions in French money here."

The bank manager made a few notes.

"This will take a little time," he pointed out.

"Get to work at once," Commodore Jasen suggested pleasantly but with the necessary amount of impressiveness in his tone. "Mr. Ryan and I will go up to the Royalty Bar and see you again in half an hour."

The manager hurried away. Timothy B. Ryan bit savagely at the stump of his cigar.

"I guess I'm making a fool of myself over this business," he muttered. "Why should I stand for losing half a million dollars, even though you are the Lebworthy Gang? The police here can't be such a dud crowd as not to fasten onto a big thing when they're put wise to it."

Commodore Jasen appeared to be profoundly indifferent. He flicked a particle of dust from the sleeve of his blue serge coat.

"We have had all this out before," he reminded his friend. "You can walk out of the bank if you like and refuse to do another thing about it. You will probably be alive for twenty-four hours, unless you go to the police. You certainly won't last a week, though. It's a mortifying experience, no doubt, to have to pay blackmail, but you have just this consolation about it—we never touch the same person more than once."

Mr. Ryan looked more morose than ever. Suddenly his whole expression changed. He laid down his cigar on the edge of the table, shook the ash from his waistcoat, and, springing to his feet, held out his hand.

"If this isn't Miss Loyd," he exclaimed. "The one person I've been wanting to see."

"Not nearly so much as I and a few other people apparently have been wanting to see you," she replied, as she shook hands. "How are you, Commodore? Let me present my friend—Monsieur Drouplain, Commodore Jasen, Mr. Timothy B. Ryan."

Monsieur Drouplain, who was a short, stiff little man with closely cropped black hair and a fierce black moustache, had apparently very little use for Commodore Jasen. He laid hold of the American's hand and grasped it.

"You are Mr. Timothy B. Ryan of the firm Ryan and Butler of Chicago?" he demanded. "Is that not so?"

"Why, sure," was the hearty reply. "Fancy your knowing about my business."

"It is rather my business to know other people's," the newcomer murmured.

"Monsieur Drouplain," Caroline explained, "is the Chef de la Sûreté at Marseilles. He is over here on account of some cables he received yesterday from New York. You have good friends, Mr. Ryan. Some of them over there seemed to have the idea that you were getting into trouble."

"Mr. Ryan will give me ten minutes of his time at once," the Chef de la Sûreté begged, "and I will explain the matter. I am staying at the Hôtel de Paris. Let us proceed there."

He led the way to the door, his grasp on his companion's shoulder a very firm one. The latter looked back.

"I guess I can sign those documents a little later on," he called out to his host. "Come right along down to the hotel and bring Miss Loyd with you. We might see about a bite of luncheon."

The two men disappeared through the swing doors. Commodore Jasen had scarcely moved in his chair. His eyes were like steel points of fire.

"Does this mean intervention on your part, Caroline?" he asked quietly. "You know the price that you will pay? You know the unspoken rule which exists between us and your people and every one indulging in our activities in every city of the States and the world? You know what resort to the police means?"

"Of course I do, my dear man," Caroline assured him, peering into the mirror which she had drawn from her bag.

"It means death," the Commodore continued, without a quiver in his tone. "It has meant death without a single break for the last fifteen years. Even the police stand on one side. Not one living soul has escaped."

Caroline thrust back a refractory wisp of fair hair underneath the white cap she was wearing.

"Untidy, aren't I?" she observed. "You see, we motored fast.... I know perfectly well the etiquette of our profession, my friend, but you will have to believe for a moment what you can prove afterwards with ease. It was not I who sent for the police—I have not approached them in any way. I have divulged nothing concerning your friend Mr. Ryan."

"Then what was the meaning of the telephone message from Marseilles yesterday?" he snapped.

"I always knew you had exceptionally good ears," she sighed. "All the same, you will have to take my word for it that that message had nothing to do with the police."

The bank manager, who had an eye for feminine beauty, approached the two. He bowed, but Commodore Jasen was in no humour to introduce anybody to this pest of a girl—especially such a valuable acquaintance as a banker.

"Rather a formidable piece of business you and your friend have given us, Commodore," he remarked. "I thought I'd better tell you that it will take at least another hour to get all the papers in order and your money counted out. If you can bring Mr. Ryan back to sign after lunch, I think it would be better. You see, we have a lot of tourists here this morning too, from the American liner in port."

"I am so glad we have not to wait any longer," Caroline murmured. "I was just trying to persuade the Commodore," she added, looking up at the bank manager with a very sweet smile, "to take me out and give me a cocktail."

"The Commodore," the manager declared, as he himself opened the door for them, "is a very fortunate fellow."

Her companion objected to entering Caroline's car and they drove down to the Hôtel de Paris in his own open limousine. He whispered a word to his chauffeur as he stepped out, and the latter was visible, a few moments later, loitering in the shadows of the bar entrance. Caroline selected two comfortable chairs and the Commodore lighted a cigarette with steady fingers. He had chosen a place on the right-hand side of Caroline and within a few yards of the open door. A very close observer might have noticed something sinister in the way his fingers were caressing the protuberance in his hip pocket. For anything he knew, this might be a trap, and he was not to be caught unprepared. He took swift stock of the room and was forced to decide that there was not a suspicious-looking person in it. Caroline herself had edged her chair a little closer to his, as though prepared for a few minutes' intimate and pleasant conversation. There was not a shadow

of fear in her eyes, although she must have noticed his chauffeur lounging outside and the stealthy movements of her companion's fingers. He waited till the glasses were placed on the table before them, then he leaned towards her.

"Caroline Loyd," he said, and his voice, although it was pleasantly modulated, was full of menace, "if this is a trap, I want you to understand that the first person who goes out will be you. Two of us have you covered."

"Don't suggest such unpleasant things," she begged. "You are spoiling my appetite and I am ravenously hungry. You've got nothing against me. I'm even hoping that you will invite me to lunch."

"How is it that the Chef de la Sûreté of Marseilles has come here to look for Ryan and it was you who received the telephone message from Marseilles yesterday morning?" Commodore Jasen demanded. "I'm waiting for an answer to that question and it is about time I got it. Don't flirt about with that mirror or come any nearer to me, Caroline. I can see him coming in just as well as you. You may think the odds are in your favour, but they aren't. There are two others here who've got him covered—and you too—beside myself. If it's a plant, you'll get what you deserve from me. Stay where you are."

"My dear man," she remonstrated, "don't be absurd. *Ici, Monsieur*," she called out.

The newcomer advanced with a smile and a bow.

"Dick," she said, "I congratulate you, for the Commodore—who is really a very clever man—believes that you are Monsieur Drouplain, Chef de la Sûreté at Marseilles! Where did you leave Mr. Ryan?"

"He's put it over the purser and got the state suite on the boat," was the reply from the fierce little man in unexpectedly broad American. "They're just off."

"Who is this person and what is he talking about?" the Commodore gasped.

"Well," Caroline explained, "his name is Dick Ferber. He's one of our little lot. Four of us altogether, you know. Two we left at Marseilles—Dick had a little business on there—Ralph is in Antibes, and myself. Dick, shake hands with the Commodore."

"Glad to know you, I'm sure," the little man remarked with a broad grin.

The Commodore did not reciprocate. Caroline shrugged her shoulders.

"My dear man," she begged, "you must be a sport. There is nothing in our Magna Charta against either of us outwitting the other if the opportunity arises. If I had squealed, I knew quite well that I should have signed my own death warrant. I never dreamed of doing such a thing. You chose to cut me out of it and run this little affair with Mr. Ryan by yourself. I decided to teach you a lesson and to play a hand against you. I've played it fairly. You have lost, and Mr. Ryan, who is now on the ocean, has saved half a million dollars. He will keep his mouth shut and there's no trouble anywhere. What about that lunch?"

Commodore Jasen drew a long breath and summoned the barman.

"Telephone over for the *maître d'hôtel*," he directed, "to bring the menu from the restaurant."

II

THE TABLE UNDER THE TREE

There were a scattered few of the little company of *al fresco* diners at the Restaurant de la Pomme d'Or at St. Paul, not so interested perhaps in their dinners or their companions, who realised what was about to happen. To the majority, however, the sudden darkness came almost as a shock. A moment before, the whole place had been flooded with moonlight, their plates, their fellow diners, the wine in their glasses, the anxious face of the one overworked waiter hurrying back and forth all plainly visible. Then, without the slightest warning, came darkness. A fragment of inky black cloud had floated across the surface of the moon with an amazing result. No longer could one look down upon the valley below, stretching away towards the pastures and the flowery land which led seawards, a vivid and brilliant picture of moonlit beauty, every tree visible and the rise and fall of the land as easily to be traced as at midday. Below now was nothing but a black chasm of darkness, with an occasional pin prick of light from the cottages or farmhouses on the hillside. Where before it seemed to be a fairy panorama, one could lean now over the terrace wall and peer over the edge of the world into an impenetrable gloom. The little company of guests seated at small tables became suddenly like shadowy, unreal figures, chaotic in shape, their faces blurred streaks of white upon the darkness.

There was a moment or two of almost complete silence, then a little nervous laughter. The waiter was groping his way towards the electric switch which turned on a shaded lamp at each table. The girl who assisted him stumbled against a tree and dropped two of the plates she was carrying with a crash. Almost simultaneously there was another sound, clear and vibrant with agony—without a doubt a human cry. At first, it seemed as though it might have come from the darkness below, then to almost every one came a feeling of shivering apprehension. It had come from somewhere in their very midst, from one of themselves. People began peering about with terrified eyes. Neighbours and friends at different tables called to one another for reassurance.

The owner of the restaurant put his head out from the doorway which led to the inside premises and called loudly to the waiter to hasten with the switch. No one thought of eating or drinking during those tense seconds. Every one was eager, yet fearful, for the coming of the light. At last from the first of the tables came a flicker, and four startled people swung round in their chairs to gaze terror-stricken into the gloom. The same thing happened at the second and third. Then, as the light flashed out from the fourth, the waiter stepped back with a shout—it seemed like the scream of a woman. People rose in their places and simultaneously through the wide-flung doors of the hotel restaurant came a broad stream of added illumination. The fourth table was occupied by a single man only. In the partial darkness there might have seemed nothing unusual in his somewhat grotesque attitude. In the clearer light one saw now that he was half sprawling across the table and that there was a very sinister-looking glitter from something rigid between his shoulder blades.... Several of the women began to shriek. One fainted. The men rushed forward and would have pressed to the table itself, but Monsieur Canis, the owner of the place, was there to push them back.

"Every one must stand clear," he insisted. "No one must come near the table before the police. Jean has gone for the gendarmes."

"Send for the doctor too," some one called out. "The man may not be dead."

But there were very ugly evidences upon the table that the affair was already hopeless.

The village gendarme arrived upon a scene of much confusion. Some of the lights had refused to burn, and the whole of the little outdoor *terrasse*, bordered with tables, and night by night an oasis of pleasure and merriment, seemed turned into a grim and ghastly tableau in which the figures of the seated guests had grown shadowy and sinister. To add to the weird effect, one of the stray dogs that haunted the place had a strain of bloodhound in him, and was seated on his haunches howling. The perspiring official wiped the sweat from his forehead and gave excited directions to Monsieur Canis.

"No one must leave the place," he commanded. "Those at the adjoining tables must remain in their seats. I am going to search for the Commissaire. Who will lend an automobile?"

There were plenty of offers, and by the time the man took his leave, having sipped plentifully from a glass of brandy which had been thrust into his hand, the doctor of the little hill town had arrived. The latter was more of the *savant* than the ordinary practitioner and he was scared and startled at the sight which he was called upon to face. His fingers stole tremblingly forward toward their task. His examination disturbed nothing: it was made with the gentleness of a woman. In a very few minutes he rose to his feet and brushed the dust mechanically from his trousers.

"The man was killed instantaneously," he announced. "The blade of that knife is through the heart. He could have known nothing, scarcely even felt any pain. Who is he?"

Monsieur Canis held up his hand. It was beginning to occur to him that, although, possibly, he was a ruined man, he was temporarily in a position of importance.

"No questions," he insisted. "It is for the police, this. Every one must remain in their places."

The gates into the little enclosure, closed perhaps once or twice in a lifetime, were pushed to, but there seemed to be no one there who was in the least anxious to leave. Most of the diners were members of the artist colony who lived together, more or less communally, in one establishment close at hand, and always took their evening meals at the restaurant. There were one or two visitors from Nice, for the place had a vogue, and a few others from Juan and Cagnes. They stood or sat about in little groups, talking. The proprietor went from one to the other.

"If any one would wish to eat inside," he suggested, "it is possible, so long as they don't leave the place. Nothing else can be served here. Inside, there is emptiness."

But no one wanted to go inside.

The Commissaire arrived. He sprang from the automobile and was across the open space, round which the dining tables were arranged, in half a dozen swift strides. He was long and lantern-jawed, with a hungry mouth and enquiring eyes. A torrent of words streamed from his lips. The two gendarmes whom he had brought with him and Monsieur Canis hastened to do his bidding. In less than five minutes he had made a hurried examination of the dead man, drawn a circle of chalk around the scene of the tragedy, across which no one was permitted to tread, and established himself at a table dragged into the centre of the courtyard a few yards away. He spoke first to Monsieur Canis, who explained that no one had witnessed the tragedy, that a passing cloud had completely obscured the moon and, during the brief interval of darkness, the murdered man's death cry had suddenly startled everybody. He himself, Monsieur Canis, had been in the kitchen and had heard nothing.

"The name of the deceased?" the Commissaire barked out.

There was only one of the diners who could tell him that—a painter, strangely attired in a workman's blouse and a pair of loose trousers.

"It was I whom he saw," he explained, "when he came to the Château Pension for quarters as an artist. He told me that his name was Paul Legarge and that he was a painter."

"What nationality?"

The other shook his head.

"He spoke French, but it was scarcely the French of a Frenchman. English or American perhaps."

"Has any one else here spoken with the deceased?" the Commissaire demanded.

The waiter and Monsieur Canis confessed to having exchanged banalities concerning the view and on the matter of food. He had spoken always in French.

"Was he dining alone?" the Commissaire asked.

"Naturally," Monsieur Canis assented.

"Who was at the table behind?" was the next question.

An *avocat* from Nice and his lady friend acknowledged themselves. The Commissaire took their names.

"Now, tell me," he said, hunching his shoulders and leaning forward. "You were within two metres of this murdered man. Can you tell me that you saw no one plunge that knife into his shoulders?"

"I saw no one," the *avocat* declared. "Nor could any one else in my position. It was impossible to see even the table. As for Madame, she was facing me, with her back towards the whole affair. I neither heard nor saw any one. I simply heard the cry and saw nothing until the lights went on."

"And there was no one standing up or moving about the place?"

"No one except the waiter, and his hand was on the switch when the lights went on."

The Commissaire glared round at everybody. It seemed apparent that he considered every one of them a possible, even a probable assassin.

"It is a circumstance most extraordinary," he declared, "that in this small place, during a temporary cessation of moonlight, a man should have been murdered in sight of all of you and no one apparently saw the assassin leave this place or heard anything but the cry. There is only one conclusion," he said, stretching out his hand. "The murderer is still present."

There was a little shiver of emotion. Every one looked fearfully around. For the moment there was no one who was not under suspicion, from Monsieur Canis himself and his pale-faced, weedy little waiter, to Monsieur Plessis, the wealthy *avocat* from Nice.

"Has this Monsieur Legarge dined here before?" the Commissaire demanded, resuming his examination.

"Several times," Monsieur Canis acknowledged. "On the last occasion with one of the young ladies who dance at the small cabaret up the hill."

The Commissaire grasped his pen. There were possibilities here.

"What ladies?" he demanded. "I know nothing of any cabaret show here."

"They were two young ladies who, with another one, I believe, came over from America some months ago to entertain the guests of an American millionaire living down at the Château d'Antibes—Commodore Jasen. Chiefly, one believes, for their amusement, the Commodore permitted them to give a small entertainment here one night a week. This Monsieur Legarge was apparently acquainted with them, for he brought one of the young ladies here to dine."

"She is not here to-night?" the Commissaire snapped.

"One has seen nothing of either of the young ladies for some days," Monsieur Canis replied.

"This unfortunate man—had he an apartment in St. Paul?"

"Barely a hundred yards away."

"Is there any one here present," the Commissaire demanded, "who can tell me more about the dead man, or who saw anything of the event of to-night other than has been described?"

"I saw the man come in," the notary from Nice observed. "One could scarcely fail to remark him, for he was wearing a claret-coloured shirt and blue trousers, as though he had come straight from the easel. He stood by his table for several minutes before he sat down, and seemed to be looking around, as though to know exactly who was here. He was restless, too, for after sitting down for a few minutes, he got up and went inside."

"That was to drink an *apéritif*," Monsieur Canis explained. "He came to me for it in the bar. He looked round the room as though in search of some one and went back to his table."

"He gave you the impression of being nervous?" the Commissaire asked the notary.

The latter assented.

"When he sat down again he even looked over the parapet, as though to see if there was any one on the terrace below."

The Commissaire stroked his chin.

"If he was afraid of any one," he remarked, "it is strange that he should have chosen the one table which is in some measure of obscurity—the table under the tree."

"He had sat there on each of his previous visits," Monsieur Canis confided.

There was an interruption and revival of interest. Police assistance had arrived from Nice with a detective and fingerprint expert. If anything was discovered, however, there was little that found its way to the outside public, for before they even commenced their investigations every one had been requested to move inside. There were rumours flying about that night, but nothing else....

The Pomme d'Or closed its doors early and from the street it seemed that every light was extinguished. The little dancing cabaret in the quaint Provençal barn a few hundred yards away was never opened. The inhabitants of St. Paul were forced to discuss the tragedy which had happened amongst them either in the streets or in their own houses. At a little before midnight, however, the Commissaire, accompanied by a gendarme, emerged from the side door of the Pomme d'Or and mounted the crazy street to the house which had been indicated as the temporary abode of the murdered man. There was a small crowd on the pavement outside. Madame, who owned the house, was entertaining a group of friends and gossips. The coming of the Commissaire created a fresh thrill.

"It is you who are the proprietress of this house, Madame?" the Commissaire enquired.

The woman acknowledged the fact.

"Monsieur le Commissaire can ask me any questions," she invited. "He was a silent man, that Legarge, but he spoke sometimes."

"First of all," the official announced, "I wish to examine his room. I have the key here."

The woman rose to her feet and pointed up the stairs.

"It was a habit of his," she confided, "to lock always his door when he went out—honest people though we are. The door faces you at the corner of the banisters."

The Commissaire mounted, followed by the gendarme. The steps were of stone and the house was of great age. The gendarme fitted the key in the lock and pushed open the heavy oak door. The room was in darkness, but electric light was plentiful in St. Paul, and the gendarme soon found the switch. A cry of amazement broke from the lips of both men almost simultaneously.

"Now, who the devil has been here?" the Commissaire exclaimed.

"*Nom de Dieu!*" the gendarme cried.

The room was in wild disorder. Every drawer in a chest had been turned out and its contents emptied. A despatch box had been broken open and a collection of unimportant trifles scattered over the table.

"Touch nothing," the Commissaire ordered.

He called in Madame. With uplifted hands she screamed out her amazement. The Commissaire had a way with women and he silenced her quickly.

"It would appear to be impossible to enter this room without a key," he said. "Are there any except the one which I found in the dead man's pocket and have just used?"

"There is another," Madame acknowledged.

"Where is it then?"

The woman hesitated, but there were few people who would have cared to lie to her fierce questioner.

"There is a young lady who dances here," she confided. "I do not think that she has often made use of it, but one night I saw Monsieur give her his spare key."

"For the moment that will do," the Commissaire observed, feeling that he was getting on very nicely. "Leave us."

The search of the apartment and of the belongings of the murdered man revealed nothing of interest. His wearing apparel and linen, ordinary enough, had apparently been bought in Marseilles. There was not the slightest indication to be gathered from any of the objects displayed as to his position in life, his poverty or his wealth. If he were indeed a foreigner, he appeared to possess no passport. There were a few hundred francs in a shabby pocketbook and a letter directed to "Dear Paul" and signed only "Max" with no address on it, begging for the loan of a mille. Whatever Monsieur Legarge had possessed of value had gone!

There was a knock at the door. The gendarme opened it. One of the young painters of the place—the one who had already spoken of his brief acquaintance with the murdered man—made tentative appearance.

"There is a thing here which might interest you, Monsieur le Commissaire," he said politely, as he glanced around the room. "Ah yes, I see that I was right. Tell me, Monsieur—you are a judge of art without a doubt—what you think of the dead man's genius?"

There was a row of paintings ranged against the wall, one half finished upon an easel. The Commissaire examined them superficially.

"I do not know why you intrude with your question," he said gruffly, "but the work is passable. I am not an artist, but I should say that the young man had learnt his trade."

"The fact that the paintings are here at all," the other replied, "is a proof that he had not. Every one of those canvases, including the unfinished one, he bought from me. You can see, if you look closely, where my name has been scratched out."

"You mean that they are your work?" the Commissaire demanded.

"Precisely."

"But is such a thing usual that one artist should buy the work of another?"

"Within my knowledge," the young painter declared, "such a thing has never happened before. Yet that is what has occurred. Legarge came to me with a story about an uncle who might come to see his work and if he found nothing would stop his allowance. He had plenty of money at the time. He asked me to sell him some pictures. I sold him these and he dragged one I was halfway through from my easel."

"It is incredible," the police functionary exclaimed.

"Yet it is true," the other affirmed. "Voilà, Monsieur le Commissaire, your murdered man may have been anything in the world, but he was no artist. He couldn't draw a line, neither could he paint."

The Commissaire stood with folded arms, staring out of the window across the crazy street to the hills beyond. He might have been posing for a study of a great man in thought.

Commodore Jasen laid down the fishing tackle which he had been stretching out upon the billiard table, removed his pipe from his mouth and glanced at the card which was handed to him soon after nine o'clock on the following morning.

Monsieur Georges
Commissaire de Police.

"Show the gentleman in at once," he directed. "Always pays to be civil to the police," he added to Jake Arnott, who was

lounging in a chair at the farther end of the room.

There was a lightning-like flash from the other's eyes.

"What the hell do the police want here?" he muttered under his breath.

"So far, I haven't an idea," the Commodore replied coolly. "Together we'll hear what the gentleman has to say."

The Commissaire was ushered in. The Commodore welcomed him pleasantly and pointed to a chair.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he enquired.

"I am engaged in investigating an unfortunate affair which occurred up at St. Paul last night," the Commissaire explained. "You have no doubt heard about it. I understand that a young lady named Mademoiselle Adams—one of the dancers, in fact, at the small cabaret there—is staying with you. I should like a few words with her."

"By all means," Commodore Jasen assented, leaning over towards the bell and pressing the knob. "I cannot say that the young lady is exactly staying with me, but she, with a friend and an elderly lady who acts as chaperone, are my guests in the annex here."

The butler presented himself, always the same—sombre, taciturn—with an air of great reserve.

"Find Miss Adams, if she's not gone out to bathe," his master instructed, "and ask her to come here for a few minutes. If she is not in the place, you'd better go down to the bathing pool."

"Very well, sir."

"May I ask," the Commissaire continued, as the man left the room, "whether it is under your auspices, Commodore, that these two young ladies have started this cabaret entertainment up at St. Paul?"

Jasen pushed the cigar box toward his guest who, however, declined the civility. The former considered his reply for several moments.

"Well, I don't know that I can exactly say that it was under my auspices," he said at last, with some deliberation. "I invited the young ladies to come here to entertain my guests in the evenings, expecting to have a much larger house party, but that unfortunate accident a short time ago—I daresay you remember that a young man staying at the hotel was drowned whilst aquaplaning with us—was rather a shock to us all, and I have not been entertaining as much as I expected. The girls wanted to do something, as they are both very talented, so they tried this scheme up at St. Paul."

"Was there a performance last night, can you tell me?"

"Fortunately, no."

"Then neither of the young ladies was up at St. Paul?" the Commissaire continued.

The door was suddenly opened and Miss Zoë Adams, in loose pyjamas with very wide legs, a little cap on the side of her head which only partially concealed her very attractive yellow hair, came gaily into the room. She threw a kiss at Arnott and looked at the Commissaire as though he were some sort of natural curiosity.

"Here is the young lady herself," Commodore Jasen observed, by way of introduction. "She can answer your questions better perhaps than I can. This is the Commissaire of Police, Zoë," he continued. "You must tell him anything he wants to know."

She threw herself into a chair and withdrew her cigarette from her lips. To any one but the closest observer her deportment was both natural and indifferent. The lines of her tight little mouth, however, were drawn close together and, underneath her slightly questioning frown, her small shrewd eyes were filled with a cautious light.

"Shoot," she invited briefly.

"The young lady speaks French?" the Commissaire asked.

"Eloquently, but with a ferocious accent," the Commodore assured him. "Her mother was a Niçoise."

Zoë made a grimace at her patron. The police official asked his questions in French which was eloquently suggestive of his local birth.

"You were acquainted with Monsieur Paul Legarge who was murdered last night at the Pomme d'Or?"

"Yes, I knew him," the girl answered.

"When did you know that he had been murdered?"

"When every one else in the house did, I suppose—at the time of the *petit déjeuner* this morning."

"Where and how did you meet him?"

"I never met him, if you mean by that introductions and that sort of thing," the girl replied carelessly. "In my profession, Monsieur le Commissaire, if a member of our small audience compliments us upon our dancing civilly and says pleasant things, the acquaintance is made."

"It was in such fashion that you met Legarge?"

"Precisely. On the night he spoke to us, he took my friend and myself and Madame Ferber, who goes with us every night when we dance at St. Paul or Vence, to the Pomme d'Or for a drink after the show. I remember thinking," she went on, "that he seemed more opulent than any of the painters I had ever met, for he gave us champagne."

"Since then you have seen him how often?"

"I do not keep a diary," she replied. "Half a dozen to a dozen times, perhaps. He was quite agreeable."

"Of what nationality was he?" the Commissaire asked.

She looked at him in surprise.

"Is it possible that you are ignorant of that? American, of course."

"Did you admire his skill as a painter?"

"Some of the things in his room seemed pretty good," was the indifferent rejoinder.

"Do you believe them to be his own work?"

"And why not?"

"Why did you have a key to his room?" the Commissaire asked, with a sudden change of subject.

The girl looked at him with upraised eyebrows.

"You are indeed inquisitive," she remarked. "Well, I am good-natured. I will tell you. Probably not for the reason you think. We give our show in two parts and there is nowhere to rest in the barn. Paul gave me the key to his room so that I could go in and sit there if I wanted to be alone between the performances."

"Was Paul Legarge your lover?" the Commissaire demanded.

"Mind your own business," the girl replied promptly.

For the first time, to judge from his set and gloomy features, it might have been the first time in his life, the Commissaire smiled.

"You decline to answer that question, Mademoiselle?"

"I certainly do."

"Now, think before you answer this one. Were you in Legarge's room last night?"

"I do not need to think," was the prompt rejoinder. "I was not. Apparently the poor fellow was not there himself after

dinner."

"Were you in St. Paul?"

"I was not. Ask the Commodore. Ask any one. There was no performance last night. I dined here. Afterwards we sang songs. You do not need to take my word. You can ask any one."

The Commissaire was disappointed.

"Do you know of any one else who has a key to the murdered man's room?"

"I do not. It is difficult to imagine that there would be more than two. He kept one himself and the other is at the present moment in my room."

The Commissaire frowned and pulled at his under lip.

"If the young lady's word," Commodore Jasen intervened, "should need any confirmation, I can assure you as to the truth of what she has told you. She dined here with her young companion, Mr. Wilson, a neighbour of ours, and myself. We had quite a pleasant little evening's music. Certainly the young ladies were not out of our sight until long after the murder had taken place."

The official thought of that ransacked room, remembered the key which had been found in the murdered man's pocket, and abstained from speech. The Commodore glanced at him deprecatingly.

"There is no reason, Monsieur," he pointed out, "for you to take the young lady's word, or even mine. If we two are not to be believed, the butler who waited upon us, the chef who cooked the dinner, the second man who served the coffee and liqueurs, are all here and at your disposal. Mr. Wilson you will know yourself where to find. It can be abundantly proved," he concluded, "that the two young ladies dined here and did not leave these premises until after midnight. We were inclined to be light-hearted last night. I think it must have been half-past twelve before we broke off."

The Commissaire listened in stony silence, saluted stiffly and turned away.

"Mademoiselle is not leaving the neighbourhood?" he enquired, as he waited at the door for the servant whom his host had summoned.

"You bet I'm not," the young lady assured him. "I beg your pardon," she added, repeating her intentions in French. "So long as the bathing remains good and the Commodore is agreeable, this is my home."

The butler threw open the door. The uninvited visitor took conventional but ungracious leave. The Commodore resumed the unravelling of his fishing line.

"A type," he murmured.

The inky black cloud which had thrown its protecting gloom over the murderer of the Pomme d'Or the night before had not crawled across the sky for nothing. The flawless serenity of the long spell of summer weather seemed at last to be disturbed. The Commissaire took his departure from the Château to the salute of rolling mutterings of thunder, and down at the Cap the bathing beaches were deserted. Commodore Jasen, after a brief visit to the terrace, abandoned his plans for a day's fishing with a sigh and considered the matter of a visit to Monte Carlo. Before he could make up his mind, however, another visitor was announced. Caroline Loyd, a little breathless from her scramble over the rocks, was ushered in. For a moment the two men were speechless. Then Commodore Jasen, with a smile of welcome, stepped forward and raised his visitor's fingers to his lips.

"Our friend the enemy," he murmured. "Welcome, dear Caroline. It is not often you favour us like this."

She nodded to Arnott and accepted a chair. She was wearing a white pullover, a white cap of the béret type and a linen skirt. The shine and odour of the sea still lingered with her.

"Ostensibly," she remarked, "the reason for my visit is because there will be no more bathing at the Cap to-day. Incidentally, however, I have come to have a very serious word with you both."

Jake Arnott strolled across the room and sat on the edge of the billiard table close to his host. Caroline watched sympathetically his glance towards the closed door.

"I have always the same feeling about this Château of yours, Commodore," she confided. "It seems full of corners and odd places. A perfect Paradise for eavesdroppers, I should think."

The Commodore nodded.

"Come this way," he invited. "I approve and I agree. There is not an indoor servant in this place who does not belong to us and who has not been thoroughly tested, but the police have been here this morning already, and one never knows."

He led the way to a small room which opened out from the larger apartment and closed the door carefully. The windows here were of the ordinary type and there was no outside terrace. The walls were lined with bookshelves.

"This," he pointed out, "is more *intime*. May I commence by asking you a question?"

"Just as you like," she assented.

"How did you get to know that Pullertons had sent a man over here?"

She looked at him steadily for a moment.

"How did you?" she countered.

The Commodore frowned.

"Caroline Loyd," he said earnestly, "in a matter like the one with which we are concerned at the moment, it is necessary that there should be complete confidence between us, because we are equally threatened. I will give you a lead if you will permit me. Last night a man posing as an artist and calling himself Paul Legarge was killed up at St. Paul. My little Zoë, who is one of the brightest children that ever fooled the world, had been suspicious of him from the first. An hour before he was killed, she had searched his room and discovered, in a secret hiding place, his badge and the envelope of a letter which he had received only that morning from Police Headquarters in New York."

Caroline Loyd's eyes were troubled. Her manner lost something of its serenity.

"I thought it must be that," she murmured. "But, Commodore, aren't you bringing the extreme measures of Chicago and New York into a country where they are barely necessary? One might at least have had an explanation with this man Legarge. One might have bought him, or if he wouldn't talk reason, after all he could only cramp your style a little. The only one of us who was liable for extradition, so far as we know, was poor Ned, and he's gone."

The two men were equally and genuinely puzzled. There was no doubt that their visitor was speaking in all sincerity. Jake Arnott had paused in the act of filling a pipe and looked towards his partner for enlightenment. He found none. The Commodore was also seeking for understanding.

"Look here, Caroline," he said, "we don't need any dope from you. You hate us like hell, I know that, but you will play the game. What we want to know—Jake and I—is what have you got to complain of? The man was just as likely to have been after you as us."

"The man ought to have had a chance," Caroline declared coldly. "I never cared about this promiscuous killing. You know that. So long as you had him marked down, he could never have got away."

Jake Arnott suddenly stiffened; the lines in his face seemed to grow deeper.

"Look here," he said, "let's have this straight between the three of us. Caroline Loyd, do you think that I or any one of our gang bumped off that man last night?"

"Of course I do," she replied.

The Commodore shook his head slowly.

"Chuck that, Jake," he begged. "It isn't worth while with Caroline."

"Chuck it be damned!" was the fierce reply. "We're great on alibis round here; in fact, we have built up our safety on them, but I don't need one this time. I was down at the Casino at Juan from dinner time till three o'clock this morning. I never went near St. Paul. If this guy Legarge was done in by any one of our crowd, it was without my knowledge."

Commodore Jasen relapsed slowly into an easy-chair. The power of speech appeared to have left him. Caroline stared at Arnott with wide-open eyes.

"Damn it all," the latter went on, "there were a dozen people there saw me dining, and a whole table full of people with whom I played 'chemie.' There is not any one else on this outfit who would have tackled the man except myself, unless they had orders. I should have had him this week sure, but I was waiting for his next advices from New York. That's the solid truth. Some one got in ahead of me."

Caroline pointed to the Commodore.

"How is it that he doesn't believe you?" she asked.

The Commodore pulled himself together.

"I believe him if he says so," he declared. "Jake's never told me a lie. They don't pay in our profession."

"But you must have talked it over since last night," Caroline objected. "What I mean is, that if Jake was dumb, you must have asked him questions."

"That's just what we didn't do and never have done," Jasen pointed out quickly. "A clean job like that is never mentioned. I am not supposed to know what my men do. I ask for no report and none is ever made to me unless there is a necessity. I knew that Jake was out all night, but I thought that he was covering up his tracks after St. Paul."

Caroline looked across towards the man standing by the mantelpiece.

"If you didn't kill Legarge, who do you think did, then?" she asked.

"Why, one of your men, of course," was the confident reply. "I saw that little chap of yours who looks like a Frenchman, up at St. Paul the other day, and I never doubted but that he was on Legarge's track too. When I heard the news this morning, well, I rather thought that you had found your nerve again. That's all there was to it."

Commodore Jasen sat forward in his chair.

"This is a serious and is becoming an alarming affair," he pointed out. "Let us have it, as it were, in black and white. Not one of us three is fool enough to tell lies; besides, it's not done in our world. Jake, you spent the night at Juan Casino, you never went to St. Paul, you didn't push that knife into the New Yorker?"

"My word's good enough, Commodore," was the prompt reply. "I never set foot in St. Paul last night, nor dreamt of going there, and I have never set eyes on the man. As you know, it was pretty well understood between us that he had to be given his ticket, but I shouldn't have chosen a public place like that. You believe me, Caroline?"

"I must," she answered.

"So do I," the Commodore decided. "Now, listen here, Caroline. What about Ralph Joslin? He would be just the sort of fellow not to let on to you so that you should be kept clear."

"Ralph was with me from half-past seven last evening until after midnight," Caroline affirmed. "As a matter of fact, we went over to Palm Beach Casino."

"There we are then," the Commodore said, lighting a cigarette. "Some one else has done our job for us. It's uncanny. I don't like the feeling."

"Damned if I do either," Jake Arnott muttered.

Caroline glanced from one to the other in some distress.

"I think it's terrible," she declared.

The Commissaire of Police sat in his office, biting his nails. Never had there been a case so full of possibilities, never one in which a swift and prompt solution would bring such credit upon his office. Yet up till that moment, though all manner of strange happenings were connected with the affair, not one of them seemed to lead to a definite clue. His assistant disturbed his not too pleasant meditations.

"Gentleman to see you, sir," he announced. "It is the Monsieur from the Château d'Antibes."

The owner, even if he were only a temporary owner, of the great house of the neighbourhood, was deserving of consideration. The Commissaire shook hands with him once more when he was ushered in.

"I beg," Commodore Jasen said courteously, as he accepted a chair, "that you will not consider me in any way officious, but on thinking over your visit this morning and some of the details of this terrible affair in St. Paul, I am emboldened to offer you a suggestion. It is an idea which occurred to me, I must confess, only half an hour ago. I ordered a car and came at once to see you. I may say that if it should help you, I desire neither thanks nor credit. I pass on the idea to you—a free gift."

"I will hear it," the Commissaire, very much to his future benefit, conceded.

A night of inky, sulphurous blackness, low-hanging clouds, immovable, leaning menacingly from the sky. Every table at the Pomme d'Or was occupied, notwithstanding the tragedy of the previous night and although it was unusual to dine out of doors under such unpromising conditions. The shaded lights had been reinforced, but even then there were pools of darkness in many places. Conversation everywhere was restrained and scanty. Laughter was a thing unheard. Upon the spirits of every one there seemed to rest the memory of the recent tragedy. In a way it was a gruesome scene, the more gruesome because seated at the table under the tree, the light upon his table the feeblest of all, was a man dining alone in a claret-coloured shirt and blue trousers. There was something almost ghoulish about the highly charged atmosphere, the spasmodic conversation, the silences, the air of impending tragedy. One woman found it too much for her nerves and was led out, sobbing. Her place, however, was speedily taken by another. It was a feast of drama that night for the guests of the Pomme d'Or.

At a table under the inner wall three men were seated together. Commodore Jasen was one, the Commissaire was another, and Jake Arnott the third. They had champagne in their glasses and food was placed occasionally on their plates by the stealthy-footed, subdued waiter. No one ate much that night, however. They were waiting for a signal which seemed slow in coming.

Monsieur Canis emerged from his secret lurking-place and stole like a ghost amongst his guests. The Commissaire summoned him. A big spot of rain had fallen. There was fear of more.

"He is there?"

"He watches all the time," Monsieur Canis answered, with a shiver.

"Let it be now," the Commissaire directed, and even his voice shook perceptibly.

The figure of the proprietor faded into the shadows. Suddenly there came what all had been warned to expect, but all had dreaded. The lights on every table went out.

"Such darkness," the police functionary muttered. "I never would have believed it possible. One can understand now."

The maid went by, sobbing with hysterical fright, keeping far away from the table by the tree, carrying a candle in her hand, which flickered out before she had taken very many steps. There was a low murmur of voices through the blackness. Here and there a white face was visible where some one had struck a match. Suddenly the *Commissaire* leaped to his feet. There was a shout from the table under the tree. The seated figure there had leaped to one side. There

was a confused vision of men struggling, a cry that rang through the whole place, down the hillside and along the valleys.... The lights went on again. On the ground by the side of the table under the tree a white-faced man with a scraggy beard lay struggling with three gendarmes, the handcuffs already upon his wrists, a knife by his side. Over him stood the *Commissaire*.

"Jaques Courdon," he challenged, "it was you who killed the American artist at this table last night."

"I thought," came a pitiful voice, "that he was here again to-night."

"You came with the same idea in your mind?"

The Commissaire repeated his question, his shrill voice echoing portentously through the courtyard. The figure on the ground rocked helplessly from side to side.

"I thought I had killed him last night," he moaned. "I saw her steal away from his rooms and I came here to kill him. I came up the ramparts—I dropped over into the darkness and I thought I had killed him—and to-night some one brought me to the gate and pointed, and he was there in the same place! It must have been a dream!"

They hurried the man away. The Commissaire shook hands with many of the friends who had come to his aid—supers in a very ghastly show.

"Of all the reconstructions the history of the criminal world has ever known," the *avocat* from Nice told him, "yours, Monsieur Georges, has been the most wonderful. My congratulations. Many people shall know of this."

The Commissaire flushed with gratified pride, but he glanced furtively at Commodore Jasen. Commodore Jasen, however, was the second to congratulate him.

"That I should have lived to see the day," Caroline Loyd murmured, as they drove down the hill, "when my friend Commodore Jasen would lend his aid to the Law!"

"There were reasons," the latter explained. "I saw at once that if ever gossip stirred about the tenants of the Château—or the lady at the Cap—this undiscovered crime would count against us. I came up here and made a few enquiries. I heard of this poor wretch—the Mad Baker they call him—who lives here on sufferance amongst a good-hearted set of neighbours. In common with every one else, the people who keep the barn had been kind to him and he had a free seat every night my two young protégées danced. It was cruel perhaps to be amused, but many people were amused at his outrageous infatuation. He would sit without stirring during the whole performance, his eyes hungering after little Zoë every moment she was on the stage. He would trudge down the hill after her till she was in her car. Once or twice she had thrown him a kind word. Sometimes a kind word is fuel to madness.... Zoë, of course, supplied the idea. One night when she had dined with this fellow Legarge, she had seen the lunatic hiding in the shrubs below, looking at their table and at her companion with murder in his eyes. She said nothing for fear of getting him into trouble, but her recollection of the incident was opportune. For the rest, it seemed easy enough. The only trouble about our little show was—even if the night were dark, would he come again if he saw a figure at the table like the figure of the night before? That idea, I will admit, we put into his mind. A gamble, surely a gamble. *Enfin*—I have made the reputation of the *Commissaire* for life."

"It is a very sound asset," Jake Arnott remarked, "to have friends amongst the police."

III

FIFTY-FIFTY

The croupier, who liked to get on with the game, looked ingratiatingly round at the little company of players at the *chemin de fer* table.

"*Un banco de cinq mille*," he announced. "*Qui fait le banco?*"

There was no response. About a quarter of the amount was grudgingly subscribed. The croupier appealed to the on-lookers.

"*Un banco de cinq mille*," he announced once more in parrot-like tones. "*Qui fait le banco?*"

Caroline, with the shoe in her hand, glanced indifferently around. She was not a great gambler. It was the third round and she was half inclined to take in the hand. Then she caught the eye of her shabby, but aristocratic-looking vis-à-vis, with whom she had already exchanged a few courteous amenities. Perhaps he took her enquiring glance, the faint quiver of her adorable lips, as a challenge. The fingers of his long white hand, which were resting upon the table, trembled, and a slight flush crept into his pallid cheeks. Five mille was a great deal of money. Nothing, alas, to this rich new crowd, who were pushing the world upon one side, but a great deal of money to the Marquis de St. Véran, whose great-great-grandfather had owned the site upon which the Casino was built and all the land between the sea and the hills. Nevertheless, he felt that the adorable young American lady had challenged him.

"*Banco*," he said.

Even then Caroline hesitated. She had a very sure instinct in human relations, and something told her that five mille was more than her opponent could afford and that his bet was a gesture incited by her simple glance of enquiry. Once more she was almost inclined to take in the hand, but his fingers already outstretched for the cards, the composure of his face and manner, changed her idea. He might think that she guessed his poverty. He might, on the other hand, be wealthy, notwithstanding his slightly worn linen, the marks of pressing upon his admirably arranged cravat, the shine upon the lapels of his dinner coat. She decided not to risk hurting him and she gave the cards. The Marquis accepted them without undue haste. He glanced at them and, despite his almost icy self-possession, there was a faint glitter in his eyes. He turned them over and displayed a natural eight. With a little shrug of the shoulders, Caroline threw down her own. There was a murmur around the table. To the non-players it was just a piece of hard luck which lent a thrill to the game. Caroline had exposed a natural nine!... The loser looked at the cards steadily and the glitter faded from his eyes. There was no other sign, however, of emotion. He bowed his congratulations, counted out the two mille worth of counters in front of him and turned to the man at the desk.

"*Donnez-moi trois mille, Monsieur*," he directed.

The official showed a curious hesitation. He looked as though about to grope in his drawer. He whispered rapidly in the ear of an overseer standing by. There was a brief colloquy. He was not a bad fellow, but it was more than he dared do to disobey orders.

"If Monsieur le Marquis would apply at the desk," he suggested respectfully.

"You have not three mille?"

"One regrets, Monsieur le Marquis."

Caroline bit her lip. She felt that she could have bitten it through for giving the hand. Her first instinct had been correct. The Marquis rose to his feet and leant for a moment on his heavy stick. He bowed slightly to Caroline.

"I regret this momentary delay," he apologised. "I will return immediately."

He walked towards the distant counter with its brass rail and white-faced, mechanical-looking cashiers, dealing out mille notes with Robot-like indifference. Caroline had an inspiration. She threw three mille plaques into the bank.

"There is no need to delay the game," she said. "I will take the money from the gentleman when he returns. I pass the

hand."

Every one was relieved at not having to wait. The affair of the *cagnotte* was speedily arranged and the money passed over to Caroline. She threw back a generous *pourboire* and dropped the remainder into her bag. She glanced over her shoulder and felt a queer shiver of sympathy. Before the desk the Marquis, leaning slightly upon his stick and gesticulating with his free hand, was talking to the indifferent-looking clerk and one of the managers. No mille notes were in evidence and the attitude of the two officials, although respectful enough, was uncompromising. Caroline acted upon a sudden inspiration. She marked her place, rose to her feet and made her way into the deserted bar behind. She threw herself into an easy-chair in a distant corner and lit a cigarette.

"*Madame prendra quelque chose?*" the barman invited, with a courteous little bow.

"*Tout à l'heure,*" she replied.

Her instinct was correct. From the window she watched the Marquis, very pale save for one angry spot of colour on his cheek, return to his place, whisper to the valet as he noted her empty seat and come to the bar. He mounted the steps and made his way towards her. She made room for him by her side.

"Let us forget that silly game," she begged. "Come and talk to me for a while."

She saw his fine mouth quiver as he sank into the chair.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "I have a confession to make to you. I owe the authorities here a little, a very little money. They think that it is enough. They do not wish to advance me three mille."

She laughed softly.

"How silly!" she exclaimed. "As though it mattered. As a matter of fact, I paid it and took the bank in. It was greedy of me, perhaps, but I wanted a rest. I wonder whether you would care to offer me an orangeade? The three mille will do next time we meet here."

The Marquis gave the order at the counter. He drew from a slim, worn pocketbook a card and laid it upon the table.

"Mademoiselle," he begged, "you will be so kind as to tell me your name. I am the Marquis de St. Véran, and I live at the Château de St. Véran on the hill beyond Mougins."

"My name is Caroline Loyd," she confided. "I am staying at the Cap d'Antibes Hôtel. As you can perhaps tell from my accent, I am an American, and as I have neither husband nor brother, nor any one there who knows anything about me, they are beginning to think that I must be an adventuress."

The waiter served her with an orangeade and handed a *fine* to the Marquis. The latter's fingers were still trembling as he raised the glass to his lips, but he was full of gratitude to this beautiful young woman who had smoothed away his humiliation. He was not as a rule attracted by the tourists who flocked to Juan. The pyjama-clad woman at night filled him with horror. He loved the precise ways of the older generations. Caroline, in her black gown, her not too sunburnt neck and arms, her kindly expression and softly modulated voice, pleased him, apart from her actual beauty, as no other woman had done for years. She might be, as she had confided, an American, but she might also have stepped from one of the frames of the pictures hanging in the long gallery at St. Véran.

"All men and women in life are better for the spirit of adventure," he said. "I myself possessed it once. I had a great scheme for reclaiming some of my lands, but the War came and they allowed even me to fight, because my family had been famous as soldiers. Hence my foot and my infirmity, for which, however, I can claim little sympathy, as it improves every day. Tell me, Mademoiselle, if you will, where you learned to speak French with so pleasant an accent."

She smiled.

"Not in France, alas," she confessed. "I was educated at a convent in New Orleans. Several of the Sisters were French. I try to speak correctly, but it is years since I was in this country.... The other day," she went on, "I passed your Château, Marquis. I think it is one of the most beautiful buildings I have ever seen."

The Marquis inclined his head. It was praise he loved to hear, but it brought with it a certain sadness.

"It is, alas," he regretted, "only a shell, but if you would, Mademoiselle, you can add to the very great kindness you have already shown me. I am a middle-aged, almost an elderly man, or I would not ask such a favour, but if you would lunch with me to-morrow—the next day if to-morrow is inconvenient—and be content with very simple fare, I will show you all that there is left to show of my home, which is little enough, save for a few pictures and some very beautiful studies in architecture. I shall have the pleasure too of discharging my debt at the same time."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure," she assured him. "About half-past twelve?"

"At that time," he said, rising to his feet, "my gates, which are usually inhospitably locked, will be thrown open and I shall be awaiting your arrival. I must not detain you now from your game. Needless to say, I shall not play again."

She understood and she took her leave. The Marquis resumed his seat and toyed with his liqueur glass. His eyes were set, and he was still suffering from the humiliation to which he had been subjected. He looked through the walls and dreamed, for a few bitter moments, of the years before the Casino had been built, when the waves came tumbling in upon an empty beach, and when, at the sight of a Lord of St. Véran, any passer-by would have curtsied or doffed his hat.

All the time, from outside, came the parrot-like calls of the croupiers, the eager voices of a common, cosmopolitan and, as they seemed to him, an indecently clad, grotesque crowd. The world had changed!

Caroline felt herself somehow a garish and meretricious fragment of the new vulgarity which had fallen like a pest upon the earth, as, in her forty-horse-power Hispano-Suiza, with its silver fittings and highly polished body, she swept through the gates of St. Véran to pay her promised visit. On either side of the lodge houses, which were practically in ruins, were carved in now decayed masonry the St. Véran arms. The woman who had admitted her, and who stood with one lean, quivering hand upon the gate, seemed as though she belonged to a world long finished with. On either side of the rough road, what had evidently once been a park was waste land, here and there planted with vines. There were treeless spaces where once a forest had been. Small white plastered houses with green roofs, stark and ungracious, were dotted about the bare hillside, with their strip of vineyard, and occasionally a more gracious expanse of flower-growing land. There was a sawmill buzzing by the side of a stream. A grim and merciless utilitarianism had gripped the fair lands of St. Véran. Only the Château itself, with its rounded walls, its weather-stained, well-defined minarets and tower, remained untouched, brooding gloomily over the desecration by which it was surrounded. Caroline shivered almost with fear as her car, with its flamboyant expression of opulence, rolled across the weed-grown square to the great front doors. She felt it to be almost a consolation that the opulence itself was in some measure a sham.

The Marquis stood ready to receive her upon the threshold. An old servant had faded literally from behind him. The former moved to hand his guest from the car and raised her fingers to his lips.

"You are the first lady who has entered my home for years," he said. "You are very welcome."

"I am very glad to come," she assured him. "If you knew how tired one gets of hotels—doing the same thing, eating the same food all the time. What a possession!

"It has been. It is still," he admitted, "a great house. It was built in the fourteenth century. The world was very much alive then. Architects, painters, sculptors were all crazy with their thirst for beauty. I shall not talk about the lines of the arch, for instance, or that ceiling, because I think you will feel them. Pintorini designed the chapel. Nowadays curves like that do not exist."

In a sense it was terrible. He led her through great, empty rooms, beautiful in their proportions, but stripped bare of every other attraction. Only in the long picture gallery there were still, notwithstanding many empty places, a few pictures.

"Much of the St. Véran collection," he told her, "was destroyed during the Revolution. Many more pictures my ancestors sold, not for themselves, but to aid others of our order less fortunate. My brother and I—my brother who was head of the family before myself and who is now dead—swore an oath that no other picture should pass out of our possession, even though we lived by eating the roots in our last field and drinking the wine we make on what was once our lawn."

"But surely these pictures that are left," she began hesitatingly—

"The portrait of a lady on your right there was painted by Andrea del Sarto on his hurried way home after his visit to Francis. Yes, I know what you are thinking. It would bring me money, of course, but there is money that rather burns one's fingers.... Now for something a little more cheerful! Here we pass," he pointed out, opening a great French window, "on to our southern terrace. You see, we lunch here," he went on, indicating a small round table. "Below us to the sea the distance is seven kilometres. Every square metre of that land once belonged to us. Yet it seems that a little matter of three mille—"

"Don't," she begged him.

"You are right," he agreed. "Henri and I between us have attempted the amazing enterprise of an *apéritif*. We had no ice, but we have water as cold as ice itself from our spring. We have laid our bottles in that. The vermouth is our own. The other ingredients I shall not specify, but they are produced on the estate."

From a richly chased glass Caroline drank the concoction, delicately flavoured, fragrantly sweet, a potion which might have been served by a lover to his mistress on St. Agnes' Eve, but the headiness of which was lost with age. The Marquis handed her to her place and the meal which followed was certainly a change from the hotel fare to which she was accustomed. There was a freshly caught trout with plain butter its only sauce, yet delicious; a chicken, a poor thin affair, but with fresh salad; a bowl of fruit and strangely tasting coffee. There was wine in priceless decanters, but wine from which the flavour was passing or had already passed. There were flowers upon the table in a bowl at which Caroline looked so often that her host moved it closer to her.

"The painting round the sides," he showed her, "is by Watteau. The china at which you are looking—you like to know these things?—is Sèvres. It is pleasant to see it again. Those rings for the napkins—an old-fashioned custom that—are three hundred years old and of solid gold. Yes," he went on, with a quaint smile, "don't think that I am too foolish about these things. I know, of course, that they are worth a great deal of money. That thought only comes to me at times and I banish it because it is an evil thought. The world thinks of nothing but money nowadays. Well, I thank God that I am content to go on until I am an old man and yet face the rest of my days without it. One foolish thing I have done, and that was because in the blood of every one of my forefathers has lurked the passion for gambling. I have no friends left with whom to pass my time, so I have tried my luck against this modern Juggernaut—the artificial machines of chance. With what lack of success you yourself have seen.... And now there comes a horrible thought to me. I have denied myself tobacco so often that I think nothing of it, but I remember now that the modern lady smokes. I have not a cigarette to offer you."

She passed him a well-filled case.

"The modern woman is prepared for all contingencies," she reminded him. "Please try these. They are not very good but they are very mild."

They strolled to the edge of the terrace, where indeed the view was marvellous. He pointed out the faint outline of the Esterel.

"Always in the shadow," he told her. "Always a different shade, from the most delicate of greys to the deepest of purples."

They looked across at the islands in the smiling sea. There was singularly little to be seen of the new outbreak of building eastwards, for the corner of the hill stood out like a bluff.

"It is here I pass my days," he continued. "I have thirty or forty books. I used to take my daily newspaper, but that I have left off. It matters so little what happens. Are you fortified with your simple lunch? Can you bear to hear bad news?"

"If you really have any to tell me," she assured him, "I think I can bear it with equanimity."

"I cannot pay your three mille," he told her.

"Do you, who really are a person of detachments," she asked him, "think that it matters?"

"Yes, it does matter," he answered. "I owe the Casino six. I should have owed them three more but for their refusal last

night. I had intended to pay them with my quarter's rents from an outside property, which should reach me to-morrow or the next day. That is of no consequence. You have come for your three mille and I cannot pay you, but I can do this, Mademoiselle, and if you will humour me, it will make me very happy. Will you step this way?"

They passed back into the great library, the shelves of which were not only empty but crumbling to decay. In one corner was an oaken chest, black and with the worm holes of genuine age. The Marquis drew from his pocket a crooked key of ancient design and fitted it into the lock.

"There are still some treasures left to the house," he sighed. "When my time comes, the hungry dealers will find their way here, and these things will go with the others. I know nothing of the money value of the contents of this chest. I know this, however. Whilst I live, its contents will be displayed in no shop windows. Will you choose something, please, and take it instead of the money I cannot pay you? Choose something which will be worth while, if you wish to gratify me. The brocade you are handling belonged to one of the ladies of Marie Antoinette's court, a St. Véran who had married a Duc de Montmorency. There is a bundle of lace there. I know nothing of it. It may interest you. It has a history, I believe. Then in that box—that little coffer—that is really rather wonderful paste. Those buckles once belonged to Marie Antoinette."

Caroline was speechless. Her fingers were passing reverently over treasures more beautiful than she had ever seen.

"There is nothing here which I can take," she declared. "There is nothing which I can disturb."

He leaned upon his stick and looked at her with kindly eyes. The hard lines had left his mouth. He seemed suddenly to have become once more a young man.

"You must please do as you are bidden," he begged. "I shall leave you to yourself. I shall stroll upon the terrace."

He passed out and left her alone. Caroline leaned back in the chair which he had dragged up for her and indulged in a shivering travesty of a laugh. If only he had known! She had even stooped once—more than once, perhaps—to what was little better than ordinary theft and she knew something about valuable things. There was more than enough here to pay her debt a thousand times over. She began her search for something less valuable than the articles he had disclosed to her, and, groping into the recesses of the box, she dragged up an old parchment. She read its quaint French, word by word. Presently she became interested. She was still studying it, unconscious of the flight of time, when the Marquis returned.

"Well," he asked, "have you chosen?"

"Do you know anything about this?" she enquired, handing him the deed.

He took it into his hand and glanced it through.

"Nothing at all," he confessed. "The old French is interesting. The lawyers in Paris took most of the documents away. This, I suppose, they found of no value."

"It might be," she meditated.

"What I think I would like you to have," he said, "is the old miniature at which I see you have been looking. It is of Marie Antoinette by Fioretto. You will see on the back, on that yellow sheet of paper, the agreement to pay Fioretto thirty pieces of gold and to give him the Farm of the Four Hills. That is the farm on the hillside above. He had a fancy for the place and thought he might paint there. He was paid and you see he left the acknowledgment behind. It is a great curiosity."

"Yes," she admitted. "I have looked at it. It is, as you say, a great curiosity and I should think it would fetch to-day—"

"Don't," he pleaded.

"At least half a million francs," she went on. "Thank you, I am something of a thief, but only one sort of a thief. I will take this parchment deed in its quaint French for my three mille."

He scoffed at her.

"But believe me, it is worthless," he pointed out. "Do not please imagine that it has the slightest value. We have no claim to a single yard of land in France except the land on which this Château stands. For all that is gone we have been paid."

"I choose it," she decided.

He shrugged his shoulders and, as she rose to her feet, he locked the box.

"More than ever," she continued, with a smile, "you will wonder, from that strange little corner of the world in which you live mentally, at the new race which has come upon the world. Women who can choose a few pages of yellow parchment, when they might possess themselves of something really beautiful! Never mind, we are all as we were made, and beauty means something to me too."

He pushed the box back and she laid her fingers upon his arm as they passed down the great vaulted room, where even their footsteps made ghostly echoes.

"I have chosen my present," she said to him, "and I am taking it away with me on one condition—a terribly modern one."

"It is granted," he promised her.

"If I should find that it has unexpected value—half of it is yours and half is mine."

"It *has* no value," he assured her.

"If it has unexpected value," she repeated firmly, "we divide. In to-day's language, we go 'fifty-fifty.' You will not be too proud to divide with me?"

They were out in the fresh air again. He raised her fingers to his lips.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "if I were ten years younger and disaster had not overtaken my house, I would divide my life with you."

To Commodore Jasen, a few afternoons later, basking comfortably in a *chaise longue* in a sheltered corner of the Château grounds, which permitted him a spreading view of the sea, was announced a visitor. He put down the book and rose to his feet. He recognised, to his great surprise, Monsieur Debeney, the presiding genius of the Casino, and the new Juan.

"Good day, my friend," the Commodore exclaimed, as he shook hands. "What is it that has happened? What service can I have the pleasure of rendering you? Sit down, pray."

Monsieur Debeney took off his hat, wiped his forehead and accepted a chair. The Commodore called back the departing butler and ordered refreshments.

"Commodore," his visitor began, "we have an impression that we have seen you sometimes with a lady, and it has been made known to us that she occasionally visits you—that you are, in short, a friend of Mademoiselle Loyd who rests at the Cap d'Antibes Hôtel."

"The young lady has been a friend of mine since she was a child," the Commodore assented. "I see little of her here because the crowd at the Cap d'Antibes is a gay one and I myself prefer a more peaceful existence, but that she is a friend of mine is the truth. Proceed, Monsieur Debeney."

Monsieur Debeney was hot, but still pale. He had the air of a man who took insufficient exercise. He had also the air of a man who was suffering from a bad fright.

"Some week or two ago," he commenced, "or it may have been before that, in the Baccarat Rooms of the Casino, this young lady made the acquaintance of the Marquis de St. Véran.

"A resident here?"

"The Marquis," Monsieur Debeney explained, "is the representative of the family to whom belonged for many generations the whole of the land around here—the land upon which the Casino is built, the hotel and most of the villas, the land through which most of the roads have been cut. In fact, the whole place."

"He ought to be a multimillionaire," the Commodore observed.

"He is, on the other hand, living in dire poverty. He has been used to coming down to the Casino and playing for low stakes at *chemin de fer*. Lately he has borrowed insignificant sums, most of which have been repaid. It happened, however, that one night about a week ago he was owing three or four mille. He applied to our cashier for three mille to discharge a debt, and my cashier, using in my absence his own judgment, refused to advance the amount."

The Commodore nodded.

"It sounds hard," he observed, "but I suppose cashiers are not men of sentiment."

Monsieur Debeney groaned and wiped his forehead with his profusely scented handkerchief.

"If I had been there," he muttered, "if only I had been there! However, the thing happened. The young lady whom I have mentioned was the person to whom the money was due and with great tact and kindness—one admits that—she covered up the incident. The Marquis invited her, it seems, to his Château on the following day to receive payment. She went there to lunch and spent a portion of the afternoon there."

"Is all this vital to the matter concerning which you have come to see me?" Jasen enquired.

"The matter is of too vast an importance not to be told in detail," the other groaned. "I have had no conversation with the young lady who, perhaps properly, declines to see me, but through her lawyer I gather that the Marquis found himself still unable to produce the three mille. He is of a peculiar temperament, like many of our aristocracy, and I think his father—"

"You must forgive my interruption for one moment," the Commodore begged. "You told me a few moments ago that it was the St. Vérans who owned the whole of the land which has become the scene of this amazing prosperity. How is it possible then that the Marquis was unable to discharge so paltry a debt?"

"That should be explained," Monsieur Debeney acknowledged. "It was the father of the present Marquis who sold the property. He sold it to a syndicate of which I was a member, and he sold it, without a doubt, remarkably cheap. Nevertheless, it was a large sum. Unfortunately, the late Marquis was a gambler. With the money we paid him he frequented the casinos of northern France. He lost everything. No share of that purchase money ever came to the present Marquis, who inherited nothing but debts."

"I understand," his companion acknowledged. "Now please go on."

"We arrive at this point, therefore," Monsieur Debeney continued. "The Marquis found himself unable to discharge even so paltry a debt as three mille, but unlike his father, the present Marquis is a man of sentiment and character. There are treasures still at the Château which he has steadfastly refused to sell. One hears of old Italian masters there locked up, but of priceless value, and other treasures. What matter? To proceed. He opens a chest full of *objets d'art*, and he invites Mademoiselle to choose something for herself. There was nothing there which was not infinitely more valuable than the three mille, but the young lady had, it seems, strange tastes. She discovered, hidden underneath a roll of engravings, an ancient document in curious old French, some of which she interprets. In the end she claims the document for her three mille. Whether she made any arrangements with the Marquis, we do not know, but he handed over the document, and she brought it away with her."

"We approach actualities," the Commodore observed. "What was the nature of the document?"

"It was part of the original title deeds of the Château. There is an old legal term which I have forgotten, governing the conditions of sale of any landed property in France, and in this portion of the title deeds there is a special interdiction against any building or buildings being erected between the Château de St. Véran and the sea, visible from the Château, without the consent of two generations of the family."

Monsieur Debeney leaned back in his chair, once more used his handkerchief and drank deep of the iced contents of the

tumbler with which he had just been served. Commodore Jasen whistled softly to himself.

"Mon Dieu!" he exclaimed. "And the document? Is it legal?"

"If its duplicate was deposited at Grasse, there is fear that it is legal," Monsieur Debeney acknowledged. "We have heard privately that the duplicate is there."

"And the result?"

Monsieur Debeney groaned.

"The result," he declared, "would be to give the owner of St. Véran—the present Marquis—a claim to have demolished or to possess the Casino and our great hotel adjoining, not to mention some two hundred villas and small hotels!"

Commodore Jasen was dumb. What a woman and what luck! The expression of placid benevolence had left his face. His eyes burnt with envious fire. There was an ugly twist to his mouth. Not a word had Caroline said to him of this great find of hers. He thought nothing of the agony of the little man who had come to visit him. He was already making plans on his own account.

"We have two lawyers from Paris staying in Nice at the present moment," Monsieur Debeney continued, "but they are able to give us very little encouragement. Mademoiselle, your friend, appears to have contented herself with the services of Monsieur Lafardière, who is the principal lawyer in these parts."

"And what is it you want me to do?" the Commodore asked.

"We desire you to use your influence with Mademoiselle, in whose hands the Marquis seems to have left the whole affair," Monsieur Debeney declared eagerly. "There are wealthy men in our syndicate, and sooner than see the town ruined, we will go from court to court of France, and the suit may last for years. Implore her to be reasonable. If the document is veritable, and our lawyers admit it, compensation shall be paid to the St. Vérans or their representatives, but if the fabulous is demanded, the place would be ruined. We could not pay. We are determined upon that."

"Do you remember the purchase price of the property?" the Commodore enquired.

Monsieur Debeney was not altogether at his ease.

"It was not high," he admitted. "But who could have foreseen what has arrived—what our enterprise has produced here? At the time of the purchase, the land was worth no more than its agricultural value. The syndicate gave, I think, a matter of two millions for it."

There was a brief silence. Monsieur Debeney's attention seemed fixed upon his tumbler. His host was looking at him in astonishment.

"Two millions," he gasped. "And to-day its value," he reflected, "roughly speaking, I should think, would be at least five hundred millions."

"To-day's value," Monsieur Debeney declared, "is entirely due to the foresight, the sagacity and the enterprise of our syndicate. Look at the money we have risked—the money we have spent. The Casino might have been a failure, *Le monde chic* might not have responded to this new craze for summer bathing and warmer atmospheres."

"I quite agree with you," the Commodore murmured.

"The object of my visit I have now explained," Monsieur Debeney concluded. "A woman by herself is apt to be unreasonable. St. Véran is angry with us and the anger of such a man is a difficult matter to deal with. Therefore I say—will you talk sense to Mademoiselle?"

"I certainly will," the Commodore promised his visitor emphatically.

Commodore Jasen found Caroline just returned from Nice. She established him on the terrace whilst she changed into a

bathing suit and peignoir.

"Now," she declared, as she rejoined him, "I feel like a human being again. Please tell me what you want."

"I have come over to ask you, Caroline Loyd," the Commodore confided, "whether we are together in this latest enterprise of yours?"

"We certainly are not," she replied promptly. "Our enterprises are conducted along different lines, and any idea we might have had of joining forces ceased the day you took Ned out for an aquaplane ride."

"I have told you before," Jasen continued quietly, "that this little corner of the country is not large enough for two bands of adventurers. We could work together admirably, but to ask one of us to stand aside and see the other, through sheer luck, bring off a great coup, is scarcely reasonable. Under the circumstances," the Commodore went on, feeling that he had made an impression, and balancing his finger tips carefully together, "I think that a special arrangement should be made in this case. You had the luck to stumble into the affair and you had also the brains to work it. My establishment is much the more expensive," he continued, with a sigh, "but that, I suppose, is my own fault. I suggest that we work on the principle—in this case only, mind you—of two thirds to you and one third to us. I shall make the same proposition to you with regard to an enterprise which we are figuring out ourselves, but in it you will take the lesser part."

Caroline was silent for several moments. Her eyes had travelled seawards. She was looking at the exact spot at which the Commodore's flying launch had emerged from the mists on the morning after Ned's disappearance.

"Is that all?" she asked softly.

"It is all," was the firm reply. "Except this. You should not need reminding that I and those who are with me are better friends than enemies."

"I do not wish to have anything to do with you in either capacity," Caroline pronounced slowly. "I shall be on my guard against you all the time and I have arranged to leave behind, if at any time I should make an unfortunate disappearance, several clues which will be sufficient to break up your little organisation. I do not need your help. I refuse to have anything to do with any scheme in which you are concerned. If there is no room for two bands of adventurers on this strip of the coast, pack up and go. It was I who had the idea of coming here first."

"I have unfortunately," the Commodore sighed, "the Château on my hands for the season. I have invested a great deal of capital in the hire of it—also in my motor boat. Be reasonable, Caroline. You know how I feel about you. You keep me at arm's length, but it is not really wise of you. I am sorry about Ned, but you know the game and you know the rules."

"I do," she admitted bitterly. "I kept my mouth shut about Ned, didn't I, although I was fonder of him than anything else in life? I let you get away with it, but as to working with you or taking you for a partner—that will never happen. Besides, in this case, we are through, as a matter of fact. Fixed. The thing's done with. You do not take a partner into a deal when the profit is already made."

"The profit," her companion reminded her, "is not yet in your pocket."

She laughed.

"You have my answer," she said. "Now go along down to the landing stage, step on to your magnificent launch and drive home. I am going to bathe, but you need not ask me to ride your aquaplane board!"

They walked down the flinty path almost in silence. Caroline left her peignoir on the rocks, poised her exquisite figure for a moment upon the diving board and plunged into the sea. Commodore Jasen stepped into his motor boat and, swinging her round, followed the line of the coast down to Juan-les-Pins.

Late that night Jasen received a sealed letter by the hand of a special messenger, brought over from the principal hotel in Nice. There was no signature to it and no commencement.

"Record at Grasse discovered confirms and legalises document but is valueless without production of document itself."

After that, for two days, there was secret activity at the Château d'Antibes, secret activity also at a little hotel the wrong side of the Seine in Paris, secret activity in a small flat at Beausoleil. Then, twenty-four hours later—sensation in Nice. In the early morning, at the premises of Maître Lafardière, the *avocat*, one of the most perfectly perpetrated burglaries of modern times was discovered. Both of the very modern safes had been opened as though by the hand of a magician, and their contents strewn upon the floor. Every drawer, tin box and receptacle of any sort had been forced open and thoroughly explored. It was another twenty-four hours before the lawyer and his staff of clerks could make the desired report to the police and to the detectives who haunted the place. In the end the news came from Maître Lafardière, who communicated it in person, with a slight twinkle in his eyes, to the Chef de la Sûreté.

"Our investigations are complete, Monsieur le Chef," he announced. "Nothing is missing from our office but a small quantity of postage stamps, some American razor blades and a photograph of Greta Garbo which hung in the outer office."

"Then, for what purpose," the official demanded, "was this burglary planned? It is a work of art. Nothing like it have I ever seen. The most complicated locks have been opened as though with butter-smearred keys, the hardest metal has been cut through as though it were brown paper! Great artists have been here, Maître Lafardière. For what reason?"

Maître Lafardière shrugged his shoulders.

"I had only one document of importance," he confided, "and that was elsewhere."

The Marquis de St. Véran, as was customary with him when the weather permitted, took his luncheon on the terrace of the Château. It appeared that on that particular morning coffee was not available, so with a little sigh, he lit a Caporal cigarette and moved his chair farther into the sunshine. To him came bustling out the shadowy old woman who, with the exception of her husband—now at work on the land but called into the house on rare occasions—was the sole domestic employed in the Château.

"There are two gentlemen who arrive. One is Monsieur Roubaud, the other a stranger."

"Place chairs," the Marquis directed wearily. "I will see them."

Monsieur Roubaud, grey-haired and almost patriarchal in appearance, whose family had been advisers to the St. Véran family for many generations, presented himself in a state of much repressed excitement. He introduced his companion—a younger, fine-looking man—Monsieur Lafardière, who wore a ribbon in his buttonhole and who, besides being the principal lawyer, was also Mayor of Nice. The Marquis waved them to the dilapidated seats. He was a little bored by their visit, for curiosity with him was a dead quality. He realised only that people had been worrying him about that mouldy yellow document, which he had given to the beautiful lady who had saved him from humiliation at the Casino, and that he had simply passed all enquiries and letters concerning the latter unopened on to Monsieur Roubaud, who had arrived in haste from Paris on receipt of the first communication.

"I trust," the Marquis said, "that you gentlemen have lunched. My housekeeping here is a very simple affair."

"We have lunched," Monsieur Roubaud assured him. "Do not disturb yourself, I beg, dear Marquis. A great thing has happened. An amazing thing! I ask myself whether my firm is in any way to blame, but of that there is no proof. I beg that you will kindly listen to what Maître Lafardière has to say."

"With great pleasure," the Marquis sighed, trying to hide his weariness.

"Monsieur le Marquis," Lafardière commenced, "I have been told that you are not a man of business. Very well. I shall put what I have to say to you in a few commonplace words. Your father disposed of much of the land which you see stretching from here to the sea, to a syndicate of men living in these parts. He was poorly paid, but, as you see, the people who bought the land have built a casino, hotels, villas, they have made a *plage*, they have made huge profits."

The Marquis' eloquent shoulders were for a moment raised.

"It pleased my father to do this," he said coldly.

"Now we come to the point," Lafardière continued. "Your father had no right to make the sale at all. The solicitors for the syndicate made the grievous error of not looking into the conditions under which the property descended from generation to generation of your family. The condition of the sale of any land has existed since the year 1700. It was properly recorded at Grasse and has become a condition of the tenure of the land. Briefly speaking, that condition is this—no building could be erected between here and the sea without the consent of the reigning Lord of St. Véran. Behold, Monsieur le Marquis—"

The lawyer's hand was outstretched. Away seawards the land seemed full of life. The huge white hotel upon the hill yawned towards them, the Casino sent out its flaunting wings on either side. The once quiet little village had become a bustling town. Other hotels, many villas dotted the hillside.

"What is the result of all this?" the Marquis asked, with some faint show of interest.

"Chaos," the lawyer replied. "The land was improperly sold and improperly bought. It was sold for something like two millions. It is worth to-day, with what stands upon it, far more than two hundred millions. It seems probable, Monsieur le Marquis, that if you care for a lengthy law process, that sum of money, more or less, would certainly become yours."

The Marquis moved uneasily in his chair. So many dreams had come to him during these last years of solitude. This must be another of them. These men were mocking him. Nevertheless, although he said nothing, some cloud seemed to have been lifted from his brain. He listened now with a different light in his eyes—a fresh measure of intelligence.

"This extraordinary situation," the lawyer continued, "appears to have been disclosed by a document which you gave to a lady who was visiting you. She was a very clever young lady indeed, for she realised its possible significance and brought it to me. Whereupon I at once communicated with Monsieur Roubaud. It seems that you gave her a Power of Attorney to act in the matter for you?"

"A paper was sent to me from her," the Marquis agreed. "I signed it. It was her affair. I gave her the document."

"The lady, if I may be allowed to say so," Maître Lafardière went on, "has shown a wise discretion. I may say that the members of the syndicate have been in a state of terror for the last few weeks, and the matter has been complicated, gravely complicated, by an organised burglary of my premises with the obvious intention of stealing the document. The attempt, naturally, was unsuccessful. I do not keep documents belonging to my clients, of that value, anywhere except in the vault of my bank. But forgive me, this is a dissertation. This morning the lady, whose name it appears is Mademoiselle Caroline Loyd, has, with our approval, come to an arrangement with the syndicate, which has already been concluded and registered. She has accepted as compensation from the syndicate the sum of fifty millions—half of which is to be paid to her and half to you."

The sun was warm, but for a moment the Marquis shivered.

"Half to me?" he repeated in dazed fashion.

"Certainly," the lawyer said. "She told us that that was the agreement."

"I scarcely thought that I was concerned," the Marquis faltered. "I gave her the document. I owed her money which I could not pay. So that was what she meant when she said 'fefty-fefty!'"

"Fifty-fifty," Maître Lafardière explained, "is an Anglo-Saxon term for proclaiming an equal division in a deal."

"How much, then," the Marquis asked, "is my share?"

"Twenty-five millions," Maître Lafardière confided. "Twelve million five hundred thousand francs have been paid into your account at the Crédit Lyonnais this morning."

The Marquis held his head. Three times he repeated the sum. Then a vagrant thought brought a queer little smile to his face.

"Sorry," he apologised. "I was thinking of the face of the bank manager. I was compelled to ask him the other day for two hundred and fifty francs. He gave it to me, but in doing so he had the air of a man who was tearing the notes into small pieces and blowing them away. Twelve million five hundred thousand francs!"

"The remainder," Lafardière concluded, "will be deposited to your credit within seven days. The lady is being treated precisely in the same way. There will be quittances and papers for you to sign. Monsieur Roubaud will present them to you."

"And you will forgive a slight liberty, my dear Marquis, I am sure," Monsieur Roubaud intervened, drawing from his pocket a long black case and opening it with trembling fingers. "I, as your old agent and representative—well, we know how things are. I thought perhaps—see, here is a cheque book. Keep that, please, locked up. I thought perhaps thirty or forty mille in notes might make the thing seem more real. Fifty mille I brought. Forty-five in mille notes—here they are. The rest in smaller amounts."

The lawyer's fingers trembled more than ever, as he snapped a rubber band around the packet and pushed it across to the Marquis.

"Unless there are questions you would like to ask us," he concluded tremulously, "Maître Lafardière and I will take our leave. This is an astonishing happening, Marquis, and I need not tell you how great is the happiness of myself, my family and the firm, to see our most valued client restored to such a great measure of prosperity. It occurs to me—this must have been a great shock, Marquis—you would like to be alone for a time. I shall wait upon you with my younger partner later in the day. A domestic staff must be engaged, a car—oh, there are many things! Life must be reestablished for you. We will talk of practical matters later on."

The Marquis rose to his feet in dignified fashion and he forgot to lean upon his stick as he bade his guests farewell.

"I have no words," he acknowledged. "They will not pass my throat. Maître Lafardière, I thank you for your visit and for your share in this happening. Roubaud, old friend, we meet later in the day. I shall be myself then. I offer no more apologies for leaving you to make your own departure."

They faded away—Monsieur Roubaud fat and so agitated that he groped his way across the terrace. Even Lafardière, the grave man of affairs, was assailed by a sudden wave of rare emotion. Arm in arm they disappeared....

The Marquis sat alone. A soft west wind was blowing in the vines which reached almost to the terrace and rustling in the leaves of the little bower of orange trees and cypresses below. In his pocket was that unaccustomed roll. He took it out and examined it. Mille franc notes! He tore one a little at the corner. There was no doubt about it. He thrust them back into the depths and rose to his feet. He was alone in the Château, for the old woman who filled the place of *bonne à tout faire* did her modest cooking in the ruins of one of the outhouses. Alone he began his melancholy promenade. He walked through the ruined and tarnished suites of reception rooms. The gilt had dropped from the panels. On the walls themselves there were great stains of damp—here and there cracks. There was thick dust on the floor, a hole in the corner of the first room where, for many nights, the Marquis had watched, by the light of his solitary candle, the coming of the first of a small company of rats. He passed on to the stately gallery, whose only remaining beauty was its form. There was a fallen oaken beam which had crashed on to the floor. There were empty frames, with the mockery of dead beauties smiling their way back into the memory of the man who paused every now and then to look upwards in his melancholy pilgrimage. *There* had been a Murillo, here at the end, that marvellous painting of King Francis, the work of Andrea del Sarto, presented to the Lord of St. Véran after he had won the great battle against the invaders on the heights of Cimiez....

The Marquis pushed open a door half a foot thick, of which only one hinge still did its work, but which hung bravely on. He crossed the great hall, cold even on this brilliant day, cold and damp, with empty leaden frames in the windows from which the stained glass had gone, many decades ago, to the markets of the world. He passed into the banqueting chamber where a long deal plank on trestles, at which a hundred men might have sat, stretched only half the length of the room. He remembered now the reason for its presence. Monsieur le Curé had begged it for a school treat on a wet day. He looked through the space where a window had been, into the little chapel where nothing remained but the picture of the Virgin, curled up and blistered with damp, looking down upon the altar. He spared himself nothing. He passed through the more habitable rooms where the last generation and he himself had lived, where odd pieces of furniture still remained, rooms dead with the horror of fireless years and open windows, through which draughts and winds had, year by year, brought

their poisonous burden of rotting leaves and dead insects....

The footsteps of the wanderer grew slower. He was fighting his last battle with the horror with which he had been surrounded for years, and it seemed as though success had brought defeat, for there was a hand of ice upon his heart. He stumbled back into the sunshine, groped his way to the edge of the terrace, leaning on his stick again now, and gazed down the valley, gazed at the vineyards where the park land should have been, at the razed woods which speculators had bought, listened to the distant hum of the sawmill where birds should have sung, gazed gravely at the hillside blistered and disfigured by the staring white villas of the prosperous shopkeepers, over the roofs of the smaller hotels, to the great structure upon the hills, and down to the Casino. Nothing, nothing, could change what lay before him. Nothing could bring life to what lay behind. Millions of bourgeois gold poured into his hands! What for? Centuries had gone to the beautifying of the St. Véran lands, which seemed suddenly to flow into life before his eyes, lit with the pain of memory, from the terrace to the sea. The groves of olive trees, the pine woods, the two old Provençal farmhouses with their meadow lands in which cows stood deep in buttercup-starred grass. A golden strip of cornland reached almost to the edge of the sea. Memory took him back for a moment, from the horrified contemplation of the shattered magnificence of his home, where dilapidation reigned instead of elegance, and dignity had given place to sordid and humiliating ruin... He seemed to sense with a sort of repulsion the suave and black-coated restorer from the establishment in the Rue de la Paix, brimful of new ideas, babbling the modern shibboleth of interior decoration, and heedless of the fact that no power on God's earth could bring back the beauty which the hand of the speculator had throttled. They were there for all time—the bustling hotels, the noisy Casino, the ugly little villas.

A fit of temporary madness seized him. He drew the fat roll of notes from his pocket and flung them down amongst the weeds and cracked stones of the terrace. He tore his cheque book in half, so that little fragments of white and green paper were fluttering in the afternoon mistral all over the place. He was glad that there was no one there to pick up the notes, and he realised with a fierce despair that the millions, an inevitable force, would mock him now and for ever in the archives of the bank. He would never be able to escape from the gifts of the gods that came too late.

Then, the world seemed suddenly different. A new peace was in his body, a new sense of life creeping into his veins. An arm was thrust through his, a faint breath of familiar perfume mingling with the scent of the roses, a white, reproachful finger pointing at the torn fragments upon the terrace.

"I was afraid you might be feeling like this," Caroline whispered. "That's why I came."

IV

NO RED RIBBON FOR THE COMMODORE

It appeared to Commodore Jasen that the world had turned upside down, when he woke in the small hours of the morning to find himself looking into the barrel of a somewhat old-fashioned, but perfectly serviceable revolver. Instinctively his right hand stole towards the stand at the side of the bed, where, amongst other articles of possible utility, he kept a small automatic. His action, however, had been anticipated. The weapon had disappeared.

"You lay quite still, Guv'nor," a hard voice enjoined. "We're not looking for trouble, so long as you do what you are told and keep quiet."

"But what is this all about?" Commodore Jasen demanded. "What is it you want?"

"I want, or rather we want—there are plenty of us in the house—the key of the old wine cellar."

"Well, you want what I haven't got," was the perfectly collected reply. "The owners of this property left me a certain amount of cellarage, but the old wine cellar has been locked up ever since I took possession."

"Where's the key?"

"At this sacred hour of the morning," Jasen replied, "and with that most unpleasant-looking weapon pointing at my head—I wish you'd lower it—I can speak nothing but the truth. *I do not know*. Do you get that? I do not know where the key of the old wine cellar is."

"Let's have a look at you and see if you are telling the truth," the intruder remarked coolly.

He turned on an electric switch, and, in doing so, lowered the weapon which had given the Commodore so much uneasiness. The two men were now facing each other, the burglar leaning over the rail of the bed, and the Commodore sitting up in his bright blue pyjamas opposite to him. The latter looked long and earnestly at his vis-à-vis. Probably English, he decided. Not very expert at his job. Certainly not a high-class gangster by profession. The humour of the situation began to appeal to him.

"So far as regards my portion of the cellarage," he said, "you will find it at the bottom of the steps leading out of the kitchen. We have not troubled to fit a lock, as I have confidence in my servants. If it's a drink you're after, pray help yourself. If champagne should be your favorite beverage, let me recommend a small quantity of Veuve Cliquot '19. If it's brandy, you ought to try my Armagnac—forty-eight years old, I can assure you, and genuine."

"Chatty old person, aren't you?" the burglar observed.

"I am talkative upon occasions," Jasen admitted, "but I am not old. I am not sure that I should be called even elderly. If you care for a little competition, the sun will be up in half an hour; I will swim you, box you, run with you, jump with you, for any sum you like to name."

The man at the end of the bed grinned.

"Well, you're a cool customer," he remarked. "Look here. Business. We have not come here for nothing, me and my pal. We have an appointment inside that wine cellar. What we didn't reckon for was it's having a sheet-iron door. We could blow it to pieces, but they would hear the noise up at Juan, therefore we'd rather have the key. If you haven't the key, you must know where it is."

"My friend," Commodore Jasen began, "let me assure you—"

It was at this point that the Commodore dropped out of the conversation. The snapped-out command to throw up his hands, which came from the shadows of the room, was very much more like the real thing than the burglar's rough invitation. Jake Arnott had entered the room stealthily and crept round the screen which the Commodore had established at the far side of his bed. Compared with the vision of his crouching figure, his set face and his wicked-looking automatic, held in fingers which gripped it as though in a vice, the burglar appeared almost like an amateur. He had sense enough, however, to grasp the situation, dropped his revolver upon the floor and raised his hands.

"What's he after?" Jake Arnott asked, crawling a little nearer.

"He says that he wants the key of the old wine cellar," the Commodore explained.

"So did another one of them, who is looking sick on the grass outside," Jake Arnott confided. "Upon my word, if this isn't a queer start. I never reckoned upon burglars in this part of the world. We didn't even take out an insurance, did we, Commodore?"

"I don't think we did," the latter replied. "On the other hand, I don't think we are going to lose anything."

"Not to this outfit, anyway," Jake Arnott scoffed. "I didn't waste any gunpowder upon the young man downstairs, but I think he'll have a headache for a week."

"Now that we can speak without embarrassment," the Commodore remarked, sitting a little farther up in the bed, "let us try and induce our visitor to explain to us why he is so anxious to acquire the key of the old wine cellar."

"If I tell you, will you let me go?"

The Commodore considered the matter.

"I really do not think," he decided, "that we should be the gainers by keeping you. You are not handsome enough for a pet—besides, I prefer Sealyhams. We are overstaffed with servants and you would probably be all the time worrying around that closed door. Yes, my friend. Gratify our curiosity in the direction I have indicated, and you may assist your sick comrade on the lawn and take him where you damn' well please."

The man at the foot of the bed looked suspiciously at his two companions.

"Sure you're not kidding?" he asked. "You honestly don't know why Lord Wyndham left that old servant of his here?"

"To spy on us, I expect," the Commodore speculated. "To see we don't do any harm and try to work up the dilapidation account."

"Don't you worry," the burglar rejoined. "He left him here on guard to see that no one tried to break into the cellar. You know very well that there's nothing else in the house worth a tinker's damn. Why do you suppose this man sleeps most of the daytime and spends the night promenading the lower regions?"

"The fellow's talking sense," Jake Arnott acknowledged. "I've always thought it was a crazy idea. There may be something in it."

The Commodore clasped his blue-clad legs in his locked hands and looked affably at his visitor.

"What is there to guard in the old wine cellar?" he asked insinuatingly.

"I'll tell you the honest truth," the man replied. "I don't know."

"Then why were you and your companion, properly armed and no doubt with the usual burglar's outfit, paying us the honour of this visit?" his questioner persisted. "You were not expecting to find anything worth while amongst the belongings of us poor tenants."

"Here's the truth," the other declared. "You can believe it or not. Old man Wyndham's a millionaire several times over. Every one knows that. Mean as they make 'em—a man with the mind of a shopkeeper, but all the same a great collector. If there's a sale at Christie's of silver, old pictures, lacquer work, miniatures, jewels—anything of that sort—you will see Lord Wyndham's name as one of the buyers. Why, only three months ago he gave seventeen thousand pounds for a pair of vases. He does the same thing in Rome and the same thing in Paris. I have heard him say at dinner time—"

"A guest of the house," Commodore Jasen murmured.

"Oh, shut up," the other interrupted. "I was temporary butler here for three months; as long as any one could stick it, I should think. I heard him say once at dinner that he scarcely ever bought a stock or a share, but invested the whole of his surplus income in portable property. You look around this place. There isn't a picture or a piece of silver, an ornament, nothing worth a snap of the fingers. Where is it all, then? Behind that steel door, *I* expect. Anyhow we came to see."

"If you were once a butler here," Jasen demanded, "how is it that you didn't know there was a steel door?"

"Because it's two years since I was in the house," the man replied, "and that door must have been placed there within the last twelve months. Any one can see the masonry round it is all new."

Commodore Jasen sidled out of bed and wrapped himself in his dressing gown.

"Jake," he enjoined, "will you take our friend down and see him and his companion off the premises? By-the-by, how did you get here?"

"We came in a fishing boat with a small auxiliary engine," the man confided.

"Excellent. See them back into their fishing boat, Jake. Let them start up their old engine and get away before it's light."

Jake Arnott threw open the door.

"This way," he directed shortly. "I'll show you where to find your pal."

The two men left the room. Commodore Jasen drew his dressing gown closer around himself, opened his window and sat out in the perfumed stillness, his eyes fixed upon the long shaft of light eastwards. Presently he heard the beat of a motor engine almost directly below, and in a few minutes the boat, with a single lantern in front, glided out across the placid waters of the bay, a spectral-like looking craft in the fading shadows. Immediately afterwards Jake Arnott could be seen, crossing the lawn. Commodore Jasen called to him softly and in due course he made his appearance.

"Bring a chair out, Jake," his patron invited. "We can sit here and watch the sun rise."

Jake Arnott was not in the mood to appreciate the beauties of nature. His remarks about the sunrise were pungent and unprintable.

"Honest to God," he begged, "I wish you'd stop kidding. We've been here months now—the Lebworthy Gang, mark you, or the best of it—and not once have we touched, whereas the dame over at the hotel—"

"Yes, yes, I know all about that, Jake," his companion interrupted soothingly. "What's your trouble at this particular moment, though? Are you dissatisfied?"

"My bank account is," was the grim reply.

"What sort of a state is Grogan in?" the Commodore asked with apparent irrelevance.

"He's conscious but sick."

Jasen's manner seemed suddenly to change.

"There's no one sleeping in the house except our people?" he asked.

"No one," Arnott replied hopefully. "Got an idea, Boss?"

The Commodore was already back in the bedroom. He drew on a pair of trousers and fastened them with a belt. Then, after carefully covering his hand with a pyjama jacket which he took from a drawer, he picked up the revolver.

"I was trying to think of a safer way," he said slowly. "There isn't one. Is the boat still in sight, Jake?"

Arnott nodded.

"Their engines ain't up to much."

"This is going to be a rush job," the Commodore confided. "Come with me, Jake. Follow my lead. Where did you say Grogan was?"

"In his easy-chair against the wall, facing the door of the old cellar."

The two men descended the stairs, passed through the kitchens and went down more stairs into the cellar. In the second crypt they came upon a pitiful figure. Grogan, his collar torn apart and his bonds loosened by Arnott, was groaning

miserably with half-closed eyes. There were other and sufficient evidences of his condition. The Commodore leaned over him.

"Grogan," he enjoined, "pull yourself together, man."

The watchman's eyes opened a little wider.

"Have they gone?" he faltered.

"We've driven them off, but I fear they're coming back. Try and listen to me, Grogan."

The man's lips moved and he raised himself a few inches. It was evident that he was doing his best.

"They threatened that they're coming back," Jasen went on, "with the stuff to blow that door out. You did your duty. You kept the key away from the burglars. We'll see to the rest. Give me the keys. We'll protect whatever may be there."

The man's head rolled on one side. He spoke with difficulty.

"Never—part with the keys—his lordship's last words."

"Listen here, Grogan," the Commodore continued soothingly. "You have obeyed your master and you have done wonderfully, but unless you use your common sense it will be of no good. Mr. Arnott and I will deal with these men when they come back, but if they bring explosives with them, and if we were to shoot down here, it would blow the place to pieces. Give us the keys and we will move the valuables upstairs and guard them till the police come."

"Have you sent for the police?" Grogan faltered.

"Of course we have," was the impatient reply. "They would have been here by now if only there was an all-night telephone service."

The man groaned. He leant over on one side for a moment. His face was a ghastly colour.

"You have done well so far, Grogan," Jasen assured him. "Don't spoil it all. If you do not trust us with the keys, you may have to lie here and see those two men walk inside. They will probably let you be blown to pieces too."

"The keys," the man confided, "are in a small safe underneath my bed. The key of the safe is under the pillow."

The Commodore turned swiftly to his companion.

"You heard, Jake," he said. "Get the keys. You know the bedroom—it leads off the kitchen somewhere. Bring the poor fellow some brandy, but don't be long about it."

Jake took swift leave. The Commodore looked down at the sick man and shook his head compassionately.

"Bad luck," he murmured to himself. "Still, safety first."

He unfolded the revolver which he had been carrying wrapped up in his pyjama jacket, wound the sleeve carefully around the butt, stepped back a few paces and raised it. The man's eyes suddenly opened. He half sat up. A strangled scream gurgled in his throat. He pawed the air with his hands.

"God," he cried. "Don't! Don't!"

Commodore Jasen fired three times into the man's body, which fell over in a limp heap. Again being careful not to touch any part of the weapon with his fingers, he threw it a short distance away, tucked the pyjama jacket into his dressing-gown pocket, and turned round to meet Arnott, who was hurrying towards him.

"Put him out, have you?" the latter exclaimed.

The Commodore nodded.

"With him alive, we were for it all the time," he explained.

"Quite like old times," Arnott muttered appreciatively. "Here's the key of the safe door. I know that, anyway. All these

little ones must be for places inside."

The Commodore paused to listen. There was silence still in the house. They moved towards the door and Jake fitted the key. They were hard men, both of them, and emotions seized them seldom and sluggishly, nevertheless their half-stifled cry, as they looked inside, rang out and awakened a hundred echoes in the low vaulted corridor.

The Commissaire of Police of the district began to feel himself a very important man indeed. This was the second murder which he had been called upon to investigate within a few weeks. He presented himself before the man who had assisted him to solve the first, with the nearest approach to an amiable smile which had ever parted his lips. The Commodore was taking his breakfast in his usual corner of the terrace and greeted his visitor with the customary handshake.

"Sit down, Monsieur le Commissaire," he invited. "A cup of coffee?"

"I breakfasted two hours ago, sir," the latter regretted. "What I have come to see is whether you can give me any ideas about this terrible affair. It was really you who solved the Legarge mystery."

Jasen shook his head gently and poured himself out another cup of coffee.

"I am afraid I cannot be inspired all the time, Monsieur le Commissaire," he replied. "You see I had something to go by on the other occasion."

"But this affair," the police functionary pointed out, "has taken place in the very house you are occupying. From here you might almost have heard the shots that were fired at the dead man."

"Quite true," the Commodore admitted, "but you see I didn't. I heard nothing."

The Commissaire sighed.

"That is unfortunate. You have not even a hint to offer me?"

"I might be able to fix the time of the affair for you, if that's any good," the Commodore observed, pushing back his chair and lighting a cigarette. "I am a very good sleeper and I seldom wake, but early this morning, without hearing any definite sounds I found myself sitting up in bed, listening. Then I heard again the sound which must have wakened me. It was a motor boat in my private waters, or rather the private waters of the Château. I got out of bed and went out on to my balcony. Within a few yards of the shore there was what seemed to be a fishing boat with an auxiliary engine."

"What time was this?" the Commissaire asked quickly.

"Soon after four."

The Commissaire reflected.

"At four o'clock," he remarked, "it is still night. There were many clouds too. How was it you were able to see the boat?"

The Commodore smiled.

"Because of the lantern hanging in front," he explained. "There was no moon, it is true, but there was quite enough light, when one's attention had been fixed upon the lantern, to trace the outlines of the boat."

"Did you do anything about it?"

"What would a sleepy man do because a fishing boat was too near his beach—or rather his landlord's beach?" the Commodore expostulated. "I got back into bed again and went to sleep."

"It is your impression, then, that the thieves got away in that boat?"

"I have no definite impression. It seems likely."

"It appears to me to be a strange thing that not one of your servants, whom I have interrogated, appears to have heard the discharge of the revolver or any sound whatever."

"It is a large house," the Commodore reminded his questioner, "and the cellars are a long way from the servants' quarters. Do I gather, then, that you have already interrogated my staff?"

"I have seen every one of them," the Commissaire assented, "including the two young ladies and the elderly one in the annex."

The Commodore shrugged his shoulders with a gesture of annoyance.

"In England or in America you would have come first to the master of the house and asked for permission to interrogate the servants," he observed.

"The law over here does not bother about permission. We act as we think best," was the curt rejoinder.

"Have you discovered how the thieves entered the house?" the Commodore enquired.

The other nodded.

"Simple enough," he replied. "They cut a large pane out of one of the lower windows. But to get into the house was a child's affair. There are other things one asks oneself."

"As, for instance?"

"Many of our French criminals," he confided, "are as bad as it is possible for that type of man to be, but when they rob they do not often kill. I ask myself why did they kill the watchman?"

"To get the key," the Commodore suggested.

His visitor indulged in a contemptuous little exclamation.

"How could a dead man give them a key?"

"Then perhaps they killed him because he would not give them the key."

"But what use would that be to them? It would be senseless."

"To prevent his identifying them afterwards," the Commodore ventured.

"Aha!" the other approved. "That is the only idea which I myself have preserved. They might have got out of that, though, by wearing masks."

"It appears to me," Jasen reflected, "that the fact of their killing him, doubtless to avoid identification, is a proof that they were not, after all, strangers from a Marseilles gang or anything of that sort. It seems to me proof that they were known to the watchman and that he recognised them."

"It is a point," the Commissaire conceded.

"It would therefore seem to one a reasonable course of procedure," the Commodore continued, "to make enquiries in the near-by ports and see which fishing boats were out last night."

The Commissaire smiled—not pleasantly, but with an obvious sense of amusement streaked with malice.

"Marvellous," he murmured. "You have the genius of a detective, Monsieur."

Jasen moved irritably in his place. His visitor's manner puzzled him.

"You have perhaps already pursued that obvious course," he remarked.

"Soon after daylight," the Commissaire assented, "Jacques Barataud, one of the worst characters amongst the boatmen,

together with a foreigner—either English or American, were detained. From here I go to Antibes to interrogate them again. I have already had a few words with them."

"Capital," the Commodore observed. "I congratulate you, *mon ami*. Has any stolen property been discovered?"

The Commissaire shrugged his shoulders.

"It is early to discuss that," he pointed out, "until we know what was in that amazing hiding place. There was nothing, however, in the boat or on their persons of the least value."

"Well, my congratulations, in any case," the Commodore repeated. "You evidently won't need my help this time."

The police functionary saluted and took his leave.

"One never knows," were his parting words....

The Commodore moved to the edge of the terrace, lit a cigarette, and looked thoughtfully out across the sea. His expression was completely serene. There was a faint drawing together of the brows, however, which indicated concentration. He recognised the footsteps of Jake Arnott crossing the terrace and spoke to him without turning his head.

"Has the Commissaire gone?" he enquired.

"Sure," Arnott answered, seating himself upon the topmost step.

"Did the servants line up all right?"

"Absolutely."

"Zoë and Laura?"

"They couldn't help it. They never heard anything."

"What's the trouble?"

"The trouble with me," Jake Arnott replied, "is that I fancy a little sea air—just halfway to the islands and round the bay."

The Commodore rose to his feet and the two men strolled down the path. They talked of the mistral that might or might not develop. The Commodore spoke pleasantly to the men at work, stopped to help an old woman who was weeding, with her bundle. They all looked after him admiringly. What a master!

Tim, the mechanic, who was lounging on deck, shot out his hand at their approach, and the engine was started before they reached the quay. They glided out from the harbour into the more troubled waters. The two men spread themselves on the cushions aft.

"Kind of feel we can talk here," Jake Arnott remarked. "These seagulls look knowing, but their story wouldn't cut any ice, even in a French court. Boss, I'm not quite sure I like that Commissaire."

"I've had moments of wondering about him myself," was the thoughtful reply. "Shoot."

"Oh, there's nothing special. Nothing to get the wind up about, at any rate," Arnott went on, as he filled his pipe. "The only thing is, I wondered why he went up into your room and stood out on the balcony."

"Did he do that this morning?"

"He surely did."

"He must have wanted to see how much I could see of a fishing boat that was close in," the Commodore reflected. "Well, you can see a great deal more than any one would imagine."

"Seems to show he's turning things over in his mind," Jake observed. "Has he had their story yet?"

"He's put them through what he calls the first interrogation," the Commodore confided. "That's what struck me as queer."

He never told me what I am perfectly certain one of the men must have told him—that he had come up into my room for the keys. He never told me a word of their story and I couldn't ask him. Now he's gone back to have another shy at them."

"Things ought to be cast iron for us," Jake Arnott mused. "We are in a different position from most of the guys who might put up a show like this. They are nearly always given away by a dame or one of their own people. There's no chance of that with us. Zoë and Laura are all right, and if they weren't, they don't know a damn' thing about it. As for the others, well—there's only been three squeals in ten years, and they were from outside members of the gang, not one of whom lived for twenty-four hours. Besides, we have got the stuff."

"They know that?"

"They do. Sure," Arnott answered. "Broadman's tickled to death. He was getting like we were—a trifle fed up—and he wants to send some money home."

"He can have it any time," the Commodore observed.

"What about the stuff?" his chief of the staff enquired.

"The stuff is good," the Commodore acknowledged. "It's better than I ever dreamt of, but it's none the less extraordinarily difficult. We shall have to take a voyage out East before we begin to dispose of it."

"You're a wizard at the valuation, Boss," Arnott said. "What do you make of it?"

"Three hundred thousand pounds," was the soft but confident reply. "There are pink pearls and sapphires there, which must have taken many years to collect, even if every gem merchant from Port Said to Rangoon was working. The green emeralds I can scarcely speak about, and by the grace of Providence they are uncut. There are half a dozen I could take to Amsterdam to-morrow, under ordinary circumstances, and they would be unrecognisable in a week, and fit to sell to the most captious courtesan in Paris or South America. The stuff's all right, Jake, but—what we had to leave behind! There's a million pounds' worth of fairly portable things there still, if only we'd known. It would have been worth while making this our one exploit in Europe. We could have done it marvellously."

"Too late now," Jake Arnott said regretfully. "We are too well known as the tenants of the Château, and of course, after this, every one will be wise to the stuff."

"The pity of it!" the Commodore sighed.

"The rest of it is off the map for us," Jake Arnott decided firmly. "We've got to go dawdling along as usual for a time. Not a servant can leave the place, neither can you or I. Our motto must be 'Life as usual.'"

"You are quite right, Jake," his chief agreed. "You have nothing more definite to say about the Commissaire, then?"

"Not a thing. I just don't like his manner. Guess I'd better have a turn on the board. It will look better. I'll pass the word to Tim."

He rose to his feet, stripped off his Lido shirt, displaying his scanty bathing attire. The boat slackened down and the board was thrown out. He dived and clambered on to it. In a few minutes they were off again at top speed, Arnott swaying from side to side gracefully, his host watching him from the stern of the boat with friendly interest. They circled round the bay for half an hour, then the Commodore passed the word forward and held up his hand to Jake. The boat slackened speed and circled round. Arnott dived off the plank and swam to the side.

"I think I'll go and hear the gossip in the bar," the Commodore decided. "You take the boat back and then send her for me, Jake. There will be another descent upon the Château before long."

"Sure," Jake assented, as he scrambled on board.

The Commodore was surrounded as soon as he drew near to the rocks upon which the Cap d'Antibes bathers were lying sunning themselves. He was, in his way, quite a popular man and had made a great many friends amongst the *habitués*.

"I say, Commodore, they're not giving you much of a peaceful summer vacation," a stalwart young American observed, rising to his feet. "We're all crazy to know the truth. Was there really a burglary last night at the Château?"

"There was indeed," the Commodore admitted gravely. "A serious affair too."

"Is it true that some one was killed?" a woman asked breathlessly.

"The man whom Lord Wyndham left as caretaker was killed," Jasen confided. "Brutally murdered, by the look of it. Shot three or four times through the body."

"Have they got the man who did it?" some one else demanded.

"They have made two arrests. I should think they've got the right fellows," the Commodore replied.

"But what on earth was there at the Château to steal?" an elderly man, who had joined them on their way to the bar, enquired. "I have been there once or twice to lunch with Wyndham, and a barer-looking place I never saw."

"I have never been inside it," another one of the group observed, "although I live not a kilometre away. I have always heard, though, that Lord Wyndham was a great collector and had some very valuable things."

"You are both right in a way," the Commodore said, as they drew into a little circle round one of the tables looking out seawards. "The place looks as empty of valuables as you could possibly imagine. In fact, it is like an American seaside boarding house. Down in the cellars, however, there is a chamber with a steel door, and I believe that, stored away inside, Lord Wyndham had a great collection of things he had picked up on his travels—*objets d'art* and jewels of every sort. These fellows had evidently got to know about it."

"Did they get away with much?"

"No one knows," Jasen went on. "So far, the thing is pretty mysterious. The caretaker was found shot several times through the body, by the side of the chair where he used to sit in the passage outside the cellars. The key of the principal door is missing from his bedroom, where he used to keep it, but the door itself is still locked, and at present no one knows how to get into the vault. Presumably the thieves cleared out what they wanted, locked up afterwards, and disposed of the key somehow."

The Commodore had set the ball rolling, but he took very little part in the babel which followed. Presently, with a word of excuse, he rose and went to meet Caroline, who was just coming out of the dressing rooms. She greeted him with a queer little smile.

"So you are in trouble again," she remarked.

"Come and let me tell you about it," he begged.

She hesitated, but walked with him down the room.

"This is rather against our principles," she reminded him softly.

"If we didn't break through them sometimes," he pointed out, "we should be just as noticeable."

"Let us go outside and look at the bathers," she suggested. "Out through the door there. The wind's getting up, and there, at any rate, we shall be alone. The echoes in this room are awful."

They made their way on to the terraced front and leaned over the wall. Within the last few minutes the weather had changed. There were whitecaps all over the sea and the rafts below were beginning to dance about like corks. The bathers had all gone in.

"There are all sorts of stories flying about," Caroline told him. "I take it that nothing serious has happened, or you would not be here."

"There has been a raid upon his lordship's treasures," the Commodore confided.

"The watchman was killed, I understand," she observed.

He nodded gravely.

"The fortune of war. He might have shot first."

"If it were true," she laughed, "there would be an element of humour in the whole situation. Fancy *you* being burgled!"

He smiled.

"The element of humour remains," he assured her. "We were burgled—a clumsy attempt. But I don't mind confessing to you—"

"Please do not confess anything to me," she interrupted.

"Nothing to confess in the way you mean," he continued. "We actually were burgled. Two of them. They broke in, shot the watchman, and found the key to the vault. As they locked it up again and apparently took the key away with them, however, no one knows what is missing."

"Except perhaps you," she murmured.

"Except perhaps me," he assented.

She sighed.

"I am a lady of fortune now," she remarked, "and I am not at all sure that I like to be on friendly terms with any one in your profession."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Are you quitting it altogether?" he asked.

"Unless something very special, and very safe, and almost moral, comes along," she replied. "I saw that Jake Arnott was out on the board—a very subtle gesture, I thought, yours this morning. I knew from the moment I saw you indulging in your innocent little recreation that you were in this last piece of trouble. We must not stay here any longer. I have a friend coming to lunch."

"Yes," the Commodore admitted, brushing back his white hair, which the wind had disarranged, and replacing his yachting cap. "We are in it, but we shall get out of it. I am not sure that it will not be one of the neatest affairs we have ever handled."

She shook her head.

"The three shots into the body," she objected, "was rather a mistake. Only American gangsters do that sort of thing."

The Commodore raised his cap as they parted and his smile of farewell was both genial and affectionate.

"I like to make sure," he said.

There followed days of tragical rumours. A stream of gendarmes and their superiors seemed to be all the time in and out of the Château. Commodore Jasen kept out of it as much as he could. He gave a great luncheon party at the Eden Roc, with Caroline his guest of honour, and his health was drunk to the strains of music before the gathering broke up. His popularity amongst the guests of the hotel and in the neighbourhood increased daily. On all sides his friends and acquaintances deplored his ill luck. First of all, his summer had been half spoiled by the loss of his aquaplane passenger, Ned Loyd, and now, under his own roof, a burglary in his temporary abode and a man shot to pieces. Hard luck indeed, every one agreed, that these two tragedies should have happened to a harmless, genial little person who had paid an immense rent for a few months' sunshine and bathing and repose. So they stood up and drank his health, and drank it again, and Commodore Jasen thanked them with tears in his eyes, and declared that, for the first time for weeks, he felt a human being again. He made his way homeward on foot and alone, for Jake Arnott had not attended the luncheon, but remained—the eternal sentry—watching the servants, watching for the newcomers, guarding against any new and

untoward happening. The Commodore knew the short cuts and very soon arrived upon his own beach. There, on the edge of the sea, with his head, as usual, bent downwards, stood the inevitable figure of the Commissaire. Jasen paused and looked at him. How he was beginning to hate the man! How joyfully his first finger could pull the trigger of any gun that might consign him to perdition. Nevertheless, there were no signs of these sentiments, as he picked his way over the pebbles to within hailing distance.

"Hello, *mon ami!*"

The Commissaire turned round. There was no start or surprise in his manner. He might even have been conscious of the Commodore's approach. He made his way quietly towards him.

"Nothing fresh?" the latter enquired.

"Nothing," was the dreary reply. "The business presents great difficulties."

"Is any part of the mystery to be solved, do you think," Commodore Jasen asked lightly, "by standing here and gazing across at Antibes? You had the air of one very deep in thought."

The police functionary shook his head gravely.

"It was you yourself," he said, "who initiated me into the finer arts of reconstruction. I came down from the house hurriedly. I stood here, from where the two men must have waded to the boat, for they had no dinghy. I wondered what they would do if they had something they wanted to dispose of hurriedly. I have been looking around to see if I could find any traces of that object."

"What is it precisely that you are looking for?" Jasen asked.

"The key. You remember, the key has never been found. Mr. Crowhurst, the agent, has opened the door of the chamber with his duplicate."

"I had forgotten about the key," Jasen observed. "So that is the reason we have two gendarmes on guard before the door."

"How did you know that?" the other asked.

"Servants' gossip. When you come to think of it," the Commodore went on, "it seems strange that the revolver, which is so much more important a piece of evidence than anything else, should have been thrown carelessly away down the corridors of the cellars themselves, where it was certain to be found, and the key, the further use of which is scarcely apparent, should have disappeared."

"There are more curious things still," the Commissaire remarked, pushing back a long wisp of black hair from his eyes, "concerning this affair. Four times now I have questioned those two men, and not even I, who have some skill, have had fortune. Their story is always the same. They failed to find the key after chloroforming the watchman, one of them came to your room in search of it, he was surprised there by your friend, Mr. Arnott, who had already knocked the other one senseless. With that they were turned out of the house, they embarked in their boat and sailed for Antibes."

Commodore Jasen smiled in mild approval.

"Why should they change such a story? It is the only one possible," he pointed out. "I imagine that, according to them, they left the watchman alive and the door of the treasure chamber unopened."

"That is their story," the Commissaire admitted.

"Another improbable part about it," Jasen continued, "is that they did not attempt to explain who killed the watchman or committed the robbery, if—as gossip tells us—a robbery was committed. Perhaps their idea is to suggest that there was another set of criminals at work at the same time?"

The Commissaire was walking slowly towards the house, his hands behind his back. His head was uplifted towards the skies, that faint twist of the mouth—an unpleasant gesture in which he frequently indulged—was displaying his unattractive teeth.

"They are very frightened," he ruminated. "They do not talk sensibly."

"And Mr. Crowhurst, the agent," the Commodore asked, "has he completed his inventory? I do not wish to seem inquisitive, but I think I am entitled to your confidence as regards the details of this affair."

The Commissaire nodded gravely.

"The result," he confided, "is bad. It is very bad. There are jewels missing valued at an enormous amount."

The Commodore's equanimity seemed at last to be disturbed.

"That means," he rejoined irritably, "that there will be no end to these investigations. They will be going on the whole of the time. I must have a talk with Mr. Crowhurst. I think I shall cancel my agreement and move to the hotel."

"To the hotel," the Commissaire mused.

"Yes. Why not? I am sorry for Lord Wyndham's loss, of course, but he should not keep such treasures in a house he lets out for six months at a time. The tenants have a right to some consideration. Crowhurst is still in the house, I suppose?"

"He is still there. I begged him to wait. We have a favour to ask of you, Monsieur. I thought I should like him to be present."

"A favour?" the Commodore repeated. "You won't find me in a very amiable mood for granting favours."

"This one, I think, will appeal to your sense of fairness," the other declared.

They made their way into the library, where the agent—a very worried-looking man—was writing out cables to his employer. He greeted the Commodore with the respect and *empressement* due to his position as a valuable client.

"You have heard the news, sir?" he groaned.

The Commodore nodded.

"Damn! bad news for all of us," he said, with some trace of his former irritation still lingering in his tone. "What do you suppose the value of the missing jewels is?"

"I have only his lordship's private valuation," the agent confided. "That amounts to something like half a million pounds sterling."

"Which means, I suppose," Jasen observed bitterly, "that this house is to be invaded now by detectives from Paris, detectives from Lyons, insurance men, private enquiry agents, and God knows what! I have just told our friend of the police here that I shall move up to the hotel. You will have to make some arrangements as regards my tenancy, Mr. Crowhurst."

"Don't, for heaven's sake, suggest any more complications!" the agent begged, holding his head. "We'll see how things work out. I'll undertake that you're not worried in any way—"

"Except for just that one little matter," the Commissaire intervened.

The agent nodded uncomfortably.

"I am sure, sir," he said, "that you will forgive me, under the circumstances, if I make a very unusual request. I promised the Commissaire that I would put the matter to you. He finds your French is as near as possible perfect, but he thought that perhaps I would be able to explain the matter better."

"Go on," the Commodore directed.

"It is the matter of the revolver. The man who tells the story of having visited you in your room swears passionately that you took it away from him and that he never used it against the murdered man. The law demands that such evidence as is possible should be taken—even though his statement is improbable. The Commissaire wishes the fingerprints of every person in the house taken and compared with the fingerprints on the revolver. He thinks that it would make the matter so much easier if you would consent to having your own taken first. No one then would feel that they were under suspicion."

The Commodore stroked his white moustache. His blue eyes were fixed upon the agent. He glanced towards the

Commissaire. All the time his mind was fixed upon a brief period—some few seconds—during which his fingers, stretched downwards, had halted and he had wrapped the blue coat of his pyjamas around his hand. Perhaps he might have been forgiven for thinking that he walked hand in hand with Fate.

"The request seems a little unusual," he remarked mildly, "but I see the point. Certainly—I consent. You had better call the servants up, so that they can see me submit myself to this ordeal. You have your man here, I suppose?" he added.

The Commissaire agreed. There was perhaps a shadow of disappointment in his tone as he rang the bell.

"He is waiting outside with his apparatus," he said. "If you will be so good as to order your servants in, the matter can proceed."

The tenant of the Château d'Antibes, seated in his favourite sunny corner on the following morning, reading his *Eclaireur* and enjoying one of his excellent cigars, looked up to greet the Commissaire.

"What, you here again!" he exclaimed, with an air of weary good humour.

The visitor nodded.

"I am here again," he admitted. "I thought you would wish to know the result of the fingerprints examination."

"I knew it beforehand," was the indifferent reply. "None of my people were down in the cellars that night."

"That would appear to be the case," the Commissaire reported. "The fingerprints are very blurred, but the only ones which it is possible to trace at all are the fingerprints of the older of the two men whom we were holding."

"Whom you *were* holding?" the Commodore repeated. "Do you mean that you have let them go?"

The Commissaire sighed.

"It is most unfortunate," he said. "The two men were confined in a reasonably guarded room in the prison, which, as you know, is overlooking the harbour. We dared not put them in the cells until the examining magistrate had made his report. Last night they managed to crawl out of the window and on to a coping, and from that they both dived into the harbour."

"Do you mean that they escaped?" the Commodore asked.

The police official shrugged his shoulders.

"A poor sort of escape," he confided. "They are both drowned. The bodies were recovered just before I started for here."

The Commodore laid down his paper.

"God bless my soul," he murmured. "Drowned! What about the jewels?"

The Commissaire sighed once more.

"They had a matter of six hours before they were arrested in which to conceal them. We shall commence at once a systematic search. It is possible that, having gone further than they intended and actually murdered the watchman, they may have thrown the jewels—in a panic—into the sea. The search has already commenced, however. We have hope."

The Commodore rose suddenly to his feet, walked to the edge of the terrace and picked up a pair of field glasses. He looked through them for several moments. His companion presently joined him.

"*Mon ami*, an idea!" the Commodore exclaimed.

"Your ideas are always good," was the eager comment.

"Across from the landing place to the port—look. There are one, two, three, four, five lobster pots. If one of those should

have belonged to either of the two men—what a wonderful hiding place!"

"And two of them did!" the Commissaire cried in much excitement.

Jasen smiled triumphantly.

"I shall not expect a reward," he observed, "as I am unfortunately already classed amongst the millionaires, but if you discover the jewels, I shall certainly expect to be decorated!"



There was no red ribbon for Commodore Jasen.



THE OBSTINATE DUKE

Van Deyl, naked as the day he was born, stood in the centre of the Eden Roc dressing room—six foot two of symmetric young manhood—and looked around him with a discontented frown.

"Say, what's happened to this place, anyway?" he demanded. "The first thing I hear when I arrive is that Ned Loyd—one of the best—good old Ned!—has been drowned aquaplaning, then there has been a murder and a great robbery up at the Château, and now I can't find my panties. Something sinister in all this."

The valet, who had been assisting in the search, appeared with a very abbreviated pair of knickerbockers, which Van Deyl accepted and buckled on with a grunt of thanks. A friend turned round from the wash-basin.

"It does seem as though there was something queer about the place this season, George," he remarked, rubbing his tousled hair vigorously with a towel. "There was a murder too up at St. Paul, at that jolly little restaurant, one night. Beastly affair. Still, there's plenty of fun going. I'm not sure that the pace isn't even hotter than last year. My little crowd got in at seven o'clock this morning."

"Call that a holiday," his friend grunted.

"You'll be doing the same yourself in a day or two," was the cheery comment. "There's something about sitting up late here which seems part of the life. Lighter drinks perhaps."

George Van Deyl stretched himself, left the room, crossed the passage and made his way through the crowded bar towards the diving boards. Halfway to his destination he came face to face with Ralph Joslin, peignoir-clad and dry from a sunbath. The former paused irresolutely.

"Hello, Joslin!" he greeted him.

"Hello, George!" the other replied.

There was a moment's awkwardness, as sometimes happens when men engaged in the secret business of the world come face to face in a public place.

"Your first visit, isn't it?" Joslin enquired.

Van Deyl nodded.

"I'm a Biarritz man," he confided. "Uncertain weather, but glorious sea when you can get into it."

Joslin glanced around. No one appeared to be taking any notice of them.

"Still at the old shop?" he asked.

Van Deyl was mildly surprised.

"I should say not," he replied. "I quit two years after the War. Shouldn't have stayed that long except that there were one or two matters I wanted to clear up. I'm in Wall Street now and in the soup with all the rest of them."

"Bad luck!" Joslin commiserated, showing signs of moving on.

"I'd like to have a few minutes with you after I've had a swim," Van Deyl remarked.

"I shall be about," Joslin answered, without any particular enthusiasm.

Van Deyl strolled thoughtfully out into the sunshine, shielded his eyes for a moment with his hand, then descended the stone steps and walked to the end of one of the springboards. He hesitated for a moment, stretched himself, and then made an unostentatious dive. His last thought as he fell through space into the salt water was of the man he had just left.

Caroline Loyd, very elegant in her green pyjamas, tightly fitting green cap and cape, waved to Joslin as he climbed the stairs and looked around the Eden Roc restaurant. He crossed the floor at once to the table where Caroline was awaiting him.

"Hope I have not kept you waiting," he apologised. "I saw Van Deyl downstairs."

"George Van Deyl?" Caroline asked.

"The same."

There was a moment's silence, followed by a discussion about lunch.

"I am afraid," Joslin went on, as soon as they had given their order, "that our habit of occasionally interfering in other people's business has developed in me the vice of curiosity."

"It is a very amiable failing," Caroline sighed. "It gives one so many interests in life."

There was a brief pause. The *maitre d'hôtel* had stopped in passing to offer his respectful greetings. The wine man had appeared for his customary order. Both men presently faded away.

"Is it George Van Deyl who has stimulated your curiosity?" Caroline enquired. "You were in X.D.O. with him, weren't you?"

"For one year only, during the war," Joslin confided. "I went back as soon as I was fit again into active service. Van Deyl couldn't. Some of us thought he was going to be an invalid for life about that time, but he pulled himself together somehow or other. Says he is in Wall Street now."

Caroline smiled.

"You appear to be rather incredulous."

"I am," he admitted. "I happen to know that he is second in command to-day at X.D.O., and the best man they have got for foreign missions. If you will believe me—he is staying here with the most abominable little specimen of a man you ever saw."

"That sounds queer," Caroline commented. "George Van Deyl always used to be very particular about his company."

"Well, you wouldn't be seen in the same party with this fellow," Joslin declared. "He is a slimy-looking, bumptious little bounder of the worst possible type. But—he is a multimillionaire," Joslin added. "I cannot help thinking that George is not here with him for nothing. They have something on. I am going to hang around after lunch and see if there is anything to be picked up. Where can I find you later in the day?"

"In my sitting room at seven o'clock," Caroline replied. "I always try to get an hour's rest before I change. Don't get to work too soon unless it is urgent. I have a date for dinner."

"That's the worst of a woman," Joslin grumbled. "Always pleasure before business."

Caroline laughed.

"Show me the business," she challenged.

For one of the finest châteaux in the Alpes-Maritimes, the room in which George Van Deyl and Mr. Reuben C. Essenheim were invited to attend the pleasure of the man whom they had come to visit certainly lacked any suggestions of hospitality. It was approached by a long corridor leading from the very magnificent hall, and was a plain square apartment with stone walls and a stone floor, in the exact centre of which reposed one priceless rug. The walls were undecorated, of furniture there was none except six high-backed but supremely uncomfortable Provençal chairs of the best period, which stood primly on one side of the room, and a further six opposite. Between them was a round table. The windows were small and high and protected by bars. The room, but for the choiceness of its scanty furniture, might

well have been the waiting room of a prison or some public institution.

"Say, that young man would need to get a push on if he were secretary to an American," Mr. Essenheim remarked, glancing at his watch. "Another ten minutes in this morgue of a room and the salt tears will stand in my eyes. Do you reckon he knows that I am Essenheim, Chairman of the Grand Prudential Trust?"

Van Deyl yawned.

"I don't suppose he's ever heard of the Grand Prudential Trust," he replied.

His companion gazed at him, open-mouthed.

"Say, young fellow, are you trying to put one over on me?" he demanded. "This Prince, whom we've come to visit, is a millionaire, isn't he?"

"He's a very rich man," Van Deyl acknowledged.

"Then you're not going to tell me that he's not heard of the Grand Prudential Trust," Essenheim scoffed. "Where there's money the folks know about the Grand Prudential Trust."

"Maybe," was the curt comment. "Here comes the secretary, anyway."

There were footsteps in the long passage outside, then the door was quietly opened. The young man who had taken their message reappeared. He was tall and good-looking in a studious sort of way. His manners were exceedingly good. It was ominous that he held in his hand the card which Mr. Essenheim had pressed upon him. He laid it unostentatiously upon the table.

"I am very sorry, gentlemen," he announced. "His Highness declines to break his rule. He has no longer any interest in outside affairs. They are all arranged for him."

"Do you mean to say that he refuses to see me?" Mr. Essenheim exclaimed angrily. "You showed him my card? He understands who I am and whom I represent?"

"I daresay he does not understand that," the secretary admitted, "because he has no interest at all in financial matters. On the other hand, he wished me to say to you, Mr. Van Deyl, that he is anxious to show every courtesy to a representative of your Government, but he scarcely sees in what way he can be of service to you."

"Naturally he can't understand that before I have had an opportunity of explaining," the young man declared eagerly. "If he will see us for five minutes I shall deliver to him personally a message from an official in Washington with whom he has some acquaintance, and I feel sure he will then understand our intrusion."

"Very well, Mr. Van Deyl," the secretary acquiesced. "If you will undertake not to be with him more than five minutes, I am to conduct you to him."

He turned towards the door. Essenheim followed the two men.

"I beg your pardon," the secretary observed, turning round. "I fear I did not make myself quite clear. The Prince will only see Mr. Van Deyl, out of compliment to his official position. No one else."

"Do you mean to say that I am to sit here and wait?" Mr. Essenheim spluttered.

"You can walk in the garden, if you please," the young man pointed out. "I can assure you that it will not be a matter of more than a few minutes."

Mr. Essenheim, who probably had never been so angry in his life, was speechless. They left him there, however, crossed once more that magnificent hall, and passed into a very beautiful apartment upon the ground floor. Van Deyl, although he had scant opportunity to look around, had the impression of having found his way into a palace. His companion ushered him towards the spacious writing table at which a tall, grey-haired man was seated. In front of the latter were three or four photographs of pre-Raphaelite pictures, some books of reference and a small priceless Old Master, which scarcely needed the magic scrawl of Fra Filippo Lippi in the corner. A little to the left, through the open window, was a stretch of beautiful country, a gleam of blue sea, between the trees the Esterels—dim violet monsters traced against the distant sky.

"Your Highness," his secretary said quietly, "this is Mr. Van Deyl—the young American gentleman who wishes to see you."

The Prince, who had been writing laboriously on a large sheet of foolscap, turned round, the black ebony pen with its gold clasps still in his hand. He had a short, pointed grey beard as well as a mass of grey hair, and his eyes were the eyes of a dreamer.

"Mr. Van Deyl," he said, with stiff courtesy, "you announce yourself as an official representative of a certain branch of the United States administration; otherwise, as is well known, I do not receive callers. What does the American Government require from me?"

Van Deyl was somewhat taken aback. He met the question frankly, however.

"The American Government is not directly concerned in my mission," he acknowledged, "but Mr. Essenheim, my companion, has a scheme for the purchase of an almost defunct railway which operates close to the frontier of a foreign country. For certain reasons it has been decided at Washington that it would be a great advantage to us to have that railway line reestablished. Officially we can do nothing, but we are prepared to support, to a certain extent, any private enterprise. Part of our support is my presence here and this explanation which I am asked to give you officially."

"And my interest in the matter?" the Prince enquired.

"You are the registered holder of a large number of the shares," Van Deyl explained. "Why you bought them, or how they came into your possession, no one knows, but they are registered in your name, and dividends—in the days when there were any—have been received by you. Mr. Essenheim cannot complete any scheme for the reorganisation of the railway without acquiring control, and whoever desires control must possess your shares. He is, therefore, over here with a proposition to you to buy them."

"Then, the sooner Mr. Essenheim—or whatever his euphonious name may be—gets back to where he came from," the Prince replied, "the better. In these days my life is dedicated to one object. I have a man of affairs who sees after such matters as those to which you have alluded."

"Let us, if you please," Van Deyl begged, "get into touch with him. We have no wish to trouble you personally. Let us put the matter before him and he can then ask for your instructions. Money is doubtless not of much object to you," the young man added, "but you will certainly be a great deal better off if you listen to what Mr. Essenheim has to say."

"The only thing in the world of which I have too much," the Prince replied coldly, "is money. I should refuse to listen to any scheme increasing my income."

Van Deyl was staggered. It was very hard indeed to adopt ordinary business methods and modes of persuasion with any one holding such views.

"Your shares are absolutely valueless," he pointed out desperately, "under present conditions. They are not quoted on the Stock Exchange, they are producing no dividends, they will never be of any value unless the railway is reorganised. Mr. Essenheim is the man to do that and this is the moment."

"My chief inspiration concerning this particular moment," the Prince said gently, "is that it is an opportune one for you to take your leave. Your request is refused. Please do not trouble me again in the matter."

He swung round in his chair. Already his eyes were searching for the place in the manuscript where he had broken off.

"Will you at least tell me the name of your man of affairs?" Van Deyl implored.

"Certainly not," was the cool refusal. "I should regard any further move on your part in this matter as an impertinence. Charles," he added, turning to his secretary, "show this gentleman and his friend out."

Van Deyl made his way back to where Essenheim was waiting and Mr. Reuben C. Essenheim had a great deal to say. Nevertheless, it was perfectly ineffectual. The secretary, though his manners remained pleasant, with a couple of servants in the background, was an omnipotent force. The two ambassadors were politely, but ignominiously, shown off the premises. As they stepped into their car on the other side of the great iron gates, Mr. Essenheim was still talking furiously. A young man who was making some adjustments to his motor bicycle, which was leaning against the wall,

watched them with curious eyes as they left.

The next stage in the proceedings connected with the inauspicious mission of George Van Deyl and Mr. Reuben C. Essenheim was marked by the following letter from an eminent firm of American lawyers established in Paris. It was addressed to the ancient house of Lafardière and Fils of Nice, and ran as follows:

Dear Sirs,

We understand that you act as agents in the affairs of the Duc de Sousponnier, resident at the Château de Sousponnier, and sometimes known as Prince Maurice of St. Saëns. We are the European representatives of the Grand Prudential Trust, the President of which—Mr. Reuben C. Essenheim—is in this country at the present moment. Acting upon his instructions, we are venturing to approach you with regard to our client's desire to acquire a block of shares, namely, 4390, in the Great Eastern Railway Company of Texas.

We should like to say, for your information, that the railway is at present inoperative. The shares of the par value of \$100 are unquoted, and no dividend of any sort has been paid for the last seven years. These facts can easily be confirmed. Furthermore, a recent bankers' estimate of the value of the shares under present conditions was \$12½, and we venture to think that at that price there would be few likely purchasers. Our client, however, who has been exceedingly successful in various reorganisations, has outlined a scheme to rebuild and reestablish the railway under entirely fresh auspices. To do so it is necessary for him to own control of the shares. He is a very large holder already, and has bought several considerable blocks at from \$12½ to \$15 a share. He wishes to acquire the holding of your client, the Duc de Sousponnier, and for that purpose he will be glad to know at what price the Duc would be prepared to sell his holdings for cash. We are not asking you, of course, to accept our word for the fact which we have stated, but we should be glad if you would make the necessary enquiries through your bankers, and communicate with us as speedily as possible, as our client is anxious to return to the States.

Faithfully yours,

Bland & Henshaw.

The reply to this letter was received within a few days.

Dear Sirs,

We have received your communication respecting your client's suggested purchase of the shares in the Great Eastern Railway Company of Texas, held by our client the Duc de Sousponnier. We regret, however, to inform you that His Highness is not disposed to make any offer of the shares in question.

Faithfully yours,

Lafardière & Fils.

On receipt of this letter Van Deyl had hard work to keep his friend Mr. Reuben C. Essenheim from precipitating himself into the sea. For twenty-four hours he shook with fury. At the end of that time he was himself again, and in due course another letter from Messrs. Bland and Henshaw reached the firm of Lafardière and Fils.

Dear Sirs [it said],

We are in receipt of your letter of the 17th, and regret very much that your client will not state the price at which he is prepared to sell his holding in the Great Eastern Railway Company of Texas. The acquisition of his shares is frankly necessary before the reconstruction of the company can be attempted. We cannot believe that your client would deliberately block the development of a great industrial enterprise, and we trust that you will take an opportunity of explaining the matter fully to him. If the company continues moribund, the shares which you hold on your client's behalf will decline in value until they simply become wastepaper. Not only your client, but many other stockholders throughout the country will suffer. We are instructed to offer you in cash, payable at the Crédit

Lyonnais within twenty-four hours of your agreement to sell, the sum of \$50 a share for your 4390 shares, amounting to \$219,500, or at to-day's rate of exchange Frs. 5,487,500. We may add that this offer is one which can never be repeated, and which is at least five times in excess of the present value of the shares.

Faithfully yours,

Bland & Henshaw.

The reply to this was prompt and brief.

Dear Sirs,

In reply to your offer for our client the Duc de Sousponnier's holding in the Great Eastern Railway Company of Texas, our client wishes us to state positively that he does not intend to sell such holding at any price, and he desires no further communication upon the subject.

Faithfully yours,

Lafardière & Fils.

Mr. Reuben C. Essenheim was a man who had never known a day's illness in his life, but on receipt of the translation of this letter he took to his bed for two days and refused to speak to any one. Van Deyl, passing his time rather warily down at the bathing club and in the Casino, came face to face with Joslin one morning.

"What's become of your little pet?" the latter asked.

Van Deyl indulged in a grimace.

"Sulking," he announced. "He's been so used to having his own way ever since he became prosperous, that he can't understand life over here, or the mental outlook of people who do not think along the same lines. For the first time in his career, I think, he is beaten, and it's going hard with him."

"The worst of these little men who don't drink," Joslin observed, "is that they have no other way of getting rid of their gall, so they go to bed and very often turn sick."

"I'm the fellow who ought to be sick," Van Deyl remarked gloomily. "I have given up my holiday to this job, I've had to cart the little boulder around for two months with just my expenses paid, and I was to have got fifty thousand dollars if the thing had come off."

"Tough luck!" Joslin murmured sympathetically. "When are you back to New York?"

"Very soon, I expect. Unless I stay on here, as I think I shall, and take a short holiday. I know exactly what will happen to my charming companion. In another day, or perhaps two, he will get up in the morning with either some new scheme in his mind, all cut and dried, in which probably I sha'n't be interested, or with his passage booked and reservations made for home."

"Can't think how you came to be mixed up with him," Joslin observed.

Van Deyl shrugged his shoulders.

"He was wished on me by the Department," he confided. "Costain himself was very keen upon his success over here, and I fancy he thought I might be helpful. But I've not been a damn' bit of good to anybody."

"Come and have a swim," Joslin suggested. "A bite of luncheon afterwards, if you like."

"I'm with you," the other acquiesced.

When at last Van Deyl left the raft and swam lazily towards shore with pleasant thoughts of a cocktail and lunch in front

of him, he saw a familiar little figure waiting at the top of the steps—a small commonplace looking man dressed in expensive clothes, utterly out of touch with his surroundings—an object of curiosity to every one. Van Deyl abandoned the brief sunbath he had proposed for himself and hurried on.

"Glad to see you are better, sir," he remarked. "Had a good rest?"

Mr. Essenheim's thin lips curled in a peculiar smile.

"I do not rest," he said. "Since the time I saw you last I have had forty-seven cables, twenty or thirty local telegrams, the visit of a police Commissaire, a private detective and one of our own Wilberforce men. I have now made my plans."

Van Deyl stared at him, speechless.

"You take my breath away, sir," he said at last.

"You are not of the type which understands rapid action," Mr. Reuben C. Essenheim declared. "I have no complaint to make of you. You did what you were expected to do. It failed. It was not your fault. Here," he announced, drawing an envelope from his pocket, "you will find dollar bills for all that I owe you, and what I consider a fair amount over for expenses."

Van Deyl held the envelope in his salt wet fingers.

"And you," he asked curiously, "what are you going to do? Return to America?"

Mr. Essenheim gravely removed his horn-rimmed spectacles. He blinked for a moment and looked up at his questioner in blank surprise.

"Go back to America?" he repeated. "Without the Great Eastern shares? Do you imagine that I made my millions, young man, by giving up things?"

"You have a nerve, sir," Van Deyl acknowledged. "If you get those shares, I'll take off my hat every time I hear your name."

Essenheim smiled queerly. He was watching the approach of a motor boat rounding the point.

"There are more roads than one to success," he said. "Au revoir, Mr. Van Deyl. I am going with my friend Commodore Jasen to lunch at his château. I see he has come for me."

The little man in his business suit, so out of place in such an environment, descended the stone steps with pompous bearing—an object of amazement to every one. He stepped into a dinghy and was rowed out to the motor boat which was hovering round....

Joslin strolled up to Van Deyl and the two men stood together, the sun blazing down unheeded upon their bare heads and the seashine of their bodies.

"So the great Mr. Essenheim is a friend of Commodore Jasen's," Joslin said curiously.

"First I knew of it," Van Deyl replied.

Mr. Reuben C. Essenheim selected the most sheltered spot in the motor boat and established himself in it with some care.

"I am obliged to you, Commodore," he said, "for your invitation to lunch, but I only eat once a day and I drink nothing whatever. I have had three biscuits and a glass of Perrier with a teaspoonful of brandy in it. That will last me until evening. I wish to speak to you alone. Here we are alone. What could be better? We talk for ten minutes, afterwards you go back to your château and send me back to my hotel."

"Just as you wish," the Commodore replied, a little shattered. "I can make you a cocktail here if you like."

"I never touch them," Mr. Essenheim protested. "Now, Commodore, I came over to Europe for one reason and with one intent. I wish to purchase, preferably at my price, otherwise at his, four thousand three hundred and ninety shares in an American Railway from a man who calls himself the Duke of Sousponnier. He is so greedy about titles that occasionally he is known as the Prince of St. Saëns."

"I know him," the Commodore admitted. "I should never have looked upon him as a likely owner of American Railway stock."

"He holds those shares," Mr. Essenheim went on, "and he declines to part with them. He declines even to see me. I have approached him at his château. Our lawyers have approached him with what must seem to be a ridiculous offer. We have offered him fifty dollars a share for shares that on the market would not fetch twelve dollars. He simply refuses to do business."

"A most unreasonable man," the Commodore murmured. "A man in constant ill-health, though. Before long you will probably find those shares upon the market. If his is a French will, as I daresay you know, every foreign share must be sold."

"Quite so," Mr. Essenheim agreed. "But the question is—how long will he live? To me the question presents itself—how long should a man of such obstinacy be allowed to live?"

Into Commodore Jasen's blue eyes there suddenly flashed a light of apprehension. For many hours he had been wondering what this millionaire financier could be wanting with him.

"I am not a man," Essenheim continued, "who accepts failure. I have agents everywhere—friends in other worlds who have sometimes been useful to me. I am in touch even with the private detective forces and Police Headquarters in my own country. The wires have been buzzing round the Hôtel du Cap d'Antibes while I have been lying in my room. One of the first things I learnt, Commodore, was that a portion, at any rate, of the famous Lebworthy Gang were supposed to be hovering around these parts."

Still the Commodore made no remark. He tapped a cigarette upon the hard seat and lit it.

"The Duke of Sousponnier," Mr. Reuben C. Essenheim went on, "has offended me mortally. He refused to receive me. He left me in a waiting room. I have never found, in the course of my life, that it pays to allow men who have offended you to continue unchallenged. He is a sick man, they tell me. Very well—earlier or later, what does it matter? There is a third point—he stands in the way of a great enterprise. With antediluvian pig-headedness he blocks progress. A man like that should go."

"You spoke of the Lebworthy Gang," Commodore Jasen ruminated. "Have you any real reason to imagine that any of that desperate crowd are in this locality?"

"Not the slightest," was the emphatic response. "If they were here, I should never know it, but I have taken out a mental policy upon the life of the Duke of Sousponnier, and it would be worth a hundred thousand dollars to the beneficiary."

"One hundred and fifty thousand dollars, I think," Commodore Jasen murmured.

His companion sighed.

"Say, isn't that rather a tall order?" he asked.

"Not at all," the Commodore assured him. "First of all, it would be exceedingly difficult to get into touch with any of these desperate fellows and secondly, well—we are not in Chicago, are we?"

Mr. Reuben C. Essenheim took out a cheque-book from his pocket and very carefully he made out a draft to self for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars and endorsed it. He dated it a week ahead.

"In a week," he observed, as he tore it out and passed it to his companion, "I shall stop payment of this in Paris, but if by any chance I should be owing that amount to the beneficiary of that life insurance—well, the cheque could be cashed at any time at the Paris branch of the Grand Prudential."

Commodore Jasen thrust it carefully into his waistcoat pocket. His guest pointed to the shore.

"If you can land me," he said, "I should be glad. I have decided to move to Nice and I have ordered my car for two o'clock. Bad news travels fast enough through the press, Commodore. I shall not leave you my address."

Van Deyl was a cheerful and welcome addition to Caroline's luncheon table at the Cap. He made no secret of his admiration for Caroline and talked over old times with Joslin.

"Tell me, what has become of your strange little friend?" Caroline enquired.

Van Deyl smiled.

"He really isn't a bad sort. I was sent over from Washington to help, if I could, in a scheme of his. I have not been able to make good and he has given me the sack. Never mind, he did it very graciously."

Both Caroline and Joslin were interested.

"Is he going home?" the former asked. "Has he really given up his enterprise here, whatever it may have been?"

"He didn't tell me anything about his plans," Van Deyl admitted. "He simply wished me to understand that I had had my chance and failed and that he was going to carry on alone. With that he left me. He embarked on that wonderful fast motor boat with the nautical-looking gentleman with the white moustache, who plays around here sometimes."

There was a moment's silence. Caroline shot one swift glance across at Joslin and then looked out to sea.

"Commodore Jasen," the latter murmured.

"Yes, that is his name," Van Deyl observed carelessly. "Nice-looking old duffer, but I don't see quite what use he is going to be to my little friend."

Caroline was her old bewitching self as she leaned across the table, her chin resting upon her clasped hands.

"It is your own fault, Mr. Van Deyl," she said, "if you have made us curious. Of course, one knows what you have done during the war, and your Washington work, and everything to do with Secret Service is so fascinating, but when you come to connect with a man like Essenheim—well, it does seem inexplicable, doesn't it?"

"Money," Van Deyl remarked thoughtfully, "is perhaps rather an uninspiring power, but in our country, at any rate, it is a mighty one. Essenheim is worth, I should think, forty millions. For that he is, in his own circle, a kind of emperor. He commands his friends. I am not sure whether he does not command the law. I don't know," the young man reflected, "that there is any particular secret about our mission here—certainly not about my part in it. Essenheim has a great scheme for reorganising a defunct railway. What's at the bottom of that is the only secret in the matter, and that I can't tell you. For certain reasons, the Government approve warmly of his scheme and would very much like it carried out. That's why I came over to help him."

"And you have failed?" Caroline asked sympathetically.

"We came across a man unlike any I have ever met before," Van Deyl admitted frankly. "He holds four thousand three hundred and ninety shares of the Great Eastern of Texas which we want, which are certainly not worth more than ten dollars a share, if that, and yielding him no dividends. He refused to sell them to-day at fifty dollars!"

"Who on earth is this imbecile?" Caroline asked, trying to keep the intense curiosity from her tone.

Van Deyl hesitated. After all, was there any secret about the matter? He imagined not.

"A man calling himself the Duc de Sousponnier," he confided, "also the Prince de St. Saëns. He is already enormously wealthy and he declines to either buy or sell a share of any sort. He is writing a book and appears to think of nothing else."

Caroline leaned back in her place. The excitement of the last few minutes had been a strain on her nerves. She began now to see daylight.

"What a lucky man you are, Mr. Van Deyl," she murmured, "to be mixed up with such interesting affairs."

He made a grimace.

"Well, I've had to pay for it," he reminded her. "Essenheim isn't every one's choice of a day-by-day companion."

"What do you suppose," she asked indifferently, "Mr. Essenheim's new scheme is?"

Van Deyl shook his head.

"I can't imagine," he said. "The Duke is supposed to be in very bad health, so I advised Essenheim to shelve the whole thing. If the Duke were to die, the shares would come on the market automatically. On the other hand, I don't think he has taken my advice. He would not have entered into all this correspondence and cabling without some object."

"It seems rather a queer anticlimax, doesn't it," Caroline mused, gazing out seawards, "that after all these exhaustive efforts, he should spend the morning going out to lunch with a harmless old gentleman like Commodore Jasen?"

"If I were still interested," Van Deyl remarked, as he rose with the others regretfully to his feet, "I should want to know something more about Commodore Jasen."

Caroline, that afternoon, picked her way through a mass of débris and avoided with difficulty being entangled with a crowd of workpeople, who were dealing with the reconstruction of the Château de St. Véran. She found the Marquis, or Armand, as she now occasionally called him, talking to an architect and his foreman. He abandoned them precipitately, however, and hastened towards her.

"You are so welcome, dear Mees Caroline," he said, as he bent over her hand. "For the renovations you come early. There is much to be done before we can even commence."

"But you," she asked—"you are feeling some interest?"

He smiled his assent. He was well and carefully dressed in country clothes and he seemed once more a young man.

"It has come, that interest," he admitted. "You have awakened it. I wish now, more than anything in the world, to make my home once more like the Château of my fathers. Tell me, there is something I can do for you perhaps, or you permit that we go in search of Madame, and insist upon some English tea?"

She laughed at his somewhat anxious glance of enquiry.

"Of course you guess that I have come here for something. You are quite right. Tell me, who is the Duc de Sousponnier who lives at the marvellous château on the other side of the valley?"

"Who is he?" the Marquis repeated. "Well, my uncle for one thing, a great scholar for another, a very rich man for a third."

"Do you ever see him?"

"Every week. He is passionately absorbed in a book he is writing—on the Renaissance, I think—but, nevertheless, he always receives any one of the family. I go to pay my respects generally on Friday evenings. I always leave feeling that he has remembered me quite wonderfully in his testament, but up till lately I have wished, oh, so much, that he would hand out a few hundred francs on account!"

She laughed.

"Well, you are past all that now."

"Thanks to you," he murmured.

"To-day is Friday," she reminded him.

He nodded.

"I shall probably go and see him this evening."

"Will you do something for me?" she begged.

"Why, of course I will. But do you mean with my uncle?"

"Naturally," she replied. "You know how fond I am of meddling in other people's affairs!"

"Your interference in mine was the most fortunate thing that ever happened," he rejoined.

"Well, then, have confidence in me," she said. "I want to buy four thousand three hundred and ninety shares which your uncle holds in an American Railway."

"Dear me!" the Marquis murmured. "Are they very good shares?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I can only tell you this—that if he were to get a report upon them to-day he would be told that they were worth about twelve dollars. I would like to give him twenty dollars. If you wish, I will divide any profit I make with you *cinquante-cinquante!*"

"Feefty-feefty," he exclaimed with delight. "Are you serious, Miss Caroline? My uncle is an impossible man with strangers but to us of his family he is sometimes amenable."

"Buy me those shares, Armand," she wheedled, "and I will come up and help you every other day with your decorations."

"I shall buy them," the Marquis declared. "I shall approach my uncle with talk, but if necessary I shall use force. I will buy them. Have no fear. You will have to find a good deal of money."

"I have a good deal of money," she assured him.

The Marquis glanced at his watch.

"Wait for me a short time here," he begged, "and you shall accompany me. Alas, I cannot promise that my uncle will receive you. I must leave you in the car. But you will have early news of my effort, and—Mees Caroline—"

"Well?"

"If I could go feefty-feefty with you—"

"In this matter of the shares?"

"No. In yourself."

The architect blundered in, but that wistful look in her eyes, the faint pressure of her fingers, was something.

An hour later the Marquis came down the broad paved way from the entrance to the Château de Sousponnier and passed through the wide-flung gates. Caroline had been leaning back in the corner of the limousine, but she stepped lightly out at his gesture.

"My uncle," he announced, "would be glad to have the honour of receiving you. He is not in one of his best moods, I fear, but he is at least gracious."

"I shall come now?" she asked.

"At once."

They went into the château, escorted by bowing servants, passed without entering the dreary waiting room, which had so

much fretted Reuben Essenheim, and into the very beautiful library where the Duke worked. He had left his seat at the desk and was in an easy-chair, from which he rose at once at their entrance. There was a smell of spring flowers about the place, of violets, carnations and early roses, which haunted her for long afterwards. The Duke himself looked old and ill.

"This is the young lady, Uncle," the Marquis announced. "You permit, Mees Caroline, that I present my uncle, the Duc de Sousponnier—Mees Caroline Loyd."

The Duke raised her fingers to his lips.

"You are the young lady whom, indirectly, my nephew has to thank for the restoration of his family fortunes," he remarked.

"Very indirectly, I am afraid," she replied. "Still, it has been a great pleasure to me. It was wonderful coming across that old document."

"I myself had heard of it," the Duke admitted. "We should have searched. But there—we are not a business family. We are rather by way of being fools, Miss Loyd, except sometimes a little knowledge of art, perhaps, in the old days some skill of soldiering. By-the-by, what is this my nephew tells me? You are so much of this modern world—that you, a young lady of your age, you wish to buy some shares?"

She smiled.

"I do indeed," she told him. "I want to buy them for your sake, too, as well as mine," she went on. "I think that so long as you hold them, your life will be in danger."

The Duke looked at her curiously. This was a strange thing to hear.

"My life!" he exclaimed. "How is danger to my life connected with my holding these shares?"

"Perhaps I should not have gone so far as that," she explained. "The only thing is, you see, that there are some people who are desperately anxious to have them, who would pay almost any price, and if you refuse to sell—well, nothing but your death would bring them into the market."

"I see," he remarked. "You believe, then, that some one might attempt my life?"

"I should not be surprised," she assured him.

He touched a bell.

"Charles," he asked his secretary, who hastened in from the anteroom, "what shares were they that those strange people tried to buy?"

"Four thousand three hundred and ninety Great Eastern Railway of Texas," the young man replied. "They were bought at fifty. They are now valued at anything between five and fifteen. The company appears to be moribund."

"We have the documents themselves?" the Duke asked. "What is it you call them—share certificates?"

"We have them in our own vault."

"Make up a parcel of them and present them to this young lady," the Duke enjoined, a little wearily. "That will save my being bothered about them any more."

"But we have not yet agreed about the price," Caroline protested, a flash of triumph in her eyes.

"The price?" the Duke repeated. "I do not sell any of my belongings, even my shares, Mademoiselle. They are yours with great pleasure. Keep them, or do what you like with them, as a slight memento of the services you were able to render to my nephew. Are other documents necessary, Charles?"

"The transfer, which I will draw up, is all, Your Highness," the secretary replied. "They happen to be bearer bonds of an old-fashioned type."

The Duke glanced over at his writing table.

"I shall see you on Sunday as usual, Armand," he said to his nephew. "Mademoiselle, your visit has been a great pleasure."

He bent over her hand. Before Caroline quite realised what had happened, she was in a small room with the secretary, who was drawing up some papers and making out a sale sheet of the bonds. He hurried out for a moment to obtain the Duke's signature. When he returned, he handed her the packet.

"But it's impossible," Caroline declared. "I must give an undertaking to pay a certain price for them."

The young man shook his head.

"It would not be wise to insist," he said. "The Duke would be angry and very likely take them back again. Money means nothing to him and he hates all form of barter. You need not hesitate, Mademoiselle," he added. "If it were necessary at any time to realise the Duke's belongings, he would be one of the richest men in France."

"Will you do this for me?" she begged, as they walked across the courtyard together towards the automobile. "I know that there are some very desperate people in this country, who are so anxious to obtain possession of these shares, or to see them upon the market, that they might go to any lengths. Watch the Duke closely to-night and to-morrow night."

The young man smiled.

"That sounds almost melodramatic," he observed.

"Never mind what it sounds like. Do it, please," she implored.

"The young lady is of a sagacity most astounding," the Marquis declared. "When she speaks of a thing she has knowledge."

Maurice inclined his head.

"Every precaution shall be taken," he promised, bowing them into the automobile....

"Well, what do you think of my uncle?" the Marquis asked, as they drove away.

"You are both utterly and entirely ridiculous," she told him, smiling. "You have lost touch with the world. You are survivals, but you are adorable."

The Marquis leaned towards her. Caroline had laid her hand gently upon his and he was very happy.

Commodore Jasen was the soul of courtesy, as he rose to receive his visitor. He moved a chair for her close to his own upon the terrace and he knocked out the ashes from the pipe which he had been smoking. Nevertheless, in his placid blue eyes there was a sudden steely light. Commodore Jasen was on his guard.

"My friend," Caroline began, "few words are best. Besides, there is need for haste. Mr. Reuben C. Essenheim, I have no doubt in the most indirect way possible, has yet placed a certain proposition before you within the last few days."

"Mr. Essenheim?" Commodore Jasen repeated thoughtfully. "The little man who lunched with me."

"Cut it out," Caroline enjoined sternly, with a touch of the manner which she had outlived. "You know I'm not squeamish. I would not interfere in any of your schemes to save a man's life or his money, but you don't want to run risks for nothing, do you? Mr. Essenheim wants the shares in the Great Eastern Railway Company of Texas brought upon the market. Well, they are on the market already. They don't belong to the Duc de Sousponnier any longer; therefore, if by any chance a high-class burglary, with accessories, were perpetrated to-night or any other night at the Château de Sousponnier, it would simply be a washout. The shares have been transferred to my name and they are in the safety vault of the Bank in Juan-les-Pins where I have an account."

The Commodore was impressed. There were many things for which he hated Caroline, and there were a few for which he loved her, but he knew very well that there was no one in the world less likely to tell a falsehood.

"Now, Commodore," she went on, "you have not had the best of luck out here. You are always complaining of me. I tell you I am sick of the ordinary sort of adventure and I am thinking of backing out. I shall hate you all my life for what you did to Ned, and yet I know that what you did, you did according to the code. Therefore, I forget it. Stop anything you may have started against the Duke, and I will let you in upon this deal, fifty-fifty."

Commodore Jansen's slowly breaking smile was the pleasant gesture of a great and benevolent man.

"You are yourself again, Caroline," he declared. "Later in the day we will make our plans. It will take me a good many hours to stop what has been started."

"I must know before eight o'clock that it has been stopped," she insisted, "or I will fill the Château de Sousponnier with police."

"If I fail to stop it," the Commodore promised her earnestly, "I will be there myself to prevent trouble."

Then there were many hours of strenuous search. The purlieus of Nice and Beausoleil were carefully combed. Furious efforts were made to pick up the trail which had been purposely dropped. It was not until after ten o'clock that success was assured. A fast motor boat came smoothly into the harbour at Nice and three well-dressed but dangerous-looking young men stepped into a waiting car and were driven to a small hotel close at hand. They entered the dimly lit lounge to be confronted by a small group of men who had the appearance of commercial travellers. There was a moment of uncertainty, the glitter of dull electric light on dull metal, as the foremost of the three newcomers took note of various unexpected things. The sound of a familiar voice, however, changed all that. Bottles of wine were brought and emptied. A raid upon the dancing cabarets of Nice was planned. It was disappointing, but all the same, a night of gaiety was well enough in its way. The Château de Sousponnier and its occupants remained undisturbed.

Mr. Reuben C. Essenheim left for New York three weeks later with the missing shares in his despatch box, and his great money-making scheme for the reorganisation of the Great Eastern Railway of Texas already launched. Nevertheless, he had met with new experiences and he was far from happy. He had met a man who had refused to do business with him, a woman who was as hard as himself in a deal, and he had been forced to leave behind a million good American dollars, when he had expected to spend fifty thousand. The fact that the little colony at the Château d'Antibes were lighter-hearted and happier for his brief visit failed entirely to alleviate his gloom, nor would it have afforded him the slightest satisfaction if he had known that the "feefy-feefy" negotiations between Caroline Loyd and the Marquis had advanced a step further on his account.

Caroline and Armand de St. Véran lay side by side upon the rocks at the Cap d'Antibes. The shine of the sea was upon their bodies and the exhilaration and joy of it in their hearts. The Marquis was sometimes a little shy when he found himself alone with this sweet but masterful young woman. To-day he found courage.

"Miss Caroline," he said, "you have now so much money, and soon, when the winter comes, I shall have a home which I dare offer even to you if you do not want any more adventures—no?"

She laid her hand upon his. Such small endearments were quite in order at Eden Roc.

"Dear Armand," she said, "I am almost sure. Will you wait until the summer is past?"

He turned round a little and his eyes watched the sunshine in her hair.

"When I look at you," he murmured, "a day seems too long, but when the summer is over, the Château will be finished, so I will wait."

VI

THE SEVEN TAVERNS OF MARSEILLES

"Stop!"

The single word, quivering through the pine-scented air, sounded more like a hysterical command than an appeal. The terror underlying it, however, and the sight of the slim, swaying figure at the side of the road were enough for Commodore Jasen. He was startled into no amateur indiscretions. To check a car travelling at a hundred kilometres an hour, even along that perfect Brignolles road, is a matter which needs unflurried nerves and gentle manipulation. His foot depressed the foot brake but gradually, his fingers drew the hand brake slowly but smoothly towards him. The big Hispano rocked slightly, but within fifty metres she was quivering stationary upon the road. A second or two later she was in reverse and crawling backwards.

The girl who had hailed it, in dust-smothered motoring clothes, with a streak of blood on one side of her face, staggered forward from the roadside, and, with her hands clasping the door of the car, leaned towards its driver. As she looked into his face, her pale lips parted and closed again. Her eyes grew larger—distended pools of shining light into which a new and more poignant horror had crept. For, following swiftly upon this crash into the darkness—this physical débâcle—came the shock of recognition and of ugly memory.... Commodore Jasen was remembering too. An ugly business, this remembering! He thrust it back. The affair of the moment pressed. He spoke to her as one wayfarer to another.

"What's wrong. Where's your car?"

She stood on one side and pointed downwards. The tree-bordered road sloped almost perpendicularly some thirty feet into a field of rough grass and bushes. At the bottom something was lying, vast and chaotic in the darkness, a shapeless, impressive bulk somehow whispering of tragedy. Commodore Jasen took from the case by his side an electric torch, and, leaning over the closed door of the car, flashed it downwards and around. The whole catastrophe seemed to leap into being. There was the torn-up fragment of the road, the barked tree, the broken saplings, the overturned car—a grotesque sight, the nose of its bonnet hard up against a splintered pine. On the ground, half hidden by the coach-work, as though he had sprung out and missed his footing, was the sprawling body of a man lying very still.

"He is dead," she whispered, finding speech at last.

"How do you know?" Jasen demanded.

"I felt his heart and his pulse. His neck is broken and he fell on his face. He jumped too late."

"And you?"

"I fell out when we struck the tree. I was on the near side, driving. Afterwards the car crashed down there."

"Is it—who is he?"

"Go and see. Make sure for yourself that he is dead."

With the effort of speech and memory, the blood began to ebb once more from her cheeks. She was a wild-looking sight in the semi-darkness, her almost black eyes burning from their blanched setting, her hair breaking loose on both sides from under her béret. Commodore Jasen slipped from his place and lifted her into the vacant seat by his side. He wiped the blood from her cheeks with his handkerchief and just in time he forced the nozzle of his flask of brandy between her lips. The spirit gurgled in her throat. She lay back in her place, her arms clasping the leather case which she had been carrying....

Her rescuer stumbled down the precipitous slope. Behind him, on the hard road above, several cars thundered by, and each time, as he heard their warning hoot, he extinguished his torch. He reached the scene of the final disaster and bent over the body of the dead man. He dropped on one knee by his side and, although the few who knew Commodore Jasen spoke of him as a callous and brutal person, his touch now was soft and gentle as a woman's. He turned the body slightly and felt the heart—silent, as he realised at once, for ever. Slowly his torch travelled up and down. A bulky, ill-shaped man, flashily dressed in light tweeds, with gold wrist watch, a diamond ring and other jewellery. The night insects came

and burred against the strange point of intruding light, an owl called weirdly from the lower part of the brushwood, but Commodore Jasen pursued his task and gratified his curiosity without undue haste. He even seemed unperturbed when, after the exercise of a slight effort, he succeeded in turning the body a little on one side, and caught a glimpse at last of the dead man's battered face....

Either Commodore Jasen was not so inured as he imagined to horrible sights, or the climb back to the main road was probably a little more severe than he had anticipated, for halfway up the bank he paused and, raising his hand to his forehead, found that unaccustomed sweat was pouring from his forehead down his cheeks. He mopped his face carefully, corrected a slight giddiness which had caused him to swerve from the path, and, in the act of recovering his equilibrium, kicked some hard substance in the undergrowth. A stone, without a doubt, he fancied. But, nevertheless, it was a night of strange happenings. He flashed his torch downwards—not on to the dull grey of a fallen flint, but on to the brilliant, highly polished steel of a small, almost a dainty, but at the same time a villainous-looking revolver. He stooped and picked it up, turning it over almost mechanically in his fingers, with the air of one well-used to such trifles. It was a beautiful weapon and it bore the name of a famous New York maker. He opened the breech and stared. There were five cartridges duly in their places and one empty barrel, and from that empty barrel came the faint sour odour of recently exploded gunpowder....

"Please!"

It was the girl's cry again from the highroad. Commodore Jasen answered it firmly and, with the weapon safely bestowed in his coat pocket, scrambled up the remainder of the precipitous ledge. The girl, once more a human being, leaned towards him from the car. The questioning monosyllable broke from her lips.

"Well?"

"He's dead enough," was the grim response. "I should say there never was a neck more completely broken."

The moon, although it had not yet altogether made its appearance, was obscured now by only a thin film of misty cloud. The intense darkness had passed, and, in the mysterious light, he could see her face more clearly. He took note of the anguished questioning of her pitiful eyes, but he made no further comment. He took his place by her side and pressed the starting button.

"What had I better do?" she asked.

"You seem to have done very well so far without advice," he replied, and there was something more sinister than the churlishness of the words themselves lurking underneath his silky tone. She shivered, but his apparent unfriendliness seemed to be no surprise to her. She sat rigidly in her place, whilst they sped on through the darkness of the tree-tunnelled road. Once, though the night was hot, she shook as though with cold, and he turned towards her.

"Would you like a wrap?" he enquired.

She shook her head.

"I want nothing," she said in a low tone. "I should shiver if I sat before a furnace."

"You have cause to fear," was his calm reply.

They drove on into Brignolles. Commodore Jasen pulled up in front of a garage where he appeared to be known. The manager hurried out to greet him.

"There has been a serious accident," the former confided, "within a few yards of the seventeen-kilometre *borne* from here. You must take a crane and a camion. You will find an overturned car about twenty feet down in the field, with luggage and a man—quite dead."

The garage man was voluble in his exclamations and questions, but Commodore Jasen cut him short.

"I will go myself to the Gendarmerie," he continued. "All you have to do is to salvage the car and bring the luggage to the hotel. The police will see about removing the body of the man."

Commodore Jasen drove on to the Gendarmerie. He entered alone and remained absent for some twenty minutes. As the

time passed by, the girl's nervousness returned. At the sound of every motor horn she turned fearfully around, her still terrified eyes fastened on the approaching car, until it had arrived within recognisable distance, in some cases even until it had passed. Her companion, upon his return, watched her for a moment from the pavement. He made no remark, however, as he took his place in the driving seat.

"They asked—many questions?" she demanded.

"The questions will come afterwards," he told her.

"Afterwards? That doesn't mean that I shall have to stay here?"

"It certainly does," he assured her, as they glided down the street. "The Commissaire insisted upon it and I gave my word that you should. There is a good hotel just outside the town. One can dine there and that is something."

"How far are we from Marseilles?" she asked.

"About eighty kilometres," he replied.

She gripped his arm.

"Take me back there," she begged.

He turned skilfully in at the wide-open gates of the hotel gardens.

"That is quite impossible," he told her. "I have a friend to meet here, and, apart from that, I have a few questions to ask you myself."

The place presented an almost gala appearance. At least a dozen tables upon the lawn were occupied by festive groups of diners. There was popping of corks and laughter, hurrying waiters, strings of fairy lamps enclosing the garden, and softly shaded electric lights upon every table.

"This is terrible," the girl shuddered, leaning back in her place. "I cannot bear the sight of all these people."

"Aren't you overdoing that stuff a little?" her companion asked coldly. "I've seen you in Delaney's cellar, tuning a mandolin, I think you were, and smoking a cigarette, with three men stretched out, whom you knew slightly better, I fancy, than your late passenger."

The girl made use of a violent French epithet.

"I had drugs then," she muttered. "I wish to the good God I had now."

The car drew up before the door. The proprietor hastened out and welcomed his guests with a respectful bow. Commodore Jasen, it appeared, was well known.

"This young lady has been involved in a motor accident," her escort explained. "We may have to remain here for the night, in which case we shall require two rooms with baths. In the meantime, we will have that table under the trees for dinner—what you will, but a *poulet de maison* and a bottle of Chambertin '11—in an hour. The young lady, I am sure, would like to mount to her room and be quiet for a time."

"Excellent, Monsieur," the *patron* murmured, with a bow. "The rooms are at your disposal and my wife will look after the young lady. The wine I shall decant with my own hands."

"I will send you some of my toilet requisites when I have parked my car," Commodore Jasen promised, turning to the girl. "We will meet in an hour's time."

She turned in silence to follow the landlord upstairs. On the first landing she paused and, her fingers gripping the windowsill, she looked with strained eyes out on to the Route Nationale. Whilst she watched, no car turned in at the gate. She remained there, however, without any sign of movement.

"Mademoiselle," her conductor ventured at last.

She started and turned reluctantly away from the window.

"I come," she muttered.

When he descended into the lounge, Commodore Jasen stared at his prospective dinner companion in amazement. He saw a slip of a girl, sixteen or seventeen years old she seemed at the most, as thin as a lath, with dead white face, large be-ringed eyes and a short black fringe. She sprang from her chair as he entered and took his arm.

"Even though you are angry with me," she said, "even though you are my enemy, I am glad you have come. I hate to be alone. Can we go into the garden? I have seen your table. It is quite hidden. I want to go there."

They threaded their way amongst the festive company, across the lawn to the retired table which she had found so attractive. A soft wind had blown away the clouds and the moon now rose high in the sky. She drew her chair around so that her back was towards the entrance. The palms of her hands framed her cheeks, her elbows rested upon the table, her eyes shone into his.

"Dear Master-in-chief of our noble profession," she murmured, "my faith is in you. I have lost my fear. You shall be my protector."

Commodore Jasen scrutinised the *hors d'oeuvres* with a mildly dissatisfied expression.

"Some of that excellent *jambon de Parme* which I saw when I came in," he told the waiter, "and also the *pâté maison*. We will take one glass of dry Chablis with the fish—the Chablis '21—and the Chambertin with the chicken."

The man departed with an appreciative bow. Like all French *maîtres d'hôtel*, he admired a client who was interested in his food. The girl pouted.

"I was inviting you to become my protector," she complained, "and you occupy yourself with your wine."

"My dear Jenny," he replied in his soft, measured tone, "I am not sure whether I am a candidate for the post of your protector. You are a very charming young lady and it may be that you have some claims upon my protection, but you are undisciplined and disobedient. Is it not so? Besides, you have pulled down the lightnings during the last few hours. Your protector of to-day will need all his brain and all his courage—"

"You have both," she declared, "and you have the great advantage—you have never been found out. You are the popular Commodore Jasen of the Château d'Antibes, whom every one knows and every one visits. I am the poor little *gamin* of New York and Paris and Marseilles. Still, our profession is the same, and it is right that you should protect me. And, after all," she added, with a wicked little gleam in her eyes, "you are not so old, nor am I so young."

Commodore Jasen was very much unmoved. He indulged in a little bow, however, as he raised his glass to his lips.

"There will be serious matters for our discussion after dinner," he observed. "In the meantime, I suggest that we abandon all unpleasant thoughts. They interfere with digestion, which, for a person of my age and habits, is an important consideration."

Jenny shrugged her shoulders and chatted airily away, sometimes patting her companion's hand, often laughing into his face. To the scattered little groups of diners the two presented an amusing problem. The elderly, benevolent-looking gentleman, with the aristocratic white moustache, the sunburned kindly face, and his—what? His niece perhaps. Scarcely his daughter—the types were too different. Or was it perhaps a tardy excursion of bored respectability into the world of flapperdom? The girl had a wicked grace of her own. More than one of the diners hoped that the pleasant-looking elderly gentleman would take care of himself...

One by one the tables were vacated and the lights extinguished. In the course of time Commodore Jasen and his companion were the only two diners left. With the passing of on-lookers that benevolent expression and the kindly light in his eyes faded from the former's face. He seemed like a transformed being. With steady fingers he turned out the

electric lamp which was burning on the table. The moonlight, coming only in patches through the boughs of the tree under which they sat, was now the only illumination. The faces of the two gleamed white in the semi-darkness. The girl, lighting a cigarette, laughed at him across the table. After the choicely cooked dinner, the rare old wine and the Armagnac brandy she had drunk with her coffee, she had regained her courage.

"You should regard far more kindly your little Jenny, *mon vieux*," she remonstrated. "Once I was altogether in your service. You were different then—in New York, *par exemple*."

He ignored her protest completely.

"Whilst you were attending to your very effective toilet," he confided deliberately, "the gendarmes came here."

She withdrew the long cigarette holder from between her lips.

"Why not?" she observed. "It is their business."

"Naturally," he agreed. "They wished, of course, to question you. I explained that you were in a very nervous and incoherent state and begged them to give you an hour or so in which to recover yourself."

"I have nothing to tell them beyond what you know," she asserted sharply. "Why could you not have told them so and got rid of them?"

"Unfortunately they wished to hear the story from your own lips," he said. "They may be here at any moment. Before they come, I have a word or two to say."

"Say it with words of love, *cher maître*," she begged, caressing his hand, and leaning with her slim, subtle body a little farther across the table.

The flash of her glorious eyes left him unmoved.

"It is the business of men like myself and girls like yourself, I presume, to watch for fools," he said. "We fulfil the natural law of the world—the strong prey upon the weak."

"Is it not that you are being long-winded?" she yawned. "I should like a glass of water."

"Presently," he replied. "You will probably need it. Talking about the weak—you know, I daresay, that Steven Cotes was one of my men."

"Surprising," she murmured. "I cannot understand how you could put up for even a month with such a loose-mouthed, boasting imbecile. Even after to-day, even thinking of him as I saw him last, I can feel no pity for him."

"Let me tell you a story, or perhaps I should say, refresh your memory, about Steven Cotes," he begged.

She was true to her disposition. She turned upon him like a flash, her lips were quivering, her eyes angry.

"Why trouble? I hate your smooth ways. You are like a cat, sitting there purring, but waiting to pounce on me. I know all about Steven Cotes. He was the braggart who swore, upon the steamer coming over to Europe, that he would visit alone the seven taverns of Marseilles—one a night for seven nights—with the whole of his fortune in his pocket, and—what do you say?—get away with it. Well, he visited six of them all right. After the seventh he got what was coming to him."

"You are remarkably, quite remarkably well-informed," Jasen admitted.

"Shut up," the girl enjoined feverishly. "I am well-informed because I was there—and you know it."

"You make my task easier," he confided. "You make it almost pleasant. Let me indulge in a brief effort of reconstruction."

The girl was becoming a bundle of nerves again. She was white and shivering. She swung her chair round so as to command a view of the entrance gates and she herself gave the single waiter left an order. Her companion shook his head.

"Very unwise to lose control of yourself," he murmured. "Remember that the Commissaire of Police will be here before

long to question you."

"What is there in that which I should fear?" she exclaimed angrily. "All that I have to confess is that I went to sleep driving the car. I had too much wine, I suppose. I got more and more sleepy. I spoke to him. He did not answer. He too was asleep. I told him that I must stop, that he must drive. Still he did not answer, and so I drove on, and I found myself rocking in the seat, and I went to sleep. It was terrible, but it was not a crime."

"No, to go to sleep was not a crime," he acknowledged. "You have nothing to fear on that account, of course. Sometimes, however, the police ask strange questions."

"What questions could they ask?" she demanded, with stealthily interrogating eyes.

He ignored her for the moment, leaning further back in his chair, and gazing dreamily through the starkly motionless boughs of the tree beneath which they were seated, to the deep blue sky.

"Reconstructions always fascinate me," he confessed. "I can see the tawdry disorder of that seventh café down the half-made street by the canal. Two or three men had been drunk and there had been a fight. I am afraid Steven himself had helped to make what he called a rough house. A strong man, Steven, and much too clever with his fists.... He paid his bill and swaggered out into the watery twilight. Can't you see him grinning to himself? He had won his wager. This was the seventh tavern of Marseilles in which he had spent a night, drank and danced at will, carrying all the time with him, sewn up in his clothes, a quarter of a million dollars, and two revolvers, neither of which he had been called upon to use. He had won his wager. Twenty thousand dollars to come to him from the boys! He strode along the narrow street, cautious even in that moment of his triumph. He knew perfectly well that he was being followed—it had happened nearly every night—but his hand was resting upon his hip pocket, and the night birds of Marseilles prefer to settle their little affairs at closer quarters. There would be plenty of time if that slouching figure drew near enough to him for a spring."

"Who was he—the man who followed?" she demanded breathlessly.

"One of my legion—a clumsy fellow—but it was his duty not to let Steven out of his sight. Steven was too clever for him, though. Almost a pity he isn't here now with you, isn't it, Jenny, counting over his fortune?"

She shuddered.

"Will you finish with this ghastliness?" she begged. "It leads to nowhere that I can see, and I do not find it amusing."

Her companion's eyebrows were slightly raised. Then suddenly he abandoned his deprecating air, his tone of faint banter. He spoke seriously.

"Steven mounted the hill towards the boulevard which, if he had ever reached it, would have meant safety. As he passed a small, disreputable café, from which was straggling out the last of its clients, a girl, very chic, very attractive in appearance, richly dressed, such a girl as he had not seen in his seven nights' wanderings, emerged from the door. She crossed the pavement, she was in the act of entering a waiting taxicab, when she saw Steven within a few yards of her. She swung round, her hand upon her hip, the light of scrutiny in her eyes, perhaps the ghost of a smile upon her lips. Steven was a fine fellow, even at the end of a wild night, and she approved of him. She stood away from the open door of the taxicab and extended her hand towards its interior in a gesture of invitation.

"'If Monsieur will please to pay for the taxi,' she suggested, 'I will drive him to his hotel. For myself, I am short of the little money.'"

"Daylight had come, his wager was won, this meeting certainly had the appearance of being entirely accidental. Steven raised his hat gallantly and followed this extraordinarily attractive young woman. The taxicab drove off. Where to? Who knows? You, without a doubt, but who else? In a sense, I suppose, Steven had won his wager, but he will never seek payment."

"See here," she said. "You talk a great deal. Now it is my turn. Steven Cotes made this foolish bet in the smokeroom of the steamer and in very dangerous company. From the moment he had made it, he became the mark of all of us. Steven Cotes was once your man, it is true, and you resented it. You were in the hunt. You had a man in Marseilles—"

"I had a man upon that boat," Commodore Jasen interrupted softly. "It was he who suggested the bet. I placed him there,

because I knew that Steven had never paid up his share of the last enterprise we had together. He had a little more money than was good for him."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You have told the story very fairly," she admitted, "but with everything in your favour you failed and I succeeded. *Voilà tout!*"

"Not quite all," her companion protested, shaking his head. "It is true that you succeeded. It may be true that I failed—but here I am. What is your proposal?"

Her eyes flashed.

"I have none," she declared. "That is final. You failed. I succeeded. You must make the best of it."

The Commodore sighed.

"Alas, dear Jenny!" he said almost tenderly. "You misapprehend the situation. In a few minutes at the most the Commissaire will be here. You will be questioned again about the accident."

"What does it matter?" she demanded. "Again I say that it is no crime to fall asleep."

Then the Commodore thrust his hand into his trousers pocket, and, with great deliberation, produced that small, that elegant, but very deadly-looking revolver.

"Five chambers loaded, you see," he remarked, "and one empty. The bullet from that one is somewhere in Steven Cotes' head."

"Where did you find that?" she gasped.

"In the long grass amongst the bushes, about twenty yards from the car. An inadequate hiding place, my dear young lady."

In the dim light she seemed to have lost all her beauty. Her pale face was drawn and twisted as though with pain. Only her eyes, contracted though they were, still glowed, and in those eyes was the barely concealed light of murder.

"What made you notice?" she asked in a low tone. "I thought, after that awful fall—"

"I know," he interrupted quickly. "It was the singeing of his beard made me look. Then I found the small hole."

"Don't!" she stopped him.

There was a brief silence. For a moment all life seemed to have gone out of her.

"What is it that you propose?" she asked at length.

Commodore Jasen lit another cigar with great care and reflected for several moments.

"In that shabby little despatch case," he remarked at last, waving his hand towards it, "which you are very wise not to let out of your sight, you have fifty notes of five thousand dollars each."

"But no," she interrupted sharply. "Steven changed one at Marseilles."

"Forty-nine then," he conceded. "I think it would be a graceful act on my part to accept forty-eight and to leave you five thousand dollars as a memento of this interesting adventure."

For an instant she seemed about to spring upon him, her fists clenched, her bosom heaving. With a great effort she restrained herself.

"I will consent to an equal partition," she announced.

He smiled in pitying fashion. The lights of a rapidly driven car flashed along the avenue and drew up in front of the hotel with a grinding of brakes and a rain of small pebbles against the mudguard. Its single occupant descended and came rapidly across the lawn.

"It is the Commissaire," Jasen said quietly. "Ten thousand for you—otherwise the truth."

She passed the shabby despatch case to him underneath the table.

The newcomer, a tall, spare man in a black suit and a bowler hat, came hurriedly to the table.

"Pardon—it is the young lady who was concerned in the catastrophe on the Route Nationale? I introduce myself—I am the Commissaire of Police of Brignolles."

"We have been expecting you, Monsieur le Commissaire," Commodore Jasen replied. "This is the young lady of whom you are in search. She is more composed now and will be able to furnish you with an account of the accident."

"A little later," was the breathless reply. "For the moment time presses. I come in great haste. The man whom we believed to be dead was in a critical state, and is without a doubt dying, but he has unexpectedly recovered consciousness."

"What?" the Commodore gasped. "Alive?"

"You are telling us that he is alive?" the girl screamed.

"A life that hangs upon a thread," the other explained. "He is about to make a statement, but he asks always for his despatch case. Ah, forgive me—"

He stopped and picked up the brown wallet leaning against the Commodore's chair, turned it over and tucked it under his arm.

"The doctor fancied that it might quieten him to see it," he continued, "although he certainly will not be able to examine its contents. My opinion is that he is dead by now, in which event I will bring the case back, when I come to hear Mademoiselle's story. I will promise not to detain you for longer than half an hour, but Monsieur and Mademoiselle will be so good as to await my return?"

They murmured acquiescence. The Commissaire saluted stiffly and hurried off to his waiting car. For once in his life, Commodore Jasen appeared to be overcome with surprise. The girl was paralysed with fear. Steven Cotes alive! Even at that moment he might be accusing her of murder.

"I have heard of miracles and I have seen strange things in the hospital," the Commodore said at last, "but never have I heard of a man in Steven Cotes' condition coming back to life!"

The girl was speechless. Her mind had wandered back through the hours. She saw the flying milestones whilst she sat by his side, her concealed hand grasping the butt of her deadly little weapon. Under the beard where no one would see! That was the place. She remembered the very second when she had finally found her courage. Even then she would have drawn back, as she had done several times before, but this time she would have been too late. He had caught some faint apprehension of her sinister movement. His head was turning, his foot slackening upon the accelerator. He had time to grunt—a hideous sound it was—as he felt the cold steel upon his throat. Then she had pulled the trigger.... Ugh!—A statement! Perhaps it was made by this time. She began to shiver violently.

Her companion had summoned a waiter and was paying his bill. He tipped the man generously and enlarged upon the excellence of the dinner. Smiles and compliments were exchanged, for Commodore Jasen was well known as a generous, although infrequent, visitor. The man took reluctant leave and Jasen felt the girl's icy fingers gripping his wrist. Her panic-stricken eyes pleaded with his.

"Take me away," she begged. "Take me to Marseilles. I can hide there."

Commodore Jasen sighed drearily as he rose to his feet.

"Forty-seven grands gone west," he lamented. "If only you women would leave off trying to do men's jobs!"

"Take me away," she implored, clinging to his arm. "It must be to Marseilles. I am safe there from all the police in France. I shall live there like a sewer rat, but they will never find me."

"Very well," he assented. "I will do my best for you, Jenny. Wait here while I fetch the car."

He took a single step towards the avenue and stopped short on the edge of the grass. It was partly Jenny's stifled cry of agony which brought him to a standstill, partly the sight of the car turning in at the avenue, the lights flashing upon the uniforms of the two gendarmes behind. He turned and caught Jenny by the arm.

"Pull yourself together," he enjoined sternly. "Remember, any one living our life must be prepared to face a crisis like this now and then. I will be responsible for the pistol. From what I remember of the man's condition, they will never be able to swear to that pistol shot."

The girl nodded. In the presence of real danger she was a different person. They moved forward, entered the hotel and awaited their visitors in the lounge. One only of the three men who had been in the car presented himself. The gendarmes remained outside.

"Mademoiselle and Monsieur," the former began gravely, "I must beg for a few minutes of your time over this very serious and important affair."

"Mademoiselle is only too anxious to offer you all the information possible," Commodore Jasen assured him. "I myself have little to tell you, for I did not arrive upon the scene until after the accident. First of all, though, relieve our minds—the condition of the unfortunate man? There is still hope perhaps?"

The newcomer was apparently puzzled. His stiff figure was drawn upright, his black eyes flashed enquiringly from one to the other.

"I regret, Monsieur," he said. "I fail to understand. Hope of what?"

"That the man may live," Commodore Jasen explained.

"The man who was in the motor accident?"

"But naturally."

The other shook his head gravely.

"The man was dead when we found him," he pronounced. "His neck was broken and he was suffering from terrible wounds in the head. I do not understand how Monsieur or Mademoiselle could have entertained any hopes of his recovery."

The girl seemed quicker of understanding than her companion. Already she was pacing the room with the fury of a caged tiger. The Commodore appeared to be groping his way towards the truth.

"You are, I presume, the doctor?" he ventured. "Why do you come instead of the Commissaire?"

The little man stared at the speaker.

"I," he announced, "am the Commissaire of Police of this district."

Then Commodore Jasen too had the air of one upon whom an unpleasant truth is slowly dawning.

"Barely a quarter of an hour ago," he confided, "a man arrived here in a motor car, assuring us that he was the Commissaire of the district. He took from Mademoiselle a despatch box belonging to the unfortunate man who, he declared, was still alive and wished to make a statement."

The Commissaire touched his short moustache with a scornful gesture.

"Monsieur has been deceived," he said. "I am the only Commissaire of Police in Brignolles, and the man who met with the motor accident was as dead as Julius Caesar when my gendarme found him. And since, Monsieur," he continued, "dead men do not make statements, it follows that your visitor was a liar."

"And we," Commodore Jasen groaned, "are simpletons."

"That is as it may be," the little man observed. "In the meantime, as a matter of form, I will ask Mademoiselle a few questions concerning the accident. The affair is so simple that I shall not detain her long."

It was a very depressed Jenny who parted from Commodore Jasen the next morning outside the door of the Splendide Hôtel at Marseilles. The latter, however, entered the place with all his accustomed briskness and good humour. He was warmly welcomed by the concierge and shook hands with the reception clerk. He was obviously well known and liked—a client who, on his not infrequent visits, chose the most expensive rooms and tipped well and graciously. In reply to his enquiry he was conducted at once to a salon on the first floor. Its single occupant—a tall, well-dressed young man of spare figure—rose to his feet at once. Commodore Jasen greeted him cheerfully and made sure about the door.

"All serene?" he enquired, without overmuch interest, for the plans of Commodore Jasen very seldom went wrong.

"Perfectly," the young man, who bore a striking resemblance to the pseudo-Commissaire of Brignolles, announced. "The money is here. The bag and the rest of its contents are destroyed."

Commodore Jasen counted the money, selected two notes of five thousand dollars each, pushed them across the table to his companion and pocketed the rest.

"We will drink a bottle of wine together, George," he said. "Afterwards, I shall ask you to have the goodness to see that those two notes are handed to Mademoiselle Jenny with my compliments."

VII

COMMODORE JASEN WATCHES HIS STEP

A page boy in resplendent livery paused before Commodore Jasen of the Château d'Antibes, who was entertaining a couple of promising acquaintances in the new reception room of the Hôtel de Paris.

"One demands Monsieur le Commodore upon the telephone," he announced.

Jasen rose unwillingly to his feet.

"What name?" he enquired.

"Madame gave no name," the boy replied. "The call, she declared, was urgent."

"Where was it from?" was the impatient query.

"L'Hôtel du Cap d'Antibes."

The Commodore hesitated no longer, but excused himself to his friends and was shepherded to the box just outside the door. He picked up the receiver and announced himself.

"Commodore Jasen speaking," he said. "Who is it, please?"

"Caroline Loyd," was the prompt reply. "Can you hear me?"

The change in the Commodore's tone was amazing. All his indifference and irritability seemed to have faded away. He spoke with the utmost *empressement*.

"My dear Caroline," he exclaimed, "what a pleasure! I heard that you were in Paris."

"Listen," the voice at the other end replied. "I wish to see you, and they told me at the Château that you were at Monte Carlo. I am coming in to a special performance at the Opera House to-night and I will be in the lounge of the hotel at a quarter past seven. It must be at that time because I dine early with a friend."

There was a bitter look for a moment in Jasen's face but no reflection of it in his suave and eager tone.

"I shall be there," he agreed....

Commodore Jasen returned to the task of cementing his acquaintance with two swarthy-faced, glossy-haired Argentines of reputed wealth but with undue gambling propensities. They had made very few friends in the Principality, and had been somewhat flattered by the attentions of this American millionaire of benevolent appearance, who was evidently a well-known and highly respected personage. They hailed his return with acclamation, and the senior of the two—Señor José de Santador—played their trump card in the game of achieving popularity. He indicated a very attractive young woman of the distinctly Spanish type who had just joined them, a young woman of very elegant appearance with her tightly fitting black dress, her ivory white skin, her dark expressive eyes and judiciously becarmined lips, which were already smiling at the newcomer.

"You permit that I present you to my sister?" he begged. "The Commodore Jasen—Miss Juanita de Santador."

Commodore Jasen, who, when it did not interfere with the more serious things of life, was a fine and critical judge of the other sex, bowed over the girl's fingers, returned smile for smile, and decided that, should his acquaintance with these two young men develop in the matters of which they had spoken, the whole business would be a great deal more agreeable for Miss Juanita's association with it. A dangerous trio, the acute and suspicious man of the world might have remarked of José de Santador, Rodriguez de Santador and their beautiful sister. But Commodore Jasen himself was no lambkin.

"You will do us the great pleasure of joining us?" the latter begged, Juanita's hand still in his.

The invitation was cordially and gracefully accepted.

At a quarter past seven precisely, Caroline Loyd, looking very beautiful indeed, followed by her devoted friend, the Marquis de St. Véran, descended from a car and passed through the entrance doors of the Hôtel de Paris into the spacious and handsome lounge. Commodore Jasen, who had been awaiting the arrival of the former, rose at once to his feet, a trim and agreeable figure in his well-cut dinner clothes. His black silk tie was a trifle larger than the fashion of the moment decreed, but admirably arranged and impressive. His black opal studs and links, his general air of benign good-nature completed a most attractive *tout ensemble*. To the casual observer, his smile, as he raised the girl's hand to his lips, was gentle and gracious. The girl, however, knew him well, and she had seen with a pang of dread the swift, rapidly veiled gleam of anger in his eyes as he had recognised her companion. It was gone in a second. Nothing could have been more courteous and friendly than his greetings.

"Delighted to see the Marquis," he said cordially. "One hears amazing things of the progress they are making with the reconstruction of your château."

"My architect is a marvel," the other replied graciously. "I trust that some day you will accompany Miss Loyd on a tour of inspection."

"It would give me a great pleasure," the Commodore declared.

"If Mademoiselle permits," the Marquis suggested, "I will, whilst she exchanges a few words with you, occupy myself in ordering dinner. It is a somewhat barbarous hour to dine, but with music before us one forgives."

"A very light dinner, please," Caroline begged.

He smiled.

"Mademoiselle shall be obeyed."

He left them, with a courteous little gesture of farewell, to meet the *maitres d'hôtel* who were already hovering in the background. Caroline looked after him with a smile at the corner of her lips and a faint sense of personal pride in his complete reestablishment. Commodore Jasen also looked after him, but with eyes of hate.

"The Marquis is a very changed man," the latter observed quietly.

"Who would not be?" she agreed. "I did not bring you here, however, to discuss his affairs."

"You have a proposition?" he asked eagerly.

"Certainly not," she replied. "To be frank, I doubt whether I shall ever have another or the will to listen to one. I am not ambitious for great wealth and I think that the love of adventure, as I used to understand adventure, is leaving me."

"Then to what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I asked you to meet me here in order to warn you," she confided.

He raised his eyebrows.

"That sounds mysterious," he observed.

"Please do not be sarcastic," she begged. "I know that you are as clever as Satan, but there's one thing that I don't think you *do* know."

"Well?"

"I do not think you know that Lavalon, the French detective, who became so famous last year and is now head of his service, and Brant, the New York man who nearly got poor Jim, are at the present moment in the bar of this hotel."

The face of Commodore Jasen became like the face of a sphinx. No one could have told whether it was fear or indifference which had chilled the blood in his cheeks. It would have been hard indeed for any one to guess whether his companion's disclosure was news to him.

"How do you know this?" he demanded.

She smiled. It was one of those small moments of triumph which nowadays meant nothing to her.

"There are times," she observed, "when my secret service is better than yours. It was Dick Ferber, the last of my staff except Ralph, who had word from Marseilles. He is in Italy by this time. He was up against Brant in that Springfield bank affair, and Brant knows him."

"Why are you so certain that they are in the bar at the present moment?"

"I saw them as we passed by. The windows were all open. Of course, I should not have noticed them had I not known they were in Monte Carlo. Now let me tell you the rest. There are some Argentines here—two men and a girl. Brant and Lavalon are interested in them."

Commodore Jasen leant towards his companion. There was a light in his eyes which might almost have been described as dreamy. His manner, if not exactly paternal, might well have been described as avuncular.

"You are a young woman of brains, Caroline," he said. "You have sometimes soared up above the possibilities of dull grey matter—you have displayed inspiration. You have set me a puzzling problem. What do you make of it yourself?"

"I have not even attempted to study it," she confessed. "I am simply passing on to you facts which have become known to me."

"I have already clicked with the Argentines," Jasen meditated, "but up till now I am uncertain whether they are useful fish for my net, or whether they are fancying that a genial—and possibly susceptible—American millionaire has not been sent by Providence to enlarge their own banking account."

"The girl is attractive?" Caroline asked.

"I only met her this afternoon," Jasen confided, "but I should say amazingly so."

"That," Caroline suggested, with a glance towards the restaurant, "should make the situation more intriguing for you."

"The personal side of it is scarcely worth considering," Commodore Jasen pronounced. "Not, at any rate, until one has the affair focussed. In the background we have the more sinister figures of Lavalon and Brant. Who are they after? Do they realise, I wonder, that they are at last almost in touch with the most famous criminal who has never yet entered the dock or crossed the threshold of a prison? If they do, the Argentines might well be their decoy. On the other hand, the Argentines might be well worth looking after for their own sakes. It is a pretty problem."

Caroline, conscious of her escort waiting patiently in the background, rose to her feet.

"I have set the pieces," she said, with a nod of farewell. "It is you who must play the game."

So Commodore Jasen sat down at the board and a very perplexing affair he found it. He invited Mr. José de Santador, Mr. Rodriguez de Santador and Miss Juanita, their sister, to dinner, but at their earnest protest he yielded the point and allowed himself to become their guest. José proved that he knew how to order food and wine, and the whole trio displayed the decorum and excellent manners of well-bred people. Juanita, who had, it appeared, been educated at a world-famous English boarding school, attracted a great deal of notice, not only on account of her beauty but because of the perfection of her clothes and the splendour of her jewels. All through the service of the meal she was gay, and with her guest—to whom she devoted herself—discreetly flirtatious. The latter noticed, however, that the conversation very seldom concerned the intimate life of his hosts or their recent doings. Only once José volunteered information of any practical interest concerning themselves. He informed their guest that, having little confidence in the immediate future of their country, they had realised their property, so far as possible, and were proposing to settle down in Europe. Their present predilections leaned towards the Riviera. Juanita alone had elected for England.

"And why England?" Commodore Jasen enquired.

She leant towards him and lowered her tone.

"Because there are no casinos there," she whispered.

"You are not fond of gambling then?"

She shook her head wearily.

"I hate it. It is my brothers for whom I fear. At home, even when the opportunity has come, I have never seen them play. Here it is like madness. We are rich—but I am afraid. You will talk to them perhaps? You almost live out here and you must know how hopeless a business it is. Will you do that for me, my kind friend?"

"Do you think that I know them well enough?" he asked, a trifle dubiously.

"But we are not going away. You will see much of us, I hope. We shall become, shall we not, great friends?"

He sighed.

"I hope so," he acknowledged. "But I wonder whether it would be wise. I am very susceptible—for an elderly person—Miss Juanita."

She openly patted his hand. He was conscious of the furtive touch of her knee under the table. The message conveyed to him by her eyes the most modest of men could not have misconstrued.

"*Tant mieux*," she murmured. "I hope that you are as susceptible as I would wish you to be..."

Yet she had her restraints. He took her from the Casino, where she pronounced herself bored and unhappy, to a supper restaurant where one danced, and her single caress vouchsafed on the way was more tender than alluring. Her whispered speech too, after they had taken their places and before they began to dance, was—considering its recipient—almost pathetic.

"I am glad you live here. I hope that you will go on being kind to me. You are so human."

The saxophone, or some other instrument of devilish import, wandered off in search of a new discord, and the result might have been the chuckle which nearly escaped Commodore Jasen's lips.

It was one o'clock before the Santador brothers arrived. They brought with them a young compatriot, an acquaintance, with whom Juanita danced tangoes without pausing, until José recalled her to the table. He whispered in her ear and she shrugged her shoulders.

"Commodore Jasen does not dance the tango," she said, with a note of anger in her tone.

"This is a waltz," her brother reminded her coldly. "It was our new friend who brought you here. You should stay with him."

She dismissed her partner and resumed her intimate conversation with the Commodore.

"The tango is like madness to us," she whispered. "I dance it even with professionals and forget. As for the young man—José's friend—I would not cross the road to pick up his heart, yet you could ask me nothing that I could refuse. My friend—you are my friend?"

"I hope so."

"I become desperate. This place is a hell. Again they have lost. And I—I who do not even amuse myself—it is my money too which disappears. Soon they will tell me, I suppose, that I must be a typist, or a danseuse, or walk the streets, for the money they have squandered."

"They seem to have the worst of luck," Jasen reflected. "But why have you not your own money under your own

control?"

"Over here we were going to make a trust, if that is what you call it," she explained. "We were going to realise everything we have and divide it into three portions. An *avocat* was to arrive from Paris. When he comes there will be nothing left."

Commodore Jasen murmured a few puzzled words of sympathy and presently called for the bill. Juanita insisted on driving in his car to the hotel. When they arrived there and she slipped out of his arms, he wished them all good night.

"But you stay here?" José exclaimed, in much surprise.

"You don't leave us!" Juanita cried, seizing his arm.

The Commodore explained that he lived at Antibes and was only over for the evening. The disappointment upon their faces was flattering but, to a man of Jasen's somewhat suspicious nature, a little suggestive.

"Perhaps," he proposed, "I could induce you all to come over to-morrow and spend the week-end with me. I have rather a famous country place on the shore. If you care about bathing and that sort of thing, I can give you as much as you want all day."

Juanita's thanks were expressed in a very torrent of gratitude. The two young men were polite, but they glanced across at the Casino and hesitated—a fact which puzzled their would-be host very much.

"It is very kind," José said doubtfully. "The trouble with us is that we feel that there is a great deal of our money over there waiting to come back to us."

Juanita was furious. She stamped her shapely foot upon the pavement.

"Very well," she cried. "I accept Commodore Jasen's invitation. I shall go in any case. You, my brothers, can please yourselves. I only beg that you leave me a little of my own money."

José pulled himself together. He rebuked Juanita sternly and turned to their proposed host.

"Do not take my sister too seriously, I beg of you," he said. "Naturally, if she wishes to go, we accompany her. We accept your invitation with pleasure, sir."

Juanita bade him a rapturous good night, and Commodore Jasen, although he was a very inhuman man, was conscious of a not unpleasant tingling of the senses as he stepped back into his automobile. The sensation lasted, however, only for a matter of seconds. Even before his chauffeur had had time to press the starting button, he found himself intrigued by a somewhat singular coincidence. Lavalon, the French detective, was leaning out of the bar window, apparently watching the people coming out from the Casino, but obviously listening to every word which had passed between Commodore Jasen and his new friends.

The car glided off, swung presently to the right and climbed with effortless ease into the Middle Corniche. Its occupant lit a cigar and, leaning back amongst the cushions, set himself to study the problem presented by the extreme friendliness of the Argentines, the presence in Monte Carlo of the two famous detectives, and Caroline Loyd's warning. He asked himself—

First—were his Argentine friends swindlers and Juanita an adventuress, and he their hoped-for prey, or were they merely just what they seemed to be—a trio of rich young people—the two brothers inveterate gamblers, and anxious to keep friendly with him, in the hope that with Juanita's influence they might, if necessary, have some one to borrow money from?

Secondly—were Lavalon and Brant here on *their* account or his? Though the presence of the American meant the latter probably, and, although he was full of confidence, he by no means minimised the danger.

Thirdly—was it possible that the Argentines were, consciously or unconsciously, being made use of by the detectives to induce him to make a *faux pas* which would bring him under their jurisdiction? There were subtleties in this theory which Jasen was well able to appreciate.

He went over every little incident of the evening, with almost meticulous care. There were arguments in favour of each proposition. In the end he reached Antibes with his problem unsolved.

Very much to their host's surprise, his guests arrived on the following morning at exactly the agreed-upon hour, namely midday. Juanita was already prepared for bathing. Rodriguez changed and joined them down on the portion of shore which belonged to the Château, but José, who was clumsier of build and stouter than his brother, preferred to cruise round in the motor boat. To all appearance the three of them enjoyed a simple and wholesome day—mostly spent in the water. Afterwards they motored round to Cagnes and Juan, where crowds of people of all nationalities were gathered, and Commodore Jasen bespoke his favourite table on the terrace for dinner that night. Throughout the whole of the day not a single word was spoken, or incident occurred, which was in any way suspicious. It was not until they sat down to dinner at Juan, and Commodore Jasen discovered Lavalon and Brant at the next table but one, that he felt any qualm of uneasiness. Not that he flinched for a single moment. His blue eyes travelled over the two men with the usual gleam of benevolent interest, which he apparently displayed in all his fellow creatures. In his heart he was not afraid. Others might make mistakes and leave loose ends for clever men to pull, but not he. He considered now the possibility, almost the probability, that they were in these parts on his account. He felt not the slightest disquietude. Let them suspect what they liked. He was a murderer? Yes. A great robber? Certainly. But what living man could raise his voice and testify against him? Not one. There never would be one. That was the advantage of being a killer. He tested Juanita suddenly.

"Is not that Lavalon, the great French detective, sitting over there?" he asked.

Her eyes flashed, but it was with genuine interest. She leant towards him.

"Where? Do show me. I have never seen a real detective."

Commodore Jasen pointed out the man with discretion. Juanita passed the information to her brothers, who accepted it with curiosity, but certainly no signs of fore-knowledge or fear. The *rencontre* at least gave him an opportunity of moving one of his pieces upon the board. It seemed impossible that there was any connection between his guests and the two detectives. The move, which he duly established in his mind, left him more puzzled than ever.

Juan was at its best that night. There was no gala and the music was mercifully subdued. A few yards behind them the sea came falling upon the sand with a soft swirl of toneless melody, a mysterious element in the darkness which the gaily illuminated restaurant failed to pierce, until the moon slid up from behind the Esterels and left a glittering pathway across the bay.

"There is no other place in which to live," Juanita sighed. "Oh, my dear host, you are so clever! Find me a potion to cure these brothers of mine of gambling, and another," she added in a lower tone, with all the sweetness of her eyes seeking for his, "to make you feel something of what you say, to turn you from a courtier into a lover."

He smiled at her tolerantly.

"Are you trying to turn the head of a respectable elderly gentleman?" he asked.

"I do not feel that you are elderly," she assured him, "and I would not wish to feel that you were respectable."

José, who had been whispering with his brother, leaned across the table and intervened a little abruptly.

"One needs an introduction to play in the Casino here?" he enquired.

His host looked at him in mock severity.

"I thought you were coming out to me for a rest from that sort of thing."

"So we are," the young man agreed. "But one must have a look at the Casino."

"And I made them promise that they would bring no money with them," Juanita observed ruefully.

"I suppose they will cash a cheque here," José ventured. "I kept my promise, anyway. I only brought a few thousand francs."

Commodore Jasen was not encouraging.

"They are not very accommodating with strangers," he remarked.

"But we are your guests," the younger brother protested. "That will surely be sufficient."

Commodore Jasen gave no sign, but inwardly he was filled with a vast contempt. This was the opportunity for which he had been waiting. Very soon he would be able to move another piece across the board. Meanwhile he shook his head gravely.

"You forget," he pointed out, "that, although I am delighted to consider you all—especially your charming sister—my *dear* friends, as a matter of fact, from the point of view of any third person, we are nothing but casual acquaintances. There is, I should explain, an etiquette in these matters on the Riviera. I cannot vouch for you anywhere until I know something of your means."

José patted his stomach and inclined his head gravely.

"We are rich," he confided.

Commodore Jasen coughed—a perfectly polite but significant gesture.

"One requires for these Casinos proof," he challenged.

"Of course," Juanita murmured. "Why not tell the Commodore everything? He is our friend," she went on, holding his hand, "whether he wants to be or not."

"I agree," Rodriguez echoed.

José shrugged his shoulders.

"Very good," he assented. "Commodore, you appear to be a person of influence here—can you arrange for a few minutes the entrée to a private room?"

"Certainly," his host assented. "As soon as we have finished dinner, I will take you to the directors' salon. Not that we are likely to be overheard here," he added, glancing around.

"A private room would be better," José insisted.

Commodore Jasen had the shock of his life about an hour later when, with the door of the directors' room locked behind them, José divested himself of his coat and waistcoat. Not only was the young man wearing the most ingenious and wonderful belt it was possible to conceive, but every slot contained a Brazilian diamond of the purest and most marvellous quality. One after another he produced them, until the table held a little pyramid of flaming stones. Jasen stopped him at last.

"It is sufficient," he begged earnestly. "Tell me first of all—where did you have that belt made?"

"It was my father's design," the young man confided. "He was the largest diamond merchant in South America. You see, the fastening is secured with a catch. The belt is undone and opened in a moment, but no one can undo it without knowing the secret."

Commodore Jasen examined the catch and marvelled. He felt the remainder of the slots. They were still packed with diamonds. José thrust his hand into the pocket of his coat and produced a letter of credit. The original amount indicated was fifty thousand pounds sterling, and twenty-two thousand only had been drawn.

"You can vouch for us financially now?" he asked, smiling. "The diamonds are undervalued at a million pounds, and twenty-eight thousand remain upon the letter of credit."

"With the greatest pleasure," his host assented. "Come with me to the cashier."

On the way there, they passed Lavalon and his companion, and Commodore Jasen smiled.

A quarter of an hour to the Château, ten minutes with Jake, a quarter of an hour back again. Even then Juanita was in despair. She was wandering dejectedly up and down in the gambling rooms, when at last Commodore Jasen found her.

"The heavens be praised!" he exclaimed, as he linked his arm in hers.

"But where have you been?" she cried, half inclined to be petulant. "I have searched the Casino for you in vain and here I find that the men are terrible. Very soon I should have permitted myself to have been what you call 'picked up' in self-preservation."

Jasen made satisfactory explanations. He had been told she was dancing: been told that she was at the *Boule* tables: everywhere he had pursued a false scent: and now—there was a little dancing garden opposite, with good music and the light ripple of wind in the trees! So they went there and danced, and Juanita was happy because she loved to sip iced drinks from tall tumblers, and dance. After all, she was young, and one well-mannered man was as good as another. And how could she tell that the particular man who was whispering affectionate things into her ear was thinking a great deal more about a belt of diamonds than of her? At three o'clock they visited the Casino. Neither José nor Rodriguez was willing to move. They had lost, as usual, it is true, but a young Englishman had elected to take a bank at baccarat, and they fancied their chances against him. They would follow on presently, which was exactly according to plan.

So Commodore Jasen and Juanita went home alone and sat on the broad terrace, drinking cold squashes, and flirting with more or less discretion, until the sky over Antibes was flecked with pink, till a strange automobile rolled up and two ghastly figures arrived to tell a terrible story of highway robbery, compared with which all their losses at baccarat and *chemin de fer* were as a snap of the fingers.

"A million pounds!" José sobbed. "The fortune of all of us. Commodore, you can vouch for it. You have seen the diamonds. Where is the telephone? How does one arrive at the police?"

Their host calmed them down. The theft was absurd. No one could get away with such a quantity of diamonds. At night the telephone was disconnected. They must rest for an hour or two, and when the morning was properly advanced, the police would be sent for. Still dazed with the chloroform to which they had been subjected, they were easily induced to collapse into a coma-like state of slumber. The Commodore himself took them to their rooms. Afterwards he descended in search of Juanita.

The inmates of the Château d'Antibes were not the only people in the neighbourhood who had spent the night without rest. It was nearly seven o'clock when the famous French detective and his friend, Brant, descended from a closed car at the Provençal Hôtel and mounted a little wearily to their rooms.

"Two hours I think we may give ourselves," Lavalon suggested.

"One hour," the American insisted.

"I have twenty-five men posted round the Château," Lavalon reminded his colleague.

Brant's face, grey with fatigue, was set like granite.

"You don't quite realise what this is to me, Lavalon," he said earnestly. "For seven years they have had it against us at Police Headquarters that we have never once come into actual touch with the head of the Lebworthy Gang. I have built

up a case against Jasen of the Château there by suppositions, by guesses, by luck. Gradually it has become cemented into a whole. If we once get our hands on him, get him back to New York, get him arrested on one definite charge, the rest will be easy. I cannot run any risk. There are others of them in hiding there. I am sure of that. I grudge taking my own eyes off the Château for a moment. I shall take a bath and a cup of strong coffee and get over there."

"Just as you like," Lavalon agreed. "I will be with you. I am not a man to shirk in a business like this."

The two men departed to their rooms. In an hour's time, Brant was slipping the cartridges into his automatic as they drove back again along the road to Antibes.

"There will be just one weak point in our evidence," Lavalon remarked, "and that will be to associate Jasen directly with the robbery."

Brant laughed scornfully.

"Dear colleague," he said, "listen. I find you down here with instructions to enquire into the past of these Argentines. You find everything about them satisfactory and that they are justly in possession of a large quantity of diamonds. Very good. We meet. We speak of this and then—the man whom I have been trailing—Jasen—makes friends with them. He invites them to his Château. Why?"

"There is that very attractive young woman," the Frenchman reflected.

Brant scoffed.

"Sam Leeworthy never looked at a woman unless she could help him," he said. "Anyhow, here they are together. José de Santador and Jasen go off to a private room at Juan. What for? I know. José shows him the diamonds. For Jasen goes straight from that room, and instructs the cashier to give these young Argentines credit for a very large amount, on his guarantee if necessary. That is proof that he had satisfied himself. It was also a bluff. What does he do then? The Argentines go in to play. Jasen slips out to his car and is driven furiously back to the Château. He spends a short time there in earnest conversation with his butler, who, I am convinced, was one of his gang in America. Back he goes and takes care that the Santadors make no movement towards leaving. He brings the girl home and waits. Your own men saw the car containing the two Argentines held up, saw the elder one thrown to the ground, and his belt removed."

"It will be hard to explain," Lavalon murmured, "why they did not intervene."

"It should not be," Brant replied. "The robbery was carried out by myrmidons. It is the arch-criminal we want—the whole world wants. We have him now. The diamonds will be found at the Château, for there is no chance for any one to leave it. Within a week I shall be on my way back to New York with the most agreeable travelling companion I have ever had in my life."

"There is no joy in life," Lavalon said fervently, "for one in our profession to compare with an exploit such as this."

Commodore Jasen, with Juanita by his side, and José and Rodriguez opposite, was seated at the former's writing table in his study, when Broadman threw open the door and announced the two visitors of fate. By agreement, it was the Frenchman who opened the proceedings.

"I believe that I am speaking to Commodore Jasen," he said, addressing the latter.

"Quite so," was the unruffled reply.

"My name is Lavalon of the French police," the detective continued. "I believe that you," he went on, bowing to them in turn, "are Monsieur José de Santador, Monsieur Rodriguez de Santador, and Mademoiselle Juanita de Santador?"

They all assented. It seemed to Lavalon himself that there was a slight lack of enthusiasm in their reception of him.

"I understand," he continued, "that you—Monsieur Santador—have been robbed of a large quantity of diamonds on the road between Juan and here last night?"

"Early this morning," José corrected him. "Quite true."

"The police here," Commodore Jasen intervened, leaning back, "certainly merit our congratulations. The news has reached them quickly."

"I should like," Lavalon observed, "to have a word with your butler, Commodore Jasen, upon this matter."

The latter touched a bell which stood upon his desk.

"With pleasure," he assented.

In due course Broadman made his appearance. It was Lavalon who interrogated him.

"Your name is Michael Broadman?"

The man seemed surprised.

"That is so," he admitted.

"What were you doing between five and six o'clock this morning?" Lavalon asked.

"I was out on the road between here and Juan," the butler replied coolly.

"What were you doing there?"

"I was carrying out a little commission for my master."

Brant swung round towards Jasen.

"You hear that?" he said. "You admit that your servant was acting under your instructions?"

"Certainly," Commodore Jasen agreed. "My butler was scarcely likely to be wandering about the road at that hour of the morning without my instructions or permission."

"I suppose you know," Lavalon said, moving nearer to the door, as though to cut off any possibility of Broadman's escape, whilst at the same time Brant edged towards the Commodore—"I suppose you know that a very serious robbery took place upon the stretch of road you spoke of, at precisely that hour this morning?"

"Certainly, I know, sir," the butler replied civilly. "I was there. In fact, I was the thief."

"No, no, Broadman," the Commodore protested, "scarcely that, my man. You were acting under my instructions."

Brant's eyes flashed.

"You admit that?" he demanded, leaning across the table towards the Commodore.

"Of course I admit it," was the prompt reply.

Lavalon moved towards the open window and raised a whistle to his lips. Commodore Jasen looked over his shoulder. Half a dozen gendarmes were climbing the grassy bank which led on to the terrace communicating with the rooms. Commodore Jasen frowned. For the first time, his composure seemed threatened.

"Confound those fellows," he exclaimed. "They're breaking down all my geraniums—and what are they doing here, anyway?"

"You will soon find out," Brant jeered.

"What is all this about?" José de Santador asked. "I have been robbed. That is quite true. But I have not invoked the assistance of the police. I have not even telephoned to the police station."

"I fancy," Commodore Jasen said calmly, "that these two gentlemen belong more to the detective of fiction than of fact. They do not wait for an appeal. They discover a crime before it is committed. Would you be so kind, Monsieur Lavalon, as to instruct your gendarmes there to wait upon the terrace? I do not wish their muddy feet upon my Turkey carpet."

"A bluff like this is not going to help you, Lebworthy," Brant said fiercely. "You're for it, and the sooner you realise that, the better."

"Lebworthy does not happen to be my name," Commodore Jasen objected, "nor have I any acquaintance with any one who has a claim to it. You seem to have blundered in upon this little affair on your own initiative. However, there are, no doubt, excuses for you. Perhaps your minds will be more at rest if the diamonds are produced. Juanita, would you mind? You will find them in that drawer."

She patted the Commodore on the cheek, crossed the room, and returned with the belt of diamonds. The two detectives stared at it in blank amazement.

"These are the facts," Commodore Jasen went on, leaning back in his chair, the tips of his fingers pressed together. "I met these young people a short time ago and took some interest in them. I believe—José and Rodriguez—you will not be offended if I say that I found you behaving not only cruelly to your sister but most unwisely in your own interests."

"It is the truth," José admitted.

"Our two young friends were, in short," the Commodore confided to the two men, "gambling in very large sums. They would soon have come to the end of their letter of credit and begun upon the diamonds. I must confess to feeling a great interest in Miss Juanita here," he went on, caressing for a moment the hand which was stealing round his neck, "and chiefly for her sake, I invited them out here with the sole intention of teaching them a lesson. Broadman robbed them of their diamonds on my instigation, and after they had had a few hours' fright, I have induced them to sign this paper, in consideration of which the diamonds are once more in their possession. Let me read you this paper."

Commodore Jasen adjusted his seldom used monocle, and read out.

I, JOSÉ DE SANTADOR, and I, RODRIGUEZ DE SANTADOR, hereby pledge my word of honour to Commodore Jasen that I will not enter a casino or engage in any game of chance until the diamonds which are the joint property of ourselves and our sister are realised and the amount distributed between us in three equal portions. And I further pledge my word that after this has been done I will not at any time risk the loss of more than a thousand pounds in any two months. In consideration of these promises Commodore Jasen returns to us the diamonds in question.

Signed, José de Santador,
Rodriguez de Santador.

Commodore Jasen laid down the document and, with Juanita's arm still around his neck, looked reproachfully at his two visitors.

"If you would kindly instruct your gendarmes to keep to the path when they leave," he begged, "I should be glad. I do not like my flowers broken down and I do not care to be addressed by a name to which I have no claim. Otherwise, we are much obliged by your visit, and I think my young friends here must appreciate your watchfulness on their behalf."

José was scarcely grateful.

"Quite unnecessary," he said curtly. "My brother and I are perfectly well able to look after ourselves and our possessions."

"And in any case," Juanita added, with a flash in her eyes, as she looked across at the two detectives, "we would be perfectly safe anywhere, with a friend like Commodore Jasen."

VIII

THE GHOSTS OF SUICIDE CORNER

The leader of the orchestra, who was a person of much imagination, always declared that the descent upon the Café de Paris, during the sacred dinner hour, of that strange flight of phantom birds, was heralded by portents of an unusual and dramatic nature. First of all, the wind, which, as though exhausted after a week of mistral, had shaken neither leaf nor bough of any tree from dawn till twilight, woke, and, as though in a hurry, brought a scurry of leaves underneath the tables of the café proper on to the dancing floor of the restaurant, where they lay like dead things until swept away. Afterwards, two of the roosting pigeons of the square, who might well have been sentinels of their dozing fellows, flew suddenly down from their shelter amongst the façades and spurious ornamentation of the Casino front, and drifted solemnly over the heads of the diners, uttering hoarse cries, as though they scented danger. Waiters paused in their hurrying to and fro, and stood with dishes in their hands, watching the curiously circling birds. A wine waiter, who had been serving some priceless Burgundy, went on pouring it until the wine was trickling in a little stream across the tablecloth on to the floor. Suddenly the pigeons disappeared, not with any effort of slow and graceful flight, but apparently in a wild and panic-stricken swoop. There was a disturbed murmur amongst the crowd of diners.

"Never in my life," the manager declared, as he stood with his hands behind his back, gazing across the strip of garden, "have I seen those pigeons stir after they have once been to roost, till morning."

Nevertheless, the incident—although unusual—would speedily have been forgotten, except for what followed. Circling around the square, without formation, in ones and twos, flying wearily and giving the impression of immense fatigue, came a flock of birds strange to Monte Carlo. They were, or seemed to be at some distance, jet-black. They crossed the corner of the grotesque building, spread out over the small tables where the loungers of the place were taking their coffee, and finally floated over the dancing floor of the space allotted to the dinner tables of the outdoor restaurant. For a moment every one was dazed. Then a woman shrieked, picked up her wrap and ran for the indoor portion of the building. Meanwhile, the birds, with incredible voracity, lit almost upon the dining tables, grubbed everywhere about the floor, scavenging, tearing to pieces with their yellow beaks everything that seemed like food. Two or three more women followed the first one, and the whole place seemed on the verge of a panic, when an old resident, who was being entertained by a Princess of the neighbourhood, rose in his place.

"The birds are harmless," he called out. "They are the hooded crows of Corsica."

"Crows are not migratory birds," some one objected.

"Neither are these," was the prompt response. "They were probably blown out to sea by the gale and landed upon a small steamer. There was one entering the harbour as I came up the hill."

The explanation satisfied the intelligence of every one. They started feeding the birds, and their male kind went in search of the deserting women. But it seemed as though intelligence was not the only one of the sensibilities which needed assuaging. There were perhaps sixty or seventy people dining in scattered groups and, amongst the majority at least, there remained something, if not of alarm, of superstitious depression. The birds strutted and hopped here and there, differing very slightly from the ordinary black crow of the fields, but carrying with them an atmosphere of the unusual. It was as though they diffused everywhere a sense of uneasiness, against which the mind was powerless to cope.

Commodore Jasen, who was dining alone with Zoë, was one of the few who regarded the incident with indifference. He patted her hand when he became aware of her distress.

"My dear girl," he protested, "drink a glass of your wine. Our friend over there has given us what, I am convinced, is the correct explanation of the arrival of those birds."

A wild-looking young man at the next table was shouting to his companions. He was half in jest and half in earnest, but there were drops of unusual perspiration on his forehead.

"They came over Suicide Corner," he declared. "Look at the face of that old one there. If you look long enough, you can see it bent over the roulette tables. I'm off!"

He threw a note upon the table and rushed away without waiting for his hat or coat. It is hard to tell what might have followed, had the manager not saved the situation. He strode into the middle of the dancing floor, with the saxophone player on one side and the drummer on the other. Together the two musicians bent to their task. With a curious rustling of the wings, as though they rose lazily and unwillingly, the whole flock flew away almost within reach of the hands of the crowd over whom they passed. They made one circle and then flew steadily for the harbour.

"Gone to book their return passage," one humourist suggested.

"Thank God, they have gone!" Zoë declared fervently.

And there were a good many others who felt the same relief.

The evening, after a fashion, was reestablished. From most tables a demand went out for more wine. The orchestra started one of their most popular dance tunes. Soon the floor was crowded. Commodore Jasen rose to his feet.

"We will dance this," he said to his companion. "Afterwards I shall be fatigued. I shall then send for our young friend and you will open up the business upon which we came."

The girl indulged in a characteristic grimace.

"I will do my best," she said, "only I wish that this had not happened. I am afraid."

"What is there in life to fear?" her companion asked, as they passed into the throng.

"It is not life of which I was thinking," she answered.

The orchestra played with furious spirit. Never had they worked so hard. They had almost the air of revivalist musicians, as they sank exhausted over their instruments when the end came, and for a time they were indifferent to the vigorous clapping of hands. Commodore Jasen led his partner to her seat. He fanned himself with his handkerchief.

"A trifle too vigorous for me," he observed, as he recovered his breath. "Ah, I see one of the young professionals over there is free."

He beckoned to a pale-faced young man who was seated in a distant corner alone, and who, only a few minutes previously, had been one of the most alarmed of the spectators. Perhaps he had not yet fully recovered from the nervous shock, for he rose almost unwillingly to his feet and crossed the room towards his prospective clients. He bowed to Zoë and to the Commodore as to strangers and they accepted his greeting in like fashion.

"My niece would like to dance," the Commodore told him. "I am myself a little fatigued."

Zoë surrendered herself to the young man's automatic gesture. Commodore Jasen lit a cigar and, leaning back in his chair, watched the dancing with benevolent interest. The encore was not a long one, and on its conclusion the dancer brought his companion back to the table. Commodore Jasen fingered his pocketbook tentatively.

"You will be able to dance again with my niece, I hope," he demanded.

The young man hesitated.

"I am really engaged for the evening," he explained nervously, "to the lady who has been my patroness for the season. I ventured to dance with Mademoiselle, as she has scarcely commenced her dinner. She is with Princess Ostreville."

"I see," the Commodore murmured. "Nevertheless, I think if you make an effort—say in half an hour—your patroness will spare you for a few minutes—just a few minutes for one more dance," he went on, "and perhaps a glass of wine."

His cold blue eyes were fixed, indifferently enough to all appearance, upon the young man's. The latter had the air of one receiving sentence of death.

"I will explain to Madame," he said. "In half an hour—yes—I will return."

He bowed and hurried away. Commodore Jasen watched him thoughtfully. There was something furtive about the young man's progress. He seemed in a great hurry to return unmolested to his solitary table in his solitary corner.

"I sometimes ask myself," Commodore Jasen observed, almost under his breath, "why Michael was ever accepted, even in our lowest class. In New York he seemed to have plenty of nerve, though. Late hours, I suppose: lack of real employment and this puppy-dog life have had their effect."

"What do you call lack of real employment for a professional dancer?" the girl asked him. "There is no one on the Riviera in more demand than Michael. They say that this Mrs. Hammond has had to pay high indeed for the right to control his movements."

Commodore Jasen stroked his moustache.

"When I said 'lack of work,'" he explained indulgently, "I meant *work*. Nothing to do, that, you know, with the avocation of a professional dancer. By real work I mean something entirely different."

"Has Michael ever done any 'real work' for you?" she enquired. "He does not seem to me to have the courage."

"He performed one mission in New York quite successfully," her companion told her. "He also carried out some very easy enquiry work here with success. At present, I admit, he seems an inefficient sort of person. Different kinds of enterprises, however, demand different qualities."

The girl toyed with a peach for several moments. She had the air of one very far from being at her ease.

"There is something you still wish to say to me?" the Commodore continued presently.

"If I might dare," she admitted. "You are dissatisfied with Michael, I know. So far he has failed in his project, and, as you often tell us, you have no place for failures. Even bearing that in mind, I think I would not press him too hard to-night."

"And why not?" was the smoothly asked question.

"Because," the girl confided, "ridiculous as it may seem to you, that poor young man is in a terrible state of nerves. I suppose it was seeing us here, and guessing that you have come to talk to him, and then—those birds...."

"Ah," Commodore Jasen murmured. "Those birds!"

"I know that things like that mean nothing to you," she went on, "but I expect that he lives an altogether unhealthy life. I could feel his body tremble when he was dancing and, although he seemed all out of condition, his hands were as cold as ice. You can force a man into anything, of course, but I am not sure that anything he attempted to-night would be well done."

The Commodore looked at his companion speculatively.

"You have common sense," he approved. "You speak well enough from your point of view. The trouble is that you do not know mine. He does, and he knows that when he fails he disappears. Wonderful steadying effect that has upon any sort of a creature with a spark of life still there! I ask myself why sometimes," Jasen went on with the air of one considering an abstruse point—"I ask myself why the ordinary human being clings so tenaciously to life. I have never found a satisfactory answer to the question and I daresay I never shall. But I think that to save his life, even that young man might get the better of a fit of nerves. You will take some coffee?"

"I will take some coffee," the girl agreed.

Presently Michael received a gracious signal from his patroness, and a few minutes later he was escorting on to the dancing floor a rather fat, elderly woman with a mass of too fair hair, a wickedly disported Chanel frock and a gorgeous diamond necklace. Zoë watched her curiously.

"I wonder you don't make him go for the necklace," she observed.

"Too obvious, my dear," her companion sighed. "The loss of such a necklace would make even a woman like Mrs. Hammond vituperative. Besides, who else but a gigolo could steal jewellery from a woman like that? They would put

him in prison before they began to look for it, and Michael in prison, with four walls safely around him, would be rather a dangerous proposition."

"He may very well find his way into prison on the present scheme," the girl reflected.

Commodore Jasen smiled.

"Not if I know anything of Mrs. Hammond," he said.

In about half-an-hour's time Mrs. Hammond, flushed and happy with dancing, and delighted with her dinner party, was in the humour to grant almost any request her cavalier could make to her. She listened to what he had to say as he held her chair, glanced across at the Commodore and Zoë, and nodded her consent. The young dancer returned to his table, where he helped himself liberally to the contents of a bottle in front of him, and when the music for the next dance commenced, he crossed the floor towards the table where Zoë and her escort were sitting.

"Not too long a dance," the Commodore enjoined, as they prepared to leave him. "Let us have time for a little conversation."

The young man shivered slightly and, as many other people had done that evening, he glanced towards the particular corner over the café from which those birds had first made their appearance.

"We will dance the first part only," he promised.

"Dance the second part," Jasen suddenly proposed. "I have friends here with whom I might talk later. Sit down. *Maitre d'hôtel*, another glass. Good. Now make your report."

The dreaded moment had come. Michael had not the least desire to drink, but he swallowed a glass of the wine which had been poured out.

"Everything has been done," he announced at last. "I have followed instructions carefully. But, Commodore," he went on, leaning over the table, "I do not think—I honestly do not think that the scheme will work."

"And just why not?" was the cold demand.

"You do not understand Mrs. Hammond, sir," the young man continued eagerly. "I know she is fond of me up to a certain point. She would have been fond of any young man who danced with her and flattered her and played the rôle I have had to fill. But she has not a great deal of heart, really, and it is not a personal affection. It is just the getting what she wants. When it comes to my disgrace, or parting with a large sum of money, she will only laugh. She loves her money, sir."

"I have ascertained," the Commodore observed, "that she is worth a million pounds—that is fifty thousand a year. She may love her money, Michael, but she loves you a little, too. Yes?"

The world who saw that smile upon Jasen's lips might have thought it a pleasant gesture, but Zoë and the young man seated within a few feet of him knew better.

"Because she is rich," the latter went on, "it does not follow that she is not sometimes terribly mean. If we take a taxi, she won't let me give the man a reasonable tip. The servants at the hotel hate her. She gives nothing to the croupiers, however much she wins. Sometimes I am ashamed to pay the bills at the restaurants and I slip something of my own in with the change."

"What an unpleasant old lady!" the Commodore sighed. "However, it all fits in with my idea of her psychology. You often find a person who is mean in small things is a spendthrift in large ones. We are not trying her too high. We shall ask for only half a million. You should be worth that to her, Michael. You young men, unless you have some one of intelligence behind you, never know how to make use of your opportunities."

There was something hopeless about Commodore Jasen's tone—a note half of irony and yet with a background of unshakable determination. Michael recognised it, as many others in life had done before him.

"I think you are wrong, sir," he said, "but you are the master."

"The mistakes I have made in life," Jasen said, "have been very few. In this case, you need have no fear. I have watched Mrs. Hammond. She is a foolish woman. She may need skilful handling, but I have the skill. I think I may say without boasting," he wound up, his voice seeming to wander out in little silver threads from his partially closed mouth, "that I have never failed to kill my man when killing has been necessary, and I have never failed to receive all that I asked in any case of barter."

The young man rose to his feet. He fingered his tie nervously and afterwards held out his arms. Zoë and he floated away amongst the throng. Commodore Jasen watched the lady whom they had been discussing.

"A common enough type out here," he reflected. "Wealthy, without social gifts or position—an easy prey for any adventurer."

He caught a glimpse of her sideways, as she leaned over to speak to her hostess, and for the first time he realised the one strong feature of her face—her jaw. Michael probably earned his money, he decided. For the young man's sake he rather regretted that jaw.

Zoë and her partner returned at the end of the encore. The latter accepted a glass of wine and sat with his back to the dancing floor. Very reluctantly he drew from his pocket two folded slips of paper and passed them across the table. Commodore Jasen studied them carefully and transferred them with dexterous fingers to his waistcoat pocket.

"Ridiculously easy," he murmured. "Your distressed appearance, my young friend," he went on, glancing at him keenly, "is perhaps so much to the good. Keep it up, but don't overdo it."

"When are you going to see Mrs. Hammond?" Michael asked fearfully.

"To-morrow evening."

"I am supposed to be dining here with her—a quiet dinner," Michael volunteered. "I don't suppose she will come. I am more likely to receive a visit from the gendarmes."

Jasen smiled scornfully.

"There will be no gendarmes," he assured the dancer. "She may be angry, but you will probably know how to console her. An extra glass or two of champagne, your vows for the future, a little more *empressement* during the dance! There is nothing, I am sure, which I can teach you."

"You taught me something in New York I wish I had never learnt," was the bitter rejoinder. "You taught me to be dishonest."

The Commodore shook his head.

"My dear young man," he said, "you needed no lessons. Your environment here, your profession—well, they would neither of them entitle you to membership of the Y.M.C.A., would they? Now, try and throw away that woebegone air for a time. Remember that you have a hundred thousand francs coming to you. My men do not work for nothing, as you know."

Michael rose to his feet. Curiously enough, he, like so many others that evening, glanced for the second or third time towards that corner of the café round which the flight of birds had circled.

"Still superstitious?" Jasen asked with faint sarcasm.

The young man shivered.

"I am not the only one who was scared to-night," he answered, as, with a bow to Zoë, he took his leave.

Mrs. Hammond received her visitor on the following evening affably and even with enthusiasm. She cut short his opening words.

"I know all about you, Commodore," she said. "You have that beautiful château at Antibes which belongs to Lord

Somebody-or-other. I have seen you out there, bathing. I have seen you here too, often," she added, with a slight smile. "Once with that beautiful girl from the Cap, who was at the Opera the other night with the Marquis de St. Véran, and last night—with a very pretty little lady last night!"

The Commodore smiled.

"When one gets on in years as I, alas, have done," he confided, "one feels that one must take hold of one's opportunities. You are a widow, I believe, Mrs. Hammond. When you have reached my years of—indiscretion, I suppose you would say—you will realise that."

"No one would ever accuse you of not making the best of things," she declared. "Do make yourself comfortable in that easy-chair. The Princess was talking to me a great deal about you last night. She complains that you do not go to her parties as often as you used to. What about ringing for a waiter? It is almost cocktail time, isn't it?"

"You are very kind," the Commodore replied, "but I think not, if you will excuse me just at present. The fact of it is, Mrs. Hammond," he went on, "I am charmed with this opportunity of making your acquaintance, but I ought to tell you at once that my visit to you is not altogether on a pleasant subject."

"Hoity-toity!" the lady exclaimed. "What's all this about? What unpleasant subject can there be for us to discuss?"

"At any rate," her caller remarked, with a smile, "if the subject does turn out to be unpleasant—perhaps it won't—I may be completely mistaken—we will at least contrive to discuss it amiably."

"My dear man," the lady begged, "don't talk in riddles any longer for the sake of being polite. I know who you are. I am very pleased to see you here and to add you to my list of acquaintances. I shall listen to everything you have to say with the utmost respect, because every one has such a high opinion of you. Let's get it over—the unpleasant part at any rate."

"The unpleasant part," Commodore Jasen admitted, "is connected with a young man who goes by the name of Michael, I believe. His name is really Michael Brennan. Mikkie he used to be called."

"Michael, my dancer at the Café de Paris!" Mrs. Hammond exclaimed. "The young man who was dancing with me last night and whom I saw at your table?"

"Precisely."

"What on earth can you have to say disagreeable about him?" she asked, with slightly heightened colour.

"About him personally—nothing," the Commodore replied. "I have known him for some years. I knew him in New York. He has always struck me as being a very well-behaved and well-brought-up young man. I have taken, in fact, quite an interest in him. I daresay though, even you—although a woman very seldom hears of these things—have an idea that he has been rather foolish lately?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," the lady rejoined. "I thought he seemed very queer last night, but he has Irish blood in him and those beastly birds had got on his nerves. Irish people are always superstitious, aren't they?"

"He was certainly upset," the Commodore agreed, "but I do not think it was altogether the birds. I understand that you and he have been quite friends, Mrs. Hammond. Why not? A very well-brought-up and well-behaved young man. Still, I should have thought that, seeing so much of him, you would have gathered that he has been in trouble lately."

"I know that he has been hard up," Mrs. Hammond admitted. "He told me so. He has had to sell his little car. I don't mind telling you, Commodore—you are a man of the world and a good sort—I gave him a cheque for fifty thousand francs to buy a new one."

"It is a good deal to give a dancer, I know," Mrs. Hammond went on. "But I believe in paying for the things you get in life. A woman in my position cannot go traipsing about into restaurants and dancing places by herself. I just send for Michael and go where I please and when I please. I have been thinking often that I really don't pay him enough. I ought to give him a salary. If I took a stuck-up young woman companion, who would not be a bit of use to me, I would probably have to give her four or five hundred a year, and that young man—who is jolly useful—I pay generously, of course, but it is practically only his dancing fees he gets from me."

"I am glad to hear you talk like this, Mrs. Hammond," her visitor said. "It shows me that I have to do with a sensible woman. I am afraid that what I have to say, however, will be a shock to you."

"Well, get on with it and don't talk so much, then," she said irritably. "Oh, I know you are trying to be very polite and nice and all that, but you are getting me worked up. If Michael's done anything wrong, I want to hear what it is."

"I am very much afraid," the Commodore told her, "that Michael has forged your name to a cheque for a much larger amount than fifty thousand francs."

"God bless my soul!" she gasped. "You don't mean that?"

"I do indeed," was the grave assent.

Mrs. Hammond, who had been lounging skittishly on the end of the sofa with a cigarette in her mouth, collapsed on to a chair and threw the cigarette into an ash tray. Some of her high colour had faded.

"Forged my name!" she repeated. "Michael! I cannot believe it. How do you come to be concerned in this, Commodore?"

"In this way," the latter explained. "As I told you, I knew the lad in New York, and I see him here every now and then. I am not like a great many people with a prejudice against professional dancers. I have always looked upon him as a decent young chap and I have had him over to swim and lunch and play a few sets of tennis more than once."

"Very nice of you too," the lady murmured. "I think I know a gentleman when I see one and I am not ashamed to take Michael anywhere."

"Quite right of you," Jasen approved warmly. "Well, when he was over about a week ago, he showed me this cheque of yours for the car and asked me if I would kindly cash it."

"Why didn't he take it to the bank himself?" Mrs. Hammond demanded.

"Simply because," the other explained, "he is a little sensitive about money affairs, as you know. He banks at the same bank and they know that he is a professional dancer. I do not think he wanted to pay in a cheque from a client for that amount. He asked me if I would put it through my Paris bank—which I was very pleased to do."

"And you gave him the money?"

"And I gave him the money. But naturally that is not the transaction I have come to see you about."

"There is another cheque, you say? Forged? Tell me about that."

"You must prepare yourself for something of a shock," the Commodore went on. "As I told you, I thought the young man looked very depressed last night. This morning, before ten o'clock, he was over at my place in a taxicab. He looked upon me as the oldest friend he had and he made—up to a certain point—a clean breast of it. He has been gambling, Mrs. Hammond. Evenings when you have not been dancing or wanted him, he has gone into Nice and stayed there, playing all night. He has been playing up at Beausoleil here too, and the fact of the matter is that he has lost a great deal of money. He has borrowed from every friend he has. The amount he owes me has nothing to do with the matter and I will not refer to it. I would have let it stand over as long as he had wished, but he is also in the hands of a lawyer money-lender in Nice, who threatens to sue him and send him to prison unless he pays. The long and short of it is that he brought me a cheque this morning—a cheque of yours—for five hundred thousand francs, and asked me to change it in the same way as I had done the other."

"A cheque of mine for five hundred thousand francs," the lady repeated in a stunned tone.

Commodore Jasen opened his pocketbook and produced it. She read it over, word by word, and gazed at her own signature as though stupefied.

"Amazing," she muttered. "I should have sworn that was my writing. I should never have believed that any one—much less Michael—could have imitated it like that."

She unlocked a drawer in a cupboard and drew out a cheque book. She looked back through the counterfoils.

"Yes," she admitted. "There was a loose cheque. I remember I took it with me to Juan-les-Pins the other night, in case I was short, and as I did not use it, I put it back in the cheque book. Go on, please."

"I went to my bank at Juan," the Commodore continued, "and I drew out five hundred thousand francs and gave them to Michael, who was with me. I took him back to lunch at the Château and I cross-questioned him closely about your cheque. I cannot say I have ever had a single suspicion about the boy, but I did not feel like paying that cheque in, and as I happened to have plenty of money there, I didn't. As you see, I have kept it, although I have given him the money for it. After lunch, we went together to Nice, and I personally saw him pay off the amounts he owed. Then I brought him on to Monte Carlo, although I did not intend to come in again so soon, and on the way he broke down. I tried to cheer him up, but it could not be done. 'You ought to be thankful,' I told him, 'that you have such a wonderful friend, and that now you owe nobody in the world anything except her.' I can assure you, Mrs. Hammond, although I am a hard man, I was sorry for him that moment. He burst into tears.

"'Yes,' he confessed, 'Mrs. Hammond has been the best friend I ever had.'

"He even went so far as to tell me that he cared for you more than any one else in the world; and then he took my breath away. He confessed that he had forged your name to the cheque."

"That cheque which you have in your pocketbook?" she faltered.

The Commodore nodded.

"I know what you are thinking," he sighed. "I have parted with my five hundred thousand francs and all I have is this forged cheque."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"There is only one thing I can do," he replied. "I am a wealthy man in a way, but I cannot possibly afford to lose five hundred thousand francs. I shall present the cheque in the hope that he has taken sudden leave of his senses and that you really did give it to him. If the bank refuses to pay it, Michael must take the consequences. I am fond of the lad, but I am not a philanthropist to that extent."

Mrs. Hammond sat quite quiet for several minutes and, something of a physiognomist as he certainly was, Commodore Jasen could only speculate as to the nature of her thoughts. Presently she looked across at him. Her manner had lost something of its decision and her jaw was less prominent.

"You were telling me what he said to you about me," she began hesitatingly.

"To me that makes the situation even sadder," the Commodore replied, with a very convincing sigh. "The lad is evidently terribly attached to you. He seems to have had no other affairs whatever. Every penny of his money has gone in gambling. There is no doubt whatever about his affection for you."

Mrs. Hammond rose abruptly to her feet.

"I see that you have already changed for dinner, Commodore," she said. "Will you do me a kindness? Wait here for me half an hour whilst my maid puts my things on, and escort me to the Café de Paris, where I promised to meet Michael. I will make up my mind what I shall do before I come down and we can see him together."

"I will wait for you with pleasure," the Commodore promised.

At ten minutes to eight Mrs. Hammond reappeared. She was dressed in black and was followed by a maid, carrying the usual collection of trifles. She dismissed the latter at once and opened her bag.

"Commodore Jasen," she said, "you wish to save Michael, I suppose?"

"I certainly do, so far as I am concerned," he assured her.

"Very well, then," she decided. "I have made up my mind to forgive him. If you will hand me over that cheque," she went on, bringing out a great bundle of notes from her case, "I will give you three hundred thousand francs in bank notes, and a draft on New York payable to me, and which I have endorsed, for five thousand dollars. I shall still owe you a little money, and as soon as you can work out how much it is, I will give you a cheque. Is that satisfactory to you?"

"Absolutely," the Commodore assented.

He drew the cheque from his pocketbook and passed it over to his companion. She occupied herself tearing it into small pieces, whilst the Commodore filled his pockets with the notes.

"Come along," she invited. "We will walk over to the Café de Paris. The sooner we let Michael know that everything is well the better."

The Commodore was a graceful and willing cavalier. As they crossed the square he touched her arm.

"Mrs. Hammond," he said, "I offer you my congratulations. You have done a very fine thing in a very fine way. You have certainly made the young man your slave for ever."

She was a woman in whose face there was seldom any marked expression, but at that moment it seemed to him that her lips twitched and there was certainly a very soft light in her eyes. She quickened her pace. Just as they began to pass through the little network of tables, however, their way was blocked. People were all rising to their feet and gazing to the far end of the café, exactly as they had peered the night before. The black crows of Corsica were once more in evidence. They passed over the heads of Mrs. Hammond and Commodore Jasen, and once more they found a scattered resting place amongst the tables of the outdoor restaurant and on the dancing floor. Mrs. Hammond shivered as she heard the fluttering of their wings.

"How I hate those birds!" she exclaimed. "There was one actually sat for a moment on our table last night and looked at us. I felt as though what that man was saying was the truth—that they had come from Suicide Corner and were all the black spirits of the place. What was that?"

"Some one dropped something, I think," the Commodore replied nonchalantly.

His companion quickened her pace. They reached the enclosure but there was no welcoming *maître d'hôtel* to greet them. Every one seemed to be crowding round the table where Michael usually sat. By chance the crowd parted for a moment. They saw the young man sprawling forward, his hands hanging helplessly by his side, the revolver still smoking two feet away upon the pavement. On the table in front of him, undisturbed even by the report, one of the oldest and wickedest-looking of the birds had alighted, and was perched, with his beak half open, and the light of all the evil in the world shining out of his angry eyes.

"He was afraid," the lady sobbed, as Commodore Jasen escorted her back to the hotel half an hour later, "that I should never forgive him! If only he had waited!"

"At any rate," her companion reminded her piously, as he felt his pockets, "it would be, I am sure, some consolation to him to know that his debts are all paid."

IX

LORD DRATTEN'S LAND DEAL

Lord Dratten began to lose just a little of his robust assurance as his Rolls Royce glided up the ascent from Villefranche, and the white villas of Beaulieu became visible on the hillside. It was an enterprise indeed, this to which he was committed! Never had he known his companion more charming, never had she seemed to him more utterly desirable. That she was beautiful he, in common with the rest of the crowd at the Cap d'Antibes, had always known. That she had charm, the whole world recognised, a charm which even he, a coarse-fibred person, had felt from the first moment he had ever spoken to her. But this morning it seemed to him that he had discovered a new attraction. The courtesy which she owed him as her prospective host had seemed to him tinged with a delightful savour of coquetry, a personal and wholly inspiring thing. There had been times previously when her aloofness had damped his ardour. This morning his confidence was in a measure reestablished. Yet, as they slackened speed, and the car swung through the tall, iron gates leading down to the Réserve, he was conscious once more of a most unaccustomed quiver of nervousness. He had just sensibility enough to realise that there was something about his companion which placed her quite apart from the women whom he had known and trifled with. He had to recall an old club aphorism to restore his confidence. "All women are alike *au fond*"! Of course they were!

Caroline gave a little cry of delight as she caught sight of the low, picturesque restaurant, with its setting of brilliantly hued flowers, quaint statuary, well-trimmed trees and shrubs. Through the windows were opaque visions of the sea, flawlessly blue.

"How delightful!" she exclaimed, "I never saw such an enchanting place in my life. How good of you to bring me!"

Lord Dratten smiled,—a smile which somehow gave the impression that he believed himself to be the only man in the world who would have thought of taking her to the Réserve at Beaulieu, and the only man in the world generous enough to invite a guest there. He was a fine fellow in his way. Six foot three, with bulky shoulders, large body, head with a mass of brown hair, features not perhaps so good. There had been some of the young set at Antibes who had called him "a bumptious old ass," and there were certainly one or two who, in spite of his financial success, had found him stupid. Caroline herself, notwithstanding her good manners, had been wondering half the time during their drive why she had accepted his invitation. The car came to a standstill in the gardens, but some distance from the restaurant. A smiling commissionaire in brilliant scarlet livery threw open the door of the vehicle with a flourish, and Lord Dratten swung his large and somewhat clumsy body out on to the avenue. Caroline accepted his hand and alighted gracefully.

"Why do we stop here?" she asked, as soon as her escort had finished giving directions to the chauffeur.

Lord Dratten was not at his best. Caroline's question was so direct, her innocence so transparent. He coughed and glanced at the commissionaire, who stepped on one side, as though inviting them to enter.

"The fact of it is, my dear Miss Caroline," he confided, in a pompous whisper, "the best class of people—er—don't frequent the restaurant.... I wondered whether you would not be more comfortable—er—over here. Very pleasant rooms—all to ourselves, you know! Good service! None of that beastly music!"

Caroline had already removed her foot from the threshold of the hotel. She was genuinely taken by surprise, but she understood. Yet, neither by word nor by any change in her expression did she betray the fact.

"Oh, I don't think so," she exclaimed. "It seems so dull in here and I think the restaurant looks most attractive. I love the music too. Do you mind?"

She was beckoning him to follow her, already a yard or two away on the avenue, and apparently fascinated by the pool in which a small shoal of melancholy fish were endeavouring to forget their predestined end. Lord Dratten *did* mind very much indeed, for he had made a special journey over to be sure of getting his favourite suite, had whispered a word into the ear of his accustomed waiter, and had, in short, made all his arrangements with the care and completeness of the accomplished *boulevardier*. Apart from his own natural disappointment, he was conscious of the covertly smiling faces of the commissionaire and the *maître d'hôtel*. His vanity was hurt. Caroline, however, was already on her cheerful way to the restaurant and affected not to notice his discomfiture.

"I am dying for a cocktail," she confided, "and the bar looks too divine. How kind of you to bring me to such a charming place!"

Lord Dratten made his last effort, when the restaurant *maître d'hôtel* had temporarily deserted them at the bar, to enquire whether a sufficient number of the succulent *mesdemoiselles* of Beaulieu could be collected for the luncheon of two hungry people. He leaned towards his companion in his best Lothario-like manner.

"Stuffily-looking lot of people down here, don't you think?" he whispered disparagingly.

"Oh, I think everything here is delightful," Caroline declared with enthusiasm. "And what a view!"

"Better from the little room I had chosen," he insinuated, with a wave of the hand backwards. "All to ourselves, too! Just the same luncheon. Shall I tell them to serve it there?"

Caroline remained extraordinarily dense.

"Sweet of you to think of it," she rejoined, "but I adore this room, and the *chef d'orchestre* and I are great friends. I know I shall enjoy the music."

The *maître d'hôtel* brought good news concerning the *mesdemoiselles* of Beaulieu and Caroline followed him to the table. Lord Dratten tried to console himself with the obvious fact that he was entertaining the best-looking and most chic young woman in the place, and was consequently the most envied man there. The fact soothed his vanity, but nothing could have made him other than a dull companion. He talked in a loud voice, mostly about himself and his doings, and complained without cause when he dared. By the time the large bottle of brandy arrived, he had almost recovered his good humour and was prepared to play his trump card.

"By the by," he said, leaning confidentially across the table, "you won't mind having just a look at Monte Carlo after luncheon? I want to see my bankers there and we might have an hour at the tables afterwards. I keep a dinner suit at the Paris—sometimes stay the night there. Bit of a change. What do you say?"

Caroline sighed and shook her head.

"I am so sorry," she told him. "I have a dressmaker coming over from Cannes at four o'clock and an early cocktail party. Besides, I was at Monte yesterday and I am going again to-morrow. One can have too much of a good thing, can't one?... May I have another cup of this delicious coffee?"

This time Lord Dratten failed to hide his annoyance. He was distinctly angry. The girl had no right—it seemed almost as though she were trifling with him!

"Sorry," he persisted gruffly, "I am afraid I shall have to call there for an hour or so. I thought you understood that."

Her amiability was unruffled.

"But what does it matter?" she protested. "*Maître d'hôtel*," she went on, addressing one of the head waiters who had scarcely left her elbow, "can you get me a taxicab to go to Antibes?"

"*Mais parfaitement, Madame*," the man replied promptly. "There is one who waits now. I go to secure him."

He bustled off.

Lord Dratten, who understood no French, leaned across the table with frowning face.

"What's all that about?" he demanded.

"Everything is arranged," she assured him. "My taxicab is waiting now. So I think, dear Lord Dratten, if you will excuse me," she went on, closing her vanity case and rising to her feet, "I had better take advantage of its being here. Such a delicious luncheon, and *so* many thanks. Now I insist upon it that you do not get up. You must finish your brandy comfortably. We shall meet again this evening. *Au revoir*."

She was gone with a little wave of the hand, profusely escorted by the *patron*, the *chef d'orchestre* and two or three *maîtres d'hôtel*. She was already through the door at the further end of the room and stepping into the taxicab before

Lord Dratten had fully recovered himself. He expressed his feelings in two different ways: he helped himself to a double liqueur brandy from the big bottle, held his glass critically in front of him, and he uttered one single but heartfelt expletive—

"Damn!"

Lord Dratten's waistcoat was joyously uplifted, for the food and wine at Caroline's return luncheon party about a week later had both been of the best. There was a flush upon his cheeks, a moistness in his eyes. More than ever he regretted that his little escapade with her had not been a complete success. Few women whom he knew could have ordered a luncheon or wines like that. She was so excellent a hostess that she ventured to call to order two of her guests.

"Commodore," she remonstrated, "you and Mr. Crowhurst are talking business far too much. Lord Dratten and I, and Zoë too," she added, with a glance at the girl who was seated on his other side, "are feeling neglected."

The Commodore broke off abruptly in his conversation. A piece of paper, upon which he had been making figures, he thrust into his pocket.

"My profound apologies, dear hostess," he said. "I am afraid that for a minute or two I got led away upon my hobby."

Caroline nodded her forgiveness.

"Commodore Jasen," she explained to her guest of honour, "although he is a very wealthy man, is like all Americans. Money-making is his sport. He cannot keep away from it."

"Do you follow the market out here?" Lord Dratten asked.

The Commodore looked shocked.

"I never gamble," he said.

"The Commodore," Mr. Crowhurst intervened, "has been one of my best clients, and one of my most successful ones in buying land out here."

"As to being successful," Jasen observed, "I am afraid no one could claim any credit for that during the last two years. Whatever odd bit of land you bought you made money on."

"Seems like a fairy tale," Crowhurst observed, toying with his pencil. "I have one client—sha'n't mention his name—who settled down here with a pension. Quite hard up he was. Couldn't even play his little game of *chemin de fer*, and owned a motor bicycle and sidecar. Some one left him fifty thousand francs. That's every penny he had when he came into my office about eighteen months ago. He was a shrewd fellow, I must say that for him, but apart from that, he acted nearly the whole of the time upon our advice. To-day he is worth at least five millions, he has built himself a beautiful villa and he drives a Lancia car. If he had held on to his properties, he would have been worth to-day at least twice as much, in three years' time three times as much."

Lord Dratten was sitting up in his chair. There was a curious light in his eyes, which were no longer moist. He was listening intently to every word.

"A wonderful boom down here, must have been," he observed, with clumsily affected indifference. "All over now, I suppose, though?"

The land agent smiled in superior fashion.

"That's how I like to hear people talk," he admitted. "Keeps the prices from soaring too much. As this is not a gathering of business people, I don't mind telling you what my real opinion is. There's a hundred per cent. rise to be looked for in practically every plot of land from Fréjus to Nice, and in this immediate vicinity I would venture to put it at two hundred per cent. The figures of the last two years' transactions would pretty near send any one crazy, and to-day, if any one comes to us for land, or what we call a Number One class villa, we have scarcely a thing to show to them."

"After all, I am not sure that it is to be wondered at," the Commodore reflected. "Where in the world could you find a climate like this, so many beautiful casinos, golf clubs, bathing spots—everything for a man's enjoyment—so much civilisation and such an environment? It was just a question of finding out what the summer was really like here, one or two of the hotels keeping open, and the man at the back of Juan Casino having the foresight to see what was coming. My dear Caroline," he added, rising to his feet, "I am afraid I must excuse myself. My architect is coming to see me this afternoon. I happen to know that the builder made half a million francs out of the villas on the last plot of land I sold him, so I am thinking of turning greedy and building myself, this time. After all, it is rather amusing, and one must have some occupation."

"What about the Everett property?" Crowhurst asked.

The Commodore hesitated.

"I am more than half inclined to go for it," he admitted. "I know the money's there. It isn't that at all. I don't like options, though. I'd be more willing to give the four millions straight out if your client really wants to deal."

"You will get it for that in the long run," the other argued.

The Commodore stood irresolute.

"Courage," Caroline called out.

"What are four millions?" Zoë exclaimed, with a shrug of the shoulders. "Think what you have made!"

For a moment it seemed as though the Commodore had made up his mind. Then apparently he changed it.

"I will let you know in a day or two, Crowhurst," he promised. "After all, I must not be greedy. I made several enemies, I am afraid, by buying the Michael's property. A wonderful luncheon, Miss Loyd, and—as usual—a perfect hostess!"

He took his leave. The others resumed their seats for a few moments. Lord Dratten's eyes, although they seemed to have become smaller, were certainly brighter. He thrust his hands into his trousers pockets.

"Reminds me of old days," he remarked. "I have been in a few land booms in my time. Done some wonderful deals, too. Bought a bit of land in the city once. When I bid, I never reckoned out what it would come to—it was some thirty pounds a foot. Bought it unexpectedly one day after lunch and had to find four hundred thousand pounds the next day."

"Wonderful!" Caroline murmured.

"It is very romantic," Zoë declared. "I like to hear how rich, clever men make money."

Lord Dratten helped himself to another cigar. He leaned back in his chair.

"Well," he said, "that is one thing that women have not taken away from us yet. They may write books and paint pictures and go into the House of Commons, but they have not yet learned how to put a big business deal through. They have not even found their way on to the Stock Exchange," he added, with a chuckle.... "So there has been a lot of money made round here, Mr. Crowhurst?"

"A great deal," the latter agreed, "and there will be a great deal more. Five years ago my father and I and an office boy ran our place. To-day we have nine clerks, our own salaried architect, three typists, and two men with motor cars continually going up and down the coast, and even now we are short-handed."

"What are your business hours—your own, I mean?" Lord Dratten asked, with well-assumed carelessness. "Supposing I wanted to come in about renting a villa or something, when should I be likely to find you?"

"The only certainty," was the dubious reply, "would be between nine and ten in the morning, and five and six at night. I am run off my legs most of the rest of the time. As regards a villa, though, we have an excellent staff who might be able to fix you up."

"I prefer to deal with principals," Lord Dratten boomed. "As a rule, when I buy or sell or hire, there is big business in it."

"Ring up and make an appointment," Mr. Crowhurst suggested, as he bent over his hostess' hand. "A wonderful luncheon, Miss Loyd. I have enjoyed it thoroughly. I should not hurry away either—I am just as well out of the office these days—but my wife wants the boat. Come across you again, I hope, Lord Dratten."

The latter nodded.

"I might decide to have a flutter in land," he said thoughtfully. "If so I will look you up."

Jonathan Crowhurst knew his man, and he was not surprised when, at a quarter to ten the following morning, Lord Dratten was shown into his office.

"What can I do for your lordship?" he asked briskly. "I can see we are in for a busy day. Hear those telephones ringing? One would think half the inhabitants of the United States had made up their minds to leave their own markets alone for a bit and do a little solid speculation!"

Lord Dratten accepted a cigarette.

"Well," he said, "I am a wealthy man, you know, Mr. Crowhurst. No one likes to have too much idle money. I have some just now. Have you anything to suggest?"

Mr. Crowhurst did not appear to be enthusiastic.

"In a week or two's time I may have," he said. "I believe the Biot lands will be on the market then, and we can commence doing business. Just at present I should scarcely know what to put you on to. Of course there are heaps of small propositions."

"No good to me," Lord Dratten interrupted. "I am a big man—in every sense of the word," he laughed, patting his stomach, "and I like big business. What about this estate the Commodore was speaking of yesterday?"

Crowhurst shook his head.

"I think he means having that. He would have come to terms before now, but he likes to do business his own way, and I must admit that the old lady who owns the estate is one of the crankiest women I ever knew."

"It's still open, is it, then?"

"Yes, it is still open," the agent admitted, without enthusiasm. "The only thing is, even if I felt at liberty to discuss it with you, you would probably feel the same as I do about it."

"Let us hear the crab," Lord Dratten begged. "You don't commit yourself to anything by talking about it."

"That's right," Crowhurst agreed. "Well, it's a matter of that large property between Eden Roc and the Château. It is really the finest piece of land on the coast and might be worth anything. The owner wants to sell one day, and then she changes her mind. All that she will do is to grant an option, provided a price can be agreed on."

"I don't quite follow you," Lord Dratten observed.

"You would not," the other said. "It's an old-fashioned way of doing business. She has still got valuers on the place, you see, and she professes that she has not made up her mind exactly what she wants for it. Well, she will let you have an option for—say a hundred thousand francs. That means we can't sell the estate to any one else if you are willing to give the price that she ultimately decides upon. Her last price was two million, seven hundred thousand francs. Very well. We had an American from Nice who paid the hundred thousand francs and hoped to get the property. The valuers, however, persuaded Madame that the price was too low, and the man got the hundred thousand francs back a few days ago. The only advantage to him was, of course, that she could not sell it to any one else while he held the option."

"It seems a one-sided sort of arrangement," Lord Dratten reflected.

"I don't know that it is, really," Crowhurst rejoined. "She knows perfectly well there are half a dozen people who would buy it to-morrow. It has not been in her hands for more than a month or two and there never has been a correct valuation. It will be decided upon the first of the month. Very well—supposing to-day she were willing to sell you what she calls an option at a hundred and fifty thousand francs, on the first of next month she will tell you what she wants for the

property. If you are willing to buy it at that or any lower price that might be agreed upon, your hundred and fifty thousand francs comes off the purchase price. If you say it is too dear, we give you back the money, and all that you lose is your first chance of purchase."

"Supposing you take me over and show me the property," Lord Dratten suggested.

The agent smiled uncomfortably.

"I am afraid I could scarcely do that," he objected. "You see, we have done some very large deals with the Commodore, and, although he hates this option business, I honestly believe he would pay to-morrow what the final valuation would come out at. I don't mind telling you, Lord Dratten, that one of the valuers is a friend of mine, and they are not putting it too high. They want the land sold and cleared out of the way. I don't believe the final valuation will be a penny more than three million, seven hundred thousand francs, and it is worth—mind you, I know what I am talking about, Lord Dratten—it is worth five millions of any one's money!"

"Well, the Commodore's had his whack," Lord Dratten persisted. "It would do no harm to take me out and show it to me. I don't want a valuer—not at this stage of the proceedings, anyway. I will take your word—your written word, of course—for the number of hectares involved. You show me the land and, if I think it is good enough, I will give you my cheque for the amount of the option straight away."

Mr. Crowhurst seemed terribly perplexed.

"I'd sooner do anything than offend the Commodore," he remarked.

"Well, you can think about that after we have been over," Lord Dratten pointed out. "There's no harm in my seeing the property, anyway. I will pay you a fee for showing it to me."

Jonathan Crowhurst closed his Derby desk with a little slam.

"All right," he said. "Come on. I feel like a little fresh air this morning, anyway."

Lord Dratten was at any rate a hard worker. He walked from one end to the other of the great stone wall which divided the estate he had come to visit from the sea—a very solidly built affair without gate or outlet of any sort. He tramped over the kitchen gardens, which were in a moderate state of cultivation, he walked through the pine woods, he studied the somewhat depressed-looking flower gardens. He paid particular attention to the small farm and the accommodation for the outside servants. The house itself he went over, but dismissed with a grunt.

"Worth what it will fetch to a housebreaker," was his only comment.

It was twelve o'clock before he had finished his investigations, by which time Mr. Crowhurst was hoarse with answering questions and thoroughly exhausted. They stood on the broad terrace and looked out across the Mediterranean.

"A fine sea view," Lord Dratten observed.

The agent flinched a little but said nothing. He was busy wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"We have gone quite as far as we need for the day," Lord Dratten decided. "Step into my car, Mr. Crowhurst. We will drive to the hotel."

"I should like," Mr. Crowhurst admitted fervently, "to go somewhere where we can get a drink!"

"I sympathise with you entirely," the other replied. "My motto, though, always is 'Business First.' We will split a gin and ginger in my room."

They drove off to the hotel, where Lord Dratten led the way to his sitting room. He gave an order to the waiter and produced pen, ink and paper.

"Now, Mr. Crowhurst," he said, "I have inspected this property. I gather that you are only prepared to talk business on

the very strange terms insisted upon by your client?"

"I ought not to talk business at all," the agent replied uneasily. "I ought, at any rate, to ring up the Commodore first."

"No necessity to do anything of the sort," Lord Dratten rejoined sharply. "One man's money is as good as another's, I suppose, and the Commodore had his chance. You cannot name a price for the property, so I will consider it on your own terms. What amount do you suggest for what you call the option? It is not, of course, an ordinary option at all."

"One hundred and fifty thousand francs," Mr. Crowhurst said unwillingly.

"Very well," Lord Dratten proceeded, "I take it that this is the understanding. I give you here a cheque for a hundred and fifty thousand francs. If the price which your principals put forward to me within the next week or ten days is acceptable to me, and I buy the property, that hundred and fifty thousand francs is deducted from the purchase price. If they ask me such a sum that I do not buy, the matter is at an end and the hundred and fifty thousand francs is returned to me. Have I got it rightly?"

"Quite correct," the agent admitted.

Lord Dratten wrote out the cheque and handed it across the table. He then wrote a few lines upon a sheet of paper and passed it over to the agent.

"The rest is up to you, Mr. Crowhurst," he said. "Sign the few lines I have written—you see there exactly your own proposition—give me a receipt for the cheque, finish that bilious-looking drink, and we will go down to Eden Roc and have a swim."

Mr. Crowhurst did everything that he was bidden without enthusiasm.

"I feel you have rather had your own way with me, Lord Dratten," he remarked, as he pocketed the cheque. "You are—if you don't mind my saying so—a forceful man. I didn't mean to do this. How I shall face the Commodore, I don't know."

Lord Dratten stretched himself out. He was certainly a fine figure of a man.

"We have our own way of doing business in the City of London," he told the agent.

It was the same little company who met together for lunch at the Eden Roc some ten days later. This time it was Lord Dratten who was the host. He sat at the head of the table—magnificent in white flannels and white silk shirt open at the throat. He was a dominant, if not altogether a pleasing figure. On one side of him sat Caroline, on the other Zoë. Both—to all appearance—sufficiently impressed. Commodore Jasen and Mr. Crowhurst completed the party.

"Any more land speculations, Commodore?" his host asked him, during the progress of the meal.

The Commodore shook his head.

"I have been gardening instead," he confided. "Unselfish work I call it that—toiling in another man's vineyard. The only deal I was rather anxious to bring to a head was the Everett estate, and my friend Crowhurst here seems to have kept off the subject for the last week. What about it, Crowhurst? Have you been able to persuade that old woman out of her ridiculous option scheme?"

The agent drank half a glass of wine and summoned up his courage.

"There was no need to do that, Commodore. Plenty of other people willing to humour her."

"Do you mean that you have been doing business with some one else for that estate?" the Commodore asked with uplifted eyebrows.

"My dear fellow, I couldn't help it," Crowhurst replied. "The old lady refused to consider any other method of doing business. She wanted to keep the thing going as long as she could, before she named a definite price. You hung fire at the option, so I had no alternative but to look elsewhere. Some one else would have chipped in if I had not."

"Perhaps it would be as well," Lord Dratten said, in his resonant bass voice from the head of the table, "to take the Commodore into our confidence. I have purchased an option, Commodore, upon the Everett Estates for a hundred and fifty thousand francs."

"The devil you have!" the Commodore exclaimed. "I beg your pardon, Miss Caroline," he went on. "You must forgive me. I was a little startled. I had no idea that the property was being offered elsewhere."

Mr. Crowhurst plucked up a little courage.

"I regret the necessity, Commodore," he said, "but it had to be done. Madame Everett would deal on that basis. You would not make up your mind. Every agent on the Riviera is yapping round her villa all day. I had to go ahead."

Commodore Jasen sipped his wine and for a moment or two looked very depressed. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know anything about business, Commodore," Caroline said gently, "but I do not think you ought to blame Mr. Crowhurst or Lord Dratten. You had the first chance. Mr. Crowhurst ran the risk of losing the business altogether if he did not act and we know what sort of a man Lord Dratten is."

The Commodore sighed.

"I suppose you are right," he admitted. "Lord Dratten, you have—as we say in America—put one over on me! I wish you luck!"

Lord Dratten's smile was maddening. Caroline deliberately looked away.

"I have made a fortune by my business habits and methods," Lord Dratten declared. "Every one in the city of London knows that when I am interested, there is something doing. No one can say that I have ever been guilty of anything like sharp practice, or that I have taken advantage of a friend, but on the other hand I do not think you would find any one able to boast that he got the better of me in a business deal."

"You have certainly nipped in on me this time," the Commodore confessed. "When is the old lady going to make up her mind, Crowhurst?"

"She made up her mind yesterday evening," the latter replied. "She fixed the price at three millions eight hundred thousand, and at that price Lord Dratten pronounced—I have bought."

Caroline looked at him breathlessly.

"You have bought the Everett Estates?" she exclaimed.

"I have bought them for three millions, eight hundred thousand francs," Lord Dratten replied pompously, "less one hundred and fifty thousand francs which I have already paid as deposit, and less a certain amount of commission," he added, with a smile, "to our friend Mr. Crowhurst here. Just a holiday deal, I look upon it as. Nothing tremendous. Just something to keep one's hand in. As soon as the papers are made out, I shall pay over my cheque and decide what to do with the property. I may build a villa for myself. I have often thought of it. For a million or a million and a half, one could build a very tidy little place on the present site. I should have the advantage, Commodore Jasen," he reflected, "of having you for a neighbour."

Commodore Jasen filled his glass and pushed the bottle across the table.

"To show that there is no ill feeling, I will drink to the health of our new neighbour."

They all drank to him. Lord Dratten was gracious and impressive.

"If I decide to come and live here," he said, "I am sure I shall be very happy with such nice people around me. On the other hand," he added, "money talks. I have an idea that if I put the property into the market, I might get even as much as five millions. I was looking around early this morning—went out in a motor boat—there is not a property along the coast with such a sea frontage."

There was a silence which any one else might have thought curious. Caroline was watching a speed boat passing the rafts. Zoë was bending close over the fig which she was peeling. The Commodore was gazing up at the ceiling.

Crowhurst was fidgeting uneasily in his chair. Lord Dratten refilled his glass. He drank the Commodore's health.

"No ill feeling, I hope, Commodore?" he said. "This option business is not so bad after all, eh?"

"You seem to have got what you deserved out of it, anyway," was the Commodore's gloomy reply.

Caroline came in from her second bath the following morning with shining eyes and glowing cheeks. She ascended the stone steps gracefully as usual, but with many a pause to exchange greetings with friends and acquaintances. At the entrance to the bar she closed her light green parasol and wrapped her peignoir of the same colour a little more closely around her. She was the cynosure of a good many admiring glances, but there was one man, who had been walking up and down the place, who had other things in his eyes. He stopped her on the way to the dressing rooms.

"Can I have a word with you, Miss Loyd?" he asked a little brusquely.

She looked at him with upraised eyebrows.

"Certainly you can presently, Lord Dratten," she said. "You don't expect me to sit down like this, do you? I shall only be about ten minutes or a quarter of an hour."

She passed on into the dressing rooms. Lord Dratten drunk a cocktail and looked as though it had violently disagreed with him. He sat down at a remote table near a window and awaited her coming with such patience as he could. It was fully twenty minutes before she emerged from the dressing rooms, immaculate in wide white silk pyjamas, her eyes and cheeks still aglow. She paused to speak to some friends at the counter, then she made her way to the table before which Lord Dratten was standing.

"You want to give me a cocktail?" she asked sweetly. "Thank you so much. I would rather have tomato juice—may I?"

He muttered an order. She looked at him in some surprise.

"Is it my fancy, or are you a little disturbed this morning?" she asked.

"I am disturbed," he replied. "I do not understand these tricks."

"Tell me all about it," she begged. "Only don't look so furious."

"It is about this Everett Estates deal, of course," he said, "and I don't see why not one of you had anything to say about it at luncheon time. I drove down with my architect this morning and young Crowhurst's head man. I went straight to the sea wall to decide what entrances I would have on to the beach and where to build my harbourage."

"Oh, but you can't have any entrances on to the beach," Caroline exclaimed. "You can't build a harbourage either. Whatever made you think you could?"

He was silent for a moment. There were a good many words which he contrived to choke back.

"If a man buys an estate in an ordinary way," he said, "he expects that the sea frontage attached to it belongs also to him. It seems that there is some underhand work about here. We did our business quickly, I admit, and all verification of the plans was naturally to come when I paid the deposit for the purchase money. But only buying an option, I just looked around and took things as they stood or seemed to stand. This morning I have seen the original plans. The sea wall seems to bound the property. Some one else," he went on, "who owns a wretched little villa on the right-hand side of that dirty little road by the side of my property, owns the frontage all the way down to the other end of my wall."

"Didn't you know that?" Caroline asked.

Again Lord Dratten opened his lips and again he struggled with a stream of profanity.

"Do you suppose," he asked, "that I should have been such a damn' fool as to buy even an option on the property, if I had? What I must confess did surprise me was to hear that you, Miss Loyd, own that miserable little villa and its ridiculous rights of frontage."

Caroline nodded brightly.

"I bought it two months ago," she admitted. "I knew the villa was not worth much, but it seemed to me that the frontage was worth quite a great deal of money. Every one has been doing so well in property here, I thought this was my chance."

"What price do you want for the sea frontage?" Lord Dratten asked brusquely.

"My dear man," she remonstrated, "are these London ways of doing business? Can't you ask me a little more civilly?"

"I find it rather hard to be civil with you," he confessed.

Caroline's thoughts travelled suddenly backwards and she laughed in her chair. Lord Dratten met her eyes and clenched his fists. He knew very well what she was laughing at.

"Of course I shall go to law about this," he said, "but in the meantime perhaps you would quote your own price."

She sipped the tomato juice which the waiter had just brought. She was looking down the coast with reminiscent eyes.

"Forgive me, Lord Dratten," she said. "I was just thinking how wonderful the restaurant at Beaulieu must be looking to-day. What was it you asked me?"

"I asked you to name your price for the sea-frontage rights to the Everett Estates," he said grimly.

She shook her head, finished her tomato juice and rose.

"My dear man," she said, "they are not for sale."

X

THE COMMODORE'S LAST CIGAR

Mr. Jonathan Crowhurst looked regretfully at his watch and rose to his feet a fine figure of a man, though inclined to be thin in the flank and shoulders. He had dined exceedingly well. His collar was a little crumpled, his tie disarranged, and there was cigar ash over his trousers.

"Awfully good of you, Commodore," he declared, holding out his hand towards his host, "to make my visit so pleasant. I am to take it that yours is a firm offer?"

"You have it in writing," Jasen reminded him. "I will give you seven and a half millions for the house, grounds and the whole of the land. As regards the furniture, I won't take a stick of it. That must all be removed within six months of the transaction being concluded."

"Don't know that I blame you," Crowhurst said, smiling. "It's a mouldy lot."

"I cannot imagine why Lord Wyndham, when he is as near as Marseilles, does not come down here and collect his own treasures," the Commodore observed. "We might have had a talk and settled the matter up, then and there."

"His lordship is peculiar," the agent replied. "The Château being occupied, he would certainly stay nowhere else in the vicinity. Besides, when he is once on a P. & O. he likes to stay there. I shall see him to-morrow morning about eight, hand over the things I have come to fetch, and we shall have plenty of time to talk your offer over then. I shall be back at night and I promise that I shall endeavour to bring you a definite reply."

Commodore Jasen knocked the ash from his cigar, rose to his feet, and touched the bell.

"I should like to know one way or another," he said. "I have promised to go over the Mougins Château, if nothing comes of my offer to you. Sure you won't have another glass of the brandy?"

"Not now, thanks. I will do my business down in the cellars first. Then, if I may, I will look in and say good-bye to you."

"Are you motoring to Marseilles?" the Commodore asked.

Jonathan Crowhurst shook his head.

"No, I am motoring as far as Cagnes," he said. "I shall get on the eleven-five train there. I have arranged to leave the car outside and the garage man is going to fetch it."

Commodore Jasen turned to the butler who had opened the door.

"Broadman," he explained, "Mr. Crowhurst is going down to the cellars. Turn on the lights and if he needs any assistance see that he has it."

"Very good, sir," the man replied.

"I sha'n't want anything, thanks," Crowhurst said, as he followed the man out. "I will look in and say good night to you when I have packed up my little lot."

He swaggered out, and there was a slight smile upon Commodore Jasen's face, as he turned round in his chair and filled his glass with choice old Burgundy. He sniffed the wine appreciatively and sipped it. He knew very well that, unless miracles happened, he had said his last good night to Mr. Jonathan Crowhurst.

Like many of the almost perfect enterprises in which Commodore Jasen and his friends had, from time to time in their adventurous career, been engaged, the present one was not an affair to be hurried through. Time was of no particular consideration, but absolute thoroughness was a necessity. It was three quarters of an hour before the door of the dining

room opened and the house agent made apparent reappearance. The cigar ash was still upon his tweed trousers, his cravat was still ill-arranged, and his face flushed with the generous wine he had been drinking. He was wearing a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, however, which slightly altered his appearance. The Commodore's eyes flashed over him critically.

"Not bad," he commented. "You'll do. Especially in this light. Don't forget the swagger. Any trouble?"

"None at all," was the prompt reply. "You were right. It was the rest of the emeralds he was after. I've got them and the Rajah's diamonds."

"You put him out easily?"

"Not the flicker of an eyelid, not a sound," was the confident reply. "He is on his way down the tunnel now to the boat."

Commodore Jasen glanced at his watch.

"You had better be getting off," he observed. "Don't forget—call in at the Majestic for a whisky. Crowhurst always drinks it with water. Tell the barman that you are catching the train to Marseilles—Jim his name is—nod to any one who looks as though he may know you. Take any message you can collect for his lordship."

"That's all right, Commodore. Don't you worry about me. I spent a fortnight watching that fellow Crowhurst. I know his runs, I know his slang, I know his mannerisms. It will be two months before you hear from me—if that oil tank ever does get to the Persian Gulf."

"We will possess our souls in patience," the Commodore observed. "Our last words have already been spoken. You had better be getting into the car. Drive slowly through Juan and don't forget to wave your hand to any one who looks as though they knew you."

"Like to have a look at the emeralds?"

"I will see them in Columbo," the Commodore replied.

The Chef de la Sûreté of Marseilles, having welcomed warmly his dear friend Pierre Lavalon, the celebrated detective from Paris, permitted himself to indulge in an outburst of irritation.

"It is unfair, my friend," he declared. "Marseilles is no worse than other great cities, except that we happen to be a seaport and therefore we have perhaps more criminals coming and going. But if there's a tragedy, an accident, a disappearance, you all come to Marseilles! You swoop down upon me. Half the crimes that are committed in France are supposed to be committed in my neighbourhood. It sounds well to say 'the missing man was last seen in Marseilles,' or 'a body fished up in the harbour of Marseilles is awaiting identification.'"

Monsieur Lavalon smiled sympathetically as he rolled and lit a cigarette.

"My friend," he admitted, "you have some reason. Yet, when you consider this matter, you must agree that there are grounds for my visit here. This unfortunate Jonathan Crowhurst, the English house and land agent of Cagnes—Well, let us take the evidence. He dined with a Commodore Jasen at the Château d'Antibes, where he had business for his master, Lord Wyndham, the owner of the place. He departs, bearing valuables, driving his own car. Very well. He is seen driving through Juan, he speaks to acquaintances in the Majestic Bar at Cagnes, he is seen to board the train for Marseilles, and his car is left outside the station, according to a previous arrangement, and garaged by a friend. He arrives at the Hôtel Splendide in Marseilles, where he is known. He engages a room and leaves orders that he is to be called an hour before the *Narkunda* from London docks sails. He follows the very bad habit which so many travellers have of dining at a restaurant in Marseilles, instead of in the hotel, and there I think he makes a great mistake. He has a large quantity of valuable jewellery with him to deliver to Lord Wyndham on the *Narkunda* the following morning, yet he chooses to go out to spend the evening in Marseilles, and apparently takes the jewellery with him. He is seen to enter a taxicab at eight o'clock, and he asks to be driven to the Cintra Bar. He pays the man off there and disappears. I cannot believe, my friend, that your very astute detectives have not been able to collect some further information of the man who

entered the Cintra Bar, at ten minutes past eight last Friday week, and has not been heard of since."

"Nevertheless, it is so," the Chef de la Sûreté announced. "My best men are on the case. We are inundated with false information but nothing leads us to the truth. If I were to presume to offer my advice, Monsieur Lavalon, to a man of your genius and distinction, it would sound strangely, but I shall offer it none the less."

"I shall listen with respect," Monsieur Lavalon promised.

"You can do no good here," the Chef de la Sûreté said bluntly. "My local men have hold of every possible clue. If Crowhurst let himself be decoyed into any of the worst of our night haunts here, then the jewels are probably lost and Crowhurst no longer lives, but a thing like that is not so easy. If I were you, Monsieur Lavalon, seeing the impasse we have arrived at here, I would start at the other end."

"The other end?" Lavalon repeated.

The Chef de la Sûreté twirled his moustache fiercely.

"I would start at the place and the hour," he declared, "when Jonathan Crowhurst left his offices in the Rue du Cannot at Cagnes, with his dressing case and despatch box, in his two-seater Chrysler, and drove out to the Château d'Antibes to dine with Lord Wyndham's tenant, and execute his mission."

"And what good would that do?" Lavalon demanded.

The Chef de la Sûreté shrugged his shoulders.

"One might have as much chance of discovering the truth," he said, "as by playing about in the noisome places of Marseilles."

"I am very honoured," Commodore Jasen said, as he stepped off his motor launch, one afternoon about a fortnight after the disappearance of Jonathan Crowhurst, and found Caroline waiting at his private dock. "You are in garden-party attire, I see, or I would invite you to cruise for an hour with me."

She shook her head.

"I should love it," she assured him, "but my clothes are too thin. Besides, your engines are too noisy for conversation and I want to talk to you."

"I am flattered," he murmured.

"I am not sure that you will be," she confided.

They climbed the broad but winding path that led to the Château. On the lawn before the terrace Caroline pointed to two very comfortable wicker chairs.

"We will sit here," she proposed. "I don't like the interior of your house very much or your servants. Your butler—Jake Arnott, all remind me of the things I want to forget. By-the-by, where is Jake Arnott?"

"He has gone to England to visit some relatives," the Commodore replied.

"You have seen the papers this morning?" she asked.

"I have glanced at them," he admitted. "I see that one young lady admits to having spent the evening with our missing friend."

Caroline nodded gravely.

"That may be true," she remarked. "I hope it is."

"Why should it not be?"

Caroline made no reply.

"I came here to tell you something," she continued. "I am going to marry."

"You are going to marry me?"

"Is there any girl in the world," she asked scornfully, "who would marry the man who deliberately murdered her brother?"

The Commodore tapped a cigarette upon the arm of his wicker chair.

"The vocabulary of you women needs amending," he complained. "That word 'murder,' for instance. How absurd! Ned knew very well that if he came into my territory, the only question was which got the other first. I got him and that was the end of it. He knew the rules of the game and he chose to take his risk. I did not want to quarrel with him. I would rather we had all worked together. I hope you don't altogether forget, Caroline, that night at the Ambassadeurs when I asked you to be my wife? You have never given me an answer."

"You have it now, then," she pronounced. "The answer is NO."

Commodore Jasen smoked on in silence for several moments. He might have received the blow of his life, but he gave no sign of it.

"It is your intention, I gather," he observed, "to cross the line."

"I have never really left my side of it," she told him. "I am going to marry amongst my own people."

He flicked the ash from his cigarette.

"When I left New York," he said, "I was worth a million dollars. I have made that into a million pounds sterling. Taking every one of my adventures, probing it, analysing it, regarding it from every point of view, it has been artistically perfect. Not one of them contains a flaw. I shared a bottle of wine with two of Headquarters' most famous detectives when I embarked for Monaco. They knew me as Commodore Jasen and nobody else has ever known me for any one else. Even little Brant here, though he has been tortured with suspicions, has never been able to connect me in the slightest degree with any one of my exploits. I am safe now, as I shall be safe for the rest of my life. I am wealthy and I have made an offer to purchase this Château. You know all my weaknesses as well as my better qualities. You know very well that women have never attracted me in the least. You are the only woman I have ever asked to marry me. I ask you now once again. You can live where you like and how you like, and the book of the past is closed. I am content with my rôle as Commodore Jasen. It may seem to the world that I grow a little younger, for I have tried to look like fifty-eight when I am really only forty-eight. That will be the only change in me."

She shook her head.

"You are a very remarkable man," she admitted, "but to me you mean nothing. There was a period—a few years of my life—when I thought such adventures as you and Ned used to talk of were marvellous. That time has passed. I loathe the very thought of it."

"You are going to marry the Marquis de St. Véran?" he asked.

"I am," she assented. "And I warn you that many things will happen if you attempt to interfere."

"A threat?" he murmured.

"Only a threat in case of a threat," she rejoined.

He remained silent for so long that she rose at last to her feet. He followed suit.

"You walked over here?" he asked.

"I walked," she told him. "It is a very short distance across the rocks."

"You will permit me to order a car or to send you back by the boat?" he suggested.

She shook her head.

"Armand is fishing on the rocks," she explained. "Perfectly ridiculous, but it amuses him. You have nothing to say to me?"

"It will keep," he answered.

Even then she hesitated, and before she spoke her last words, she looked cautiously around as though she feared listeners.

"This afternoon," she told him, "Lavalon, the French detective, arrived here from Marseilles. Brant and the local Commissaire met him. They are all together in the hotel now."

"A whimsical fellow, Lavalon," he murmured, as he held open the gate.

The Marquis abandoned his fishing enterprise with alacrity on Caroline's arrival. He was inclined to be peevish.

"There has been a small man," he complained—"American—not a pleasant man. He interfered with my fishing to ask questions about Commodore Jasen. He even mentioned your name. I showed him over which rocks to escape. He annoyed me."

"What sort of questions did he ask?"

"Whether you had known Commodore Jasen in New York. Where you had met him."

"And what did you tell him?"

"I tell him to mind his own affairs. I show him the way over the rocks. I should have helped him, but he hurried."

Caroline laughed.

"A newspaper man, I expect," she observed. "They are rather wearisome people."

Nevertheless, she wondered.

Caroline and Armand de St. Véran dined alone that night, in Paradise—or what was so near to it that it really did not matter. Their table at the Eden Roc overhung the deep diving pool, in the waters of which the searchlight, arranged by amateur fishermen, disclosed white-bellied fish, loup and mostelle, darting eagerly towards the unusual illumination. In the distance was the black, whalelike shape of the island. The near hills were dotted with the lights of the villas, ugly enough by day, the possible habitation of fairies by night. Palm Beach had its little frieze of golden pin pricks and its mystic summons. Only twenty minutes across the bay, and such a welcome at the long, squat Casino for the visitor with the thin cheque book or the fat *portemonnaie*. And behind, brooding over the world of vanities and night-lived passions, the curses and joys of the gaming rooms, the slumbers of the just in those hillside villas, and the fierce unrest of the gamblers in the crowded gaming rooms, the marvellous Esterels, blue and grey against a violet background, the zigzag outline cutting into the eternal sweetness beyond....

"This is a foretaste of heaven," the Marquis murmured.

"Except that I hope the music will be different," Caroline sighed. "I think I shall prefer the harp and cymbal to the saxophone."

"And I," her companion declared, "would welcome any form of angel at the next table rather than the little—how is it, you call him?—bounder who was asking impertinent questions of me this afternoon."

"Is he here?" Caroline enquired quickly.

"Next—to your left. Alone naturally. He disports a too small black tie and a shirt which leaps from his waistcoat. He does not please me at all, that little man. He has the face of a hungry ferret."

Caroline turned her head. Her premonition had been correct. It was Brant, the American detective.

"You know who he is?"

She nodded.

"I will tell you presently."

Then a uniformed page boy paused at the table. He addressed Caroline.

"One desires Mademoiselle on the telephone," he announced.

"Down here?"

"The connection is made, Mademoiselle."

The Marquis rose gallantly to his feet. Caroline crossed the floor, followed by many greetings from friends and acquaintances, and many admiring glances. She took up the receiver. The attendant closed the door.

"This is Caroline Loyd speaking," she said.

The answer came at once. Commodore Jasen's voice, but barely recognisable.

"Jasen speaking. Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"You have heard the news?"

"No."

"Body of Jonathan Crowhurst—the missing man, you know—has been found."

"At Marseilles?"

"Washed up at Golfe Juan. Miracles, it seems, happen in the Mediterranean. That fellow Brant thinks he has it over me now. The place is surrounded. Brant is on the terrace at the present moment, waiting for the bell to be answered."

"What can I do?" Caroline asked.

"Bring a car by the Antibes shore road to the Garoupe by-way. You can reach the dock from there. I can come down the underground passage and will meet you. If your friend, the Marquis, is there, bring him along. I shall need help."

"You are really leaving?"

"If I can get to the boat."

"Listen," she insisted. "You tell me that Brant is there on the terrace."

"He has just rung the bell himself. He has been about here all the evening."

"That seems queer," Caroline remarked calmly.

"Why?"

"Because he is at the present moment dining at the next table to mine. I left him there, when I came to answer the telephone. He seems to have been dividing his attention for the last hour between his dinner, my companion and myself."

There was a blank silence. Then Jasen's voice—not by any means a pleasant sound to listen to.

"What am I to say to such an unforeseen piece of bad luck? Perhaps it is better to say nothing. As I cannot induce you then to come to me, I must come to you."

"But what do you want?" she demanded. "All that can usefully be said is said."

"Then, believe me, there is a postscript," the Commodore mocked,—"a very important postscript. *À bientôt!*"

There was once more blankness. The Commodore had rung off. Caroline crossed the floor of the restaurant with unseeing eyes. Fear had come to her. Not only for herself. The Marquis leaned across the table towards her.

"Nothing disconcerting, I hope?" he asked anxiously. "You have lost your colour, dear Caroline."

Her eyes met his, those rather deep-set grey-blue eyes which looked out upon life now so steadily, and which seemed always to carry for her the one entrancing message.

"Yes," she admitted, "my message was very disconcerting."

"May I share your disquietude, or relieve it?" he begged.

"You shall share it, at any rate," she promised. "I told you that there was one person whom I dreaded telling of my intention to marry you."

"Something you did say like that," he acknowledged. "But you told me other things which were all I wanted to know, and indeed, dearest," he went on, his voice sinking almost to a whisper, "if you had not been able to tell me those other things, I should still have been content, because whatever was in your life before is as nothing."

Every one flirted openly at Eden Roc and there was nothing at all unusual in the touch of their fingers. Only a good many people envied her, for Armand de St. Véran in these days was a gallant figure of a man.

"There is a seal upon my lips," she confided, "as to certain things, but that seal means nothing dishonourable. I can tell you, however, the name of the man I fear, because I am convinced that, unless we are sensible and leave this country, you will soon know. It is Commodore Jasen."

He looked at her in amazement.

"Why, that nice benevolent-looking gentleman over at the Château!" he exclaimed. "I thought he was your friend. I was looking forward to his congratulations."

"Commodore Jasen," she said, "is no man's friend. The personal things between us are slight. He once asked me to marry him. I perhaps lingered for a long time before I gave him my reply. When I gave it to him it was 'no.' Since then I have learned what manner of man he is. What I half admired once as courage I have learned to be ferocity. What I took for firmness I know now to be cruelty. You speak of him as benevolent. Armand, he is a devil. Just now he did his best to trick me—you too—up to the Château. I found out that he was not telling the truth. He only laughed and he is on his way here now."

"It may be as well," Armand de St. Véran remarked. "He shall be given to understand, if he has annoyed or threatened you, that you have a protector."

"He is outside that sort of thing," she sighed. "Armand, if you and I value very highly our lives, we should be wise indeed if we left the table now—if you brought your car out of the garage, and if we rode on till morning—never mind where—north, east, south or west—anywhere out of reach of that man!"

"My dear, you are hysterical!" he declared. "One man is only one man. I am not a stripling."

"Oh, you are brave enough, I know that," she admitted. "But you don't understand fighting as Jasen understands it. A snap of the fingers, the flash of a torch and a bullet. He does not wait for the other man. He is not a fighter. He is a killer."

"That sounds very unpleasant," the Marquis said gravely. "In that case, one must make sure that it is he who is killed."

"How can you do that?" she asked feverishly. "You are not like these devils of men. You have no ugly pocket with a loaded weapon ready to your fingers."

He smiled.

"I have not," he acknowledged. "But this is scarcely the scene for exploits such as you describe. I do not think that our mild-looking little friend will prance in here, dealing out murder and sudden death. You are too pale, dear Caroline. All

through dinner time I have been dying to dance with you in that amazing rose-coloured frock. I think that our time has come. It is a waltz."

They danced under the tented roof, in a darkness relieved only by a few shaded lamps and the long pathway of moonlight upon the water—not so clearly defined now, for in the background dark clouds were rolling up and a storm was brewing. And sometimes Caroline forgot and was curiously happy, and sometimes there was a little stab at her heart, and fear came into her eyes as she watched the stairway. Yet when the man whom she feared arrived, he arrived unnoticed. She heard his voice talking to a group of friends and, but for her partner's protecting arm, would have fallen.

"Shall we sit down now?" she begged.

He smiled at her indulgently, but acquiesced, leading her back towards the table. His smile now might seem to have been justified, for nothing in the atmosphere of any part of the room even dimly suggested the imminence of tragedy. The Commodore had been detained by a group of gay diners a few yards away. Never had his smile been more benevolent, his laughter more infectious. The fingers of one lady were pressed audaciously to his lips, whilst he whispered what appeared to be a very amusing story in the ears of another. He waved his hand to Caroline as she passed, but made no immediate move. The Marquis smiled as he drew out her chair.

"You see for yourself, my dear," he began—

Then he broke off in his speech. The Commodore had a habit of moving noiselessly, of turning up in unexpected places. A moment ago his soft laugh, his lowered voice were clearly audible as they had passed within a few feet of him. They looked up and there he was, leaning almost between them at the end of their table, a speechless—a strangely dumb person. As a last desperate resource, Caroline turned her head towards where the little man had been seated. The table was deserted, the napkin thrown down. Brant had finished his meal and departed.

"Won't you sit down, sir?" the Marquis invited courteously.

"I fear to intrude," was the quiet reply. "Besides, in affairs such as the one I am about to deal with, I am more at my ease standing up."

The Marquis raised his eyebrows. Certainly this man talked strangely. There were no signs either of the geniality and good humour which had been flowing from his lips during his progress through the room. His face was hard and set. The long upper lip seemed to have escaped the concealment of the moustache and to be drawn tightly down.

"We should like to ask you to have a glass of wine with us," de St. Véran ventured politely.

"To drink wine out of the same bottle," Commodore Jasen observed, "is supposed to indicate a certain amount of good-feeling and good-fellowship. Between you and me nothing of that sort can possibly exist. In fact, within the next few minutes—or seconds perhaps—I propose to kill you."

The Marquis set down the glass which he had been in the act of raising to his lips. After all, then, Caroline was right. This man was either mad or a desperate criminal. The position was equally unpleasant in either case.

"This seems to me to be rather a poor joke," he said coldly. "Can't you see that you are alarming Miss Loyd?"

"Miss Loyd is alarmed," the Commodore confided, "because she knows that I always keep my word. You are wondering, perhaps, how I am going to do it. You see my right hand?"

The Marquis nodded. He saw the fingers moving, but he showed no signs of trepidation. Nevertheless, he seemed to be taking into account his chances. His eyes measured the distance between the Commodore and himself. Jasen smiled.

"No hope," he observed. "Perhaps if I had sat down—you have long arms, I see—but very wisely I preferred to remain where I am. You see that my right hand is holding something in my jacket pocket? It is holding the butt of a small weapon with which I have never missed in my life. I prefer to shoot in this way. I have your heart covered to within an inch. A move on your part would be unfortunate."

"Don't move," Caroline whispered frantically. "He tells the truth. He never misses."

"But why does he want to kill me?" the Marquis demanded. "If I am to fight a duel for you, I am agreeable, but murder!

Surely murder does not enter into any possible scheme of things."

"An ugly word," Jasen objected. "Killing is the logical resource of any man, when something stands in his way which can only be removed by extinction. Killing is the weapon which has freed countries from slavery all over the world."

"Do sit down and let me order another bottle of wine, if you are going to be didactic," the Marquis said coolly. "We can do our killing later."

Commodore Jasen turned his head, set eyes upon the speaker.

"Your attitude pleases me," he said. "It is a pity we did not meet earlier in life. You would have been a welcome addition to my little band of helpers."

"Can you say anything to bring this man to his senses?" de St. Véran asked across the table.

Caroline shook her head. During the last few minutes shadows had formed under her eyes. She was ghastly pale. Her fingers trembled. She was almost beginning to long for even the worst to happen. Anything was better than this cold duel of words between the man who, she knew, meant murder, and his victim. Suddenly she felt a rush of courage. The Marquis's complete nonchalance, the kindly light in his enquiring eyes, his questioning smile inspired her. The thing couldn't happen. That silly little bulge in the Commodore's pocket might mean anything, but not that.

"For the first time in his life," she said, "Commodore Jasen is talking like a fool. He loves adventure, and he has been utterly spoilt in life because he has been always successful, and he has generally had his own way. This time he cannot have his own way. If he does what he threatens, he knows perfectly well what will happen to him. He is boxed in here like a rat in a corner."

"Common sense, my dear," the Commodore admitted. "That's why I tried to get you to come down on to the dock to me. Things would have been much easier then. This may possibly turn out to be more dramatic. The end is the same, anyhow. You are both going to die."

"But what about yourself afterwards?" Caroline asked, looking appealingly at him, struggling frantically to keep the new light of hope from her eyes, to command and restrain this new set of emotions. "What about you? You won't be able to escape."

The Commodore sighed.

"I might," he reflected. "On the other hand, you are probably right. I may have to—disappear. You would not believe, however," he went on, "how calmly I can face the worst, when I think that you two will precede my passage into eternity by a few seconds."

"Listen," she begged frantically.

"I have always been willing to listen to you," Commodore Jasen said reproachfully, "but you are trying me high. Some one might come up and join in our conversation."

"I will keep them away," she whispered. "There is something I must say: something to which you must listen. It might—make a difference."

Then she spoke appalling words.

"Supposing I gave up Armand?"

The Commodore affected to consider the situation. The bulge in his jacket pocket, however, did not diminish. He was enjoying these last few minutes on earth. He must be careful, though, he told himself, not to delay too long.

"I am afraid," he began regretfully—

Events during the next few seconds seemed to happen without sequence or continuity. The little man whose behaviour, in the shadows of the room, Caroline had been watching with mingled hope and amazement, until she dared look no longer, suddenly lifted a pile of plates over his head and sent them crashing to the floor, barely a yard behind their table.

Commodore Jasen's nerves were fairly impervious to this sort of thing, but his left hand for a single second lost its

tensity. He pulled the trigger of his revolver, all right, but his arm was already jerked upwards from behind by one of the tall figures who had been waiting for Brant's signal. Two bullets travelled harmlessly out into the darkness, just as Caroline practically threw herself upon him, and her companion's fist crashed into his face. Commodore Jasen, fighting like a wild-cat, went crashing into the next table—one of his arms, which he had managed to free, striking flail-like and terrible blows at every one within reach. Once he very nearly reached the Marquis, who stood waiting for him. Then there was a sudden rush from the other end of the room, a medley of confused, angry and questioning cries.

"What the mischief are they doing to the old Commodore?" Major Darnell, the leader of the young set, called out. "Come on, lads."

In less than a minute the whole place was in worse confusion than ever. The women ran screaming to a distant corner. Brant was a prisoner in the arms of half-a-dozen assailants. Three or four men were on their knees, bending over a tangled heap of struggling humanity in the middle of the place. Brant at last made himself heard.

"Listen, you fools!" he cried. "Your Commodore Jasen is a murderer, an international criminal—the murderer of Jonathan Crowhurst not ten days ago. We are detectives. Don't let him go."

There was a slackening in the struggle, but a good deal of disbelief.

"Don't talk rot," Darnell shouted. "Old Jasen! He's one of the best sorts going. Where are you, sir?"

He might well ask. One or two of them thought they saw a man crouching low, running with flying footsteps down into the bar, but no one was sure. By degrees every one had stumbled to their feet. One of the gendarmes had a broken leg. Brant himself was bleeding freely from a cut on the cheek. The young men, most of them Englishmen, who had led the assault, were beginning to look somewhat foolish. Brant dashed towards the stairway.

"Come on, any of you who can stand up," he cried.

They went streaming down into the bar lounge. At the far end, the doorkeeper lay groaning on the ground.

"He's mad," he faltered. "It was the Commodore, running like a madman. He shot me through the shoulder when I tried to stop him."

"Where is he now?" some one cried out.

"Gone down to the beach," the man gasped, and rolled over.

From the small harbourage given over to fishing craft, there came the beating of a powerful engine. Commodore Jasen's famous motor boat shot out from the shadows. Caroline, clinging desperately to her lover's arm, leaned over the side of the balustrade jutting out from the restaurant. She pointed to the bay.

"He's got away from them all," she cried. "The man is a devil."

The motor boat, with roaring engines, rushed into full sight. People, recovering a little from their alarm, leaned from every point of vantage to watch it. Already motor cars were on the way to the Château, but it appeared that Commodore Jasen had no idea of returning home. He shot past the point of the Mosque without wavering. Just then the moon temporarily escaped from the banks of dark clouds which had risen during the last half hour and threw a faint illumination upon the scene. They could see the man at the wheel leaning forwards, the bow well out of the water, a huge wake of churned-up sea in the rear. Jasen was momentarily invisible, apparently stooping down. Presently they saw him rise and throw himself backwards into one of the most comfortable easy-chairs. The boat was heading straight for a bank of black clouds.

"He's going right into the storm," some one muttered.

The sheet lightning showed both men in their places, the mechanic bending lower still, to avoid the sting of the flying spray. Commodore Jasen, however, had the air of one who was at peace with the world. He was lying back amongst the cushions, a cigar in his mouth, embarked on that brief voyage towards eternity, looking very much the same as when he had escorted a party of ladies to picnic upon the islands.

THE END

[The end of *Crooks in the Sunshine* by E. Phillips Oppenheim]