

PRODIGALS
OF
MONTE
CARLO



E·PHILLIPS
OPPENHEIM

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By

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM



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CHAPTER I

Sir Hargrave Wendever, Baronet, country gentleman, and for a brief space of time a noted figure in financial circles, lounged against the mantelpiece in the waiting room of a famous Harley Street physician on a wet January morning, amusing himself with an old copy of *Punch*. He was a tall man, inclined to thinness, with a long, lean face, bronzed complexion, and grey-blue eyes. The hair around his ears was greying a little; otherwise he scarcely looked his thirty-nine years. He was alone in the room—a somewhat alien figure in the sombre surroundings, for he had all the appearance of perfect health, and it was obvious that he shared none of the nervous anticipations which so many of Sir James Horridge's patients experienced in that atmosphere of waiting. Nevertheless, it was with an air of content, as though relieved of a brief period of boredom, that he responded to the butler's summons and passed into the consulting room. The physician—a thick-set, hard-jawed man, with keen eyes and heavy, bushy eyebrows—looked up at his entrance, nodded, and pointed to a chair.

"Sit down, Sir Hargrave," he invited. "What can I do for you? You don't look as though there were much wrong with you."

"As a matter of fact, I don't think there is," Wendever replied, making himself comfortable in the patient's chair. "I took a toss a fortnight ago hunting, chose the wrong place in a thick hedge, and came down rather heavily on my left side. I've had a queer spell or two since, and Dudley—our local man—thought I'd better see you."

The physician nodded and reached for his stethoscope.

"Take off your coat and waistcoat," he enjoined.

It was about half an hour later when Hargrave Wendever passed through the portals of the house in Harley Street and hesitated upon the steps.

"Would you like me to call you a taxicab, sir?" the butler, with immutable face, enquired.

"Thanks, I'll pick one up," was the careless reply.

Hargrave strolled down the street—the same street, the same houses on either side, the same heavy, grey atmosphere and slight drizzle of rain. Yet he seemed suddenly to be far removed from it all, to have stepped into some foreign land, to be surrounded with objects familiar enough in themselves but belonging to some other

part of some one else's life. The sort of shock which he had just received might possibly have happened to any one else, might have been discovered in the pages of fiction, might have flashed across the mind for a moment, conceived by the workings of a freakish imagination, but that it should have happened to him, a strong, well-living man in the prime of life, was incomprehensible. He walked mechanically along the broad pavement, and mechanically raised his stick as he came across a wandering taxicab. Leaning back in the corner, he tried to think. His mind, however, for the moment refused to go forward, or to dwell upon that brief period of drama from which he had just emerged. It fixed itself obstinately upon those few breathless moments which had immediately preceded his accident. He recalled the throbbing excitement of the run, the inspiring sensation of a fine horse moving under him, the sudden realisation that he was a little detached from the rest of the field. The fence ahead was unfamiliar, thicker than he cared about, and that stunted oak tree just in his line. Which side should he take it? He made up his mind and afterwards never hesitated, jammed his hat a little farther down upon his head, and went for it without doubt or fear.—Then came the sudden vision of that unexpected widening of the ditch, almost a pithole, on the other side—the crash, and darkness.—Yes, it had been a bad fall, but he had suffered worse. He had recovered consciousness within a few minutes, had almost decided to dine with friends that night, but had been dissuaded. And now—what was it the doctor had said of him—of no other man—of him, Hargrave Wendever? The thing was incredible!

That night, Hargrave Wendever gave a dinner party to three men, all, as it chanced, old school fellows, at his flat in Berkeley Square. On his right sat Philip Gorse, a clergyman of the most modern type, a miracle worker, who a few years previously had taken over a great barnlike church in the heart of London with an occasional congregation of a few score, which he now filled to overflowing three times on Sundays and twice a week. He had two great gifts—earnestness and eloquence—and he was possessed of a nervous, almost passionate hatred of all sorts of humbug. He was a fair, rather delicate-looking man, clean-shaven, with a lined face, a sensitive mouth and clear grey eyes. He wore ordinary dinner clothes, cut in the most correct fashion, and his tempered enjoyment of his host's hospitality left nothing to be desired. On the latter's other side sat Lord Edward Pellingham, a young man who had played at diplomacy and dabbled in politics, but was best known in his world by reason of a delightful disposition, and a philosophy which entailed a placid acceptance of the good things which fall to the lot of even the fourth son of a Duke with an adequate allowance. The concluding member of the party was

John Marston—pink and white and prosperous, with flaxen hair brushed close to his head, a partner in the firm of stockbrokers which Hargrave's great-grandfather had founded, and in which, for a short time, Hargrave himself had been a partner.

They had been speaking of Philip Gorse's amazing success, and during a pause in the conversation, Hargrave asked him a question.

"Tell me, Philip," he enquired, "did you ever try to account for the very strong hold you seem to have acquired over those astonishing congregations of yours? Of course we all know that you have the gift of speech—we realised that at Oxford—but there must be something more than that in it. Sheer eloquence only appeals to people who have imagination themselves, but they tell me that your congregations are drawn chiefly from the most difficult of all classes—small shopkeepers and clerks, and girls who work for their living in the City."

"One of the sights of London is to see the people trying to get into the church on Sunday evening," Marston remarked.

"I know a chap who's given up dining on Sunday night and never misses," Lord Edward Pellingham intervened.

"I don't think it's a matter of eloquence at all," Philip Gorse declared thoughtfully. "There are other men preaching to-day to whom I couldn't hold a candle. I don't think it's even earnestness alone. Earnestness, perhaps, coupled with sympathy. You see," he went on, peeling a peach, "I am all the time trying to live in thought with my people. The series of sermons I am just finishing is a series which I call 'Life's Day by Day Problems'."

"Pretty difficult to tackle some of them," Lord Edward, who had never been called upon to face a problem in his life, sighed.

"And the smaller they are the more perplexing sometimes," Marston observed.

"A man's financial difficulties, for instance," Gorse continued, "the difficulty of making both ends meet and putting a bit on one side on the average salary. That's a subject they can all understand. Trouble with the wife—a little fed up with too much housekeeping and too little pleasure, perhaps. That's another. Discipline of children who are growing up and have ideas of their own. You've no notion how many perfectly everyday problems there are with which a man in moderate circumstances can find himself confronted during the week."

There was a little murmur of appreciation. Hargrave's lips parted for a moment in what seemed to be a smile—a smile, however, which still contained more than a trace of bitterness.

"I will present you with a problem which occurred to me to-day," he said. "You three represent entirely different points of view. You shall each give me your ideas.

Supposing that for some reason or other a man like any one of us four, prosperous, healthy, in good odour with the world, were suddenly faced with the termination of his career, in say six or eight months' time, how would you, supposing you were that man, spend the interval?"

"Do you mean if one knew that one were going to die?" Marston enquired.

"Not necessarily," Hargrave replied. "I want you, if you can, to conceive the position in this way. To-day is the seventh of January, isn't it? Say on the seventh of July you had to step into some utterly different condition of life or state of existence, and that nothing you could do between now and then could make any difference; exactly how should you spend that six months?"

"No problem at all about that for me," Pellingham declared promptly. "Not having any one dependent upon me, I should raise every penny I had in the world, I should hire a villa—as beautiful as yours out at Monte Carlo, if I could find it, Hargrave—select the most agreeable companions from amongst my friends to bear me company, charter a yacht for short cruises, and imbibe so far as possible the spirit of Boccaccio's charming puppets."

"A characteristic start," Hargrave observed. "What about you, Marston?"

Marston removed his eyeglass and scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"Well," he said, "it's a bit of a problem, but I think, if I were to yield to my natural inclinations, I should do what I've never had the courage to attempt yet—because of my partners for one thing, and because of my position on the Stock Exchange for another—I'd go in for an almighty and wonderful speculation. I'd select one of several stocks I know of, with a free market, and I wouldn't go for it piecemeal either—I'd go for it as the Americans do—smash it to pieces or boost it to the skies. You fellows aren't speculators, I know, and you've no idea what self-restraint a stockbroker has to exercise. There's no fascination in the world like the fascination of the legitimate gamble if you once give way to it."

"And you, Philip?" Hargrave asked, surprising the other's eyes fixed upon him with a curious intentness.

Philip Gorse shrugged his shoulders.

"Well," he said, "I don't know that there's much I would change in my life. I'm as happy as any man ought to be. I love my work, but I couldn't work any harder. I have enough to eat and drink and good friends. I think I should go on pretty well as I'm going now."

"H'm! You're all three more characteristic than illuminating," Hargrave remarked, pouring himself out a glass of wine and passing the decanter.

"We're logical, anyhow," Marston rejoined. "As a matter of fact, if we were

honest with ourselves I think we should find that half our conduct of life is influenced by the fear of results. If we were quite sure that there was no aftermath of life left for regrets we should at least for once in our lives be natural.”

Gorse dissented, and for a few minutes there was argument. Pellingham wound it up by a direct appeal to his host.

“What about yourself, Hargrave?” he enquired. “You are, after all, more completely master of your fate than any of us. You’re full of resources, and no dependents—a hunting man, a golfer, a dilettante in the arts, unmarried and sickeningly well off. If you had to concentrate you’d find it pretty difficult to know where to spread yourself.”

“I wonder,” Hargrave murmured.

CHAPTER II

The party broke up early. Pellingham was attending a farewell supper to a bevy of beautiful damsels from the other side, whom Broadway was once more claiming for its own, and Marston had to see a Colonial client at his hotel. Philip Gorse lingered.

“Going on anywhere, Hargrave?” he asked. “Or have you time for a pipe and a whisky and soda?”

“I’m your man,” the other agreed promptly. “I was just wondering whether it was worth while going round to the Club. Come along to my den.”

The two men left the very correct but somewhat severe atmosphere of the Georgian dining room, with its odour of choice exotics and Havana cigars, and made their way to a comfortable room at the back of the house where the walls were lined with books and sporting prints; gun cases, tennis racquets and golf clubs were stacked in the vacant corners and a general atmosphere of warm comfort prevailed. Philip Gorse lit his pipe with a grunt of satisfaction.

“Best hour of the day,” he observed, settling himself in an easy-chair. “Chuck me out when you’ve had enough though. I don’t want to keep you up.”

“Stay just as long as you like,” Hargrave invited, throwing himself into an easy-chair opposite his guest. “I’ve a few letters to write before I go to bed—nothing of any importance—and I hate going too early.”

“Any particular reason for your putting that problem to us to-night?” Philip Gorse enquired, looking across at his friend through the cloud of tobacco smoke.

Hargrave continued for a moment to smoke meditatively.

“In a way,” he admitted. “I took a nasty toss about a fortnight ago and I went to see a doctor this afternoon. He gave me—well, rather a shock.”

“Nothing really serious, I hope?” the other asked anxiously.

“May not be,” Hargrave replied. “He said he would know better in six months. These fellows won’t tell you outright, you know, Philip, but between you and me I pretty well got my marching orders.”

Philip Gorse laid down his pipe. His eyes were filled with sympathy but his expression at first was more incredulous than grave.

“But, my dear fellow!” he exclaimed. “You have the constitution of an ox. Did he examine you properly?”

“Pretty well stripped me,” Hargrave acknowledged. “But the trouble of it is that my local man who sent me to him evidently thought there was something wrong, and

he's no fool.—Don't talk about this, there's a good chap," Hargrave went on, after a moment's pause. "It's been rather a shock, of course, but, dash it all, it might have happened at any moment during the War, and it's got to happen some day to all of us. It's only the unexpectedness of it that takes one's breath away just at first."

Andrews, the butler, entered the room, with the whisky and soda. His quiet, stereotyped movements and deferential speech seemed to restore to normality an atmosphere which a moment before had been charged with tragedy. Hargrave's tone was almost matter-of-fact as the door closed behind him.

"You understand now, Philip," he went on, "what was in my mind this evening."

Philip Gorse knew his friend too well even to try to express the sympathy which was in his heart. Nevertheless his eyes were a little dim and his voice was not quite steady.

"I shouldn't take this too seriously, Hargrave," he begged. "These fellows often make mistakes."

"I don't think Horridge does," was the somewhat grim reply. "However, let's put that behind us for the time. Consider the problem which I propounded now applied to myself. Give me your advice."

Philip Gorse relit his pipe with trembling fingers.

"Very well then, Hargrave," he said. "I'll try. First of all, I'd wipe out from your mind all that Pellingham said. You are not and never could be a man of Pellingham's type. You have sought for pleasure and found it, I presume, as you have a perfect right to, when it is not at the expense of others, but you have done it with restraint—if one can use such a word, with taste. Don't think that because I'm a clergyman, old chap, I don't understand and appreciate these things. I have kept one foot in either world and I peer into many. For a man of your world, Hargrave—if you don't mind my saying so—I've always had a sneaking admiration for you. You've never been blatant. There has always been a flavour of epicureanism about the way you have sought the best, the healthiest things in life. Don't let go of that just because of this crisis. Even though what the doctor told you might come true, you won't gain anything in a mad search for new sensations. You'll only lose the most admirable thing in your life."

Hargrave nodded approvingly.

"Good advice," he admitted. "I may step out a little but I don't think I shall lose my head. Get on with it. Remember that I am a very wealthy man, wealthier even than any one of my friends imagines."

"Notwithstanding that," Gorse said, "I certainly shouldn't suggest for an instant that you tried to make a bargain with the Almighty by giving huge sums to charity, or

anything of that sort.”

“But what about your own poor?”

“All well taken care of. No one with my experience could say that this was not a charitable age. Why, I have offers nearly every day from all sorts of people, and the offertories, considering the class of my congregation, are enormous.”

“You’ve done a great work, Philip,” Hargrave acknowledged sympathetically. “You’ve done what so few of us accomplish—you’ve done a great work for others. It makes one thoughtful, you know, to think of the difference between your life and mine. I haven’t any unwholesome craving to make, as you say, a bargain with the Almighty, but I should like to feel that I had done something that was worth while, given some poor devils a lift, or something of that sort, before I passed in my checks.”

Gorse sipped his whisky and soda.

“If I were in your position, Hargrave,” he advised gently, “I don’t believe I’d worry so much about the poor. The hospitals need help, of course, but the very poor have never been so well cared for as to-day, and I’m afraid, as a practical Christian, I must admit that those who remain down and out do so more from lack of character than absence of help. If I were you, I should try the other class. It is more difficult, of course, because they are more sensitive, but I’ve come to the conclusion that since the War there’s more real suffering amongst what are called the ‘lower middles’, the shopgirls and shopmen, clerks and people like that, who have a certain position to keep up, than the very poor. They can’t accept charity, and who is there to help them?”

“But how do you come across them?” Hargrave demanded.

“A matter of chance, I suppose,” Gorse admitted. “I have had one or two cases amongst those who came to ask my advice in the vestry. I have no one on my list just now, thank goodness. You’ll find some one, if you’ll keep your eyes open. And there’s another thing, Hargrave, keeping your eyes open in such a quest is in itself a good thing. It prevents a man from becoming selfish and self-centered. Go about for the next few days or weeks, looking for some one who seems unhappy. If you don’t happen to find any one with whom you can get into touch the very attitude of mind takes your thoughts off your own troubles and does you good.”

Hargrave smiled a little whimsically.

“It’s all very well for you,” he pointed out. “You’ve brought yourself into such sympathy with your fellow creatures that you can tell instinctively when they need help, and you’d approach them also in such a way that no one could possibly resent a question from you. I couldn’t go up to an anæmic-looking young woman, with a

hole in her shoe and a shabby frock, and take off my hat and say, ‘Madame, I fear you are in distress. Can I be of any assistance?’ She’d probably hand me over to the nearest policeman, if she was honest, or try to march me down to Pimlico if she wasn’t.”

Philip Gorse laughed softly. He glanced at the clock and knocked out his pipe.

“Hargrave, old chap,” he said, “I am glad we’ve had this talk. I’m not going to believe the worst part of it, and I wouldn’t let my thoughts dwell upon it myself, if I were you. You can send me a moderate-sized cheque for my shelter scheme, if you like—not more than a hundred pounds—but keep your eyes open for the other things, and something will come along. Perhaps you’d better leave the young ladies alone, but sometimes one comes across really human trouble in the most unexpected places. And listen,” he went on earnestly, “it isn’t always pounds, shillings and pence that count. It’s the greyness of life that’s so horrible to some of these people who have a little imagination and slender means. There’s nothing of the Calvinist about me, you know. I believe in pleasure, and I believe people have a right to it. You can do just as much good in the world by bringing a little brightness into the lives of people who can’t find it for themselves as you can by supporting soup kitchens or any other form of charity. There’s real human charity, for instance, in cinema tickets for the young people who have to give up all their earnings to keep the home going—one can always pretend they are complimentary—or the loan of a car for the day to a man who would give anything to take his wife and family into the country and can’t. These little things will come your way, if you keep on looking out for them.”

Hargrave smiled ruefully as he walked down the hall and lingered by the lift with his guest.

“You’ve the gift of finding these people, Philip,” he remarked.

“Easily developed,” the other assured him cheerfully. “You often don’t need to give to complete strangers either. Just keep your eyes open amongst the people you meet casually in one day, and see for yourself who there is missing the sunlight.”

The lift came noiselessly up. Almost for the first time there was a note of real seriousness in Gorse’s tone as he clasped hands with his friend.

“Don’t brood about that other matter, old fellow,” he begged. “It may be right, or it may be wrong. You and I can’t alter it. Get off somewhere and enjoy yourself—Monte Carlo, I should say. We each have our time fixed, and when it comes we were both born men.”

CHAPTER III

Hargrave Wendever began the next day without any of that sense of boredom which had at times depressed him. Subconsciously he knew that something fresh and tragic had taken its place in his life, but with that knowledge was born also the stern intention to keep the memory of it back in the secret places, to live through his days without brooding or profitless regrets. Nearer the surface, he was aware of a new interest, a new search to conduct. He noticed with satisfaction that Andrews, who when in town combined the duties of butler and valet, was looking a little tired.

"You're not quite yourself to-day, Andrews," he remarked, as, after his bath and leisurely toilet were completed, he sat down to breakfast. "I've been keeping you up too late, I'm afraid."

Andrews negatived the suggestion emphatically but respectfully.

"Not at all, Sir Hargrave," he insisted. "The fact is——"

He coughed and hesitated. Hargrave did his best to adopt a sympathetic attitude.

"Some little trouble?" he suggested hopefully. "Get it off your chest, Andrews."

"Not at all, Sir Hargrave," the man replied. "The fact is, the wife has come into a bit of money lately—an uncle of hers who kept a public house—and we had a sort of celebration—after you'd gone to bed, of course, sir—a little party round in the mews here. We were not perhaps altogether discreet."

"I see," Hargrave murmured, his expectations somewhat dashed. "Congratulate your wife for me, Andrews. I hope that won't mean that you're not coming down South with me?"

"Not at all, Sir Hargrave," the man assured him. "We are, I am thankful to say, in easy circumstances, but we know a good place when we have it."

Hargrave finished his breakfast and presently strolled out towards his coiffeur. On the way he called at his gunmaker's. A superior but despondent-looking young man came forward and received his complaint about some too lightly loaded cartridges.

"Very sorry, sir," he apologised. "I'll see that it doesn't happen again."

"Business seems a little quiet with you," Hargrave remarked, glancing around.

"It's just a trifle early, sir," the young man explained. "As a matter of fact, we've never had a better season."

"Mr. Martin keeping well?" Hargrave enquired, referring to the principal of the firm.

Mr. Martin came hurriedly forward to answer the enquiry for himself.

“Very well indeed, thank you, Sir Hargrave,” he announced; “very well but a bit worried.”

Hargrave tapped a cigarette upon his case thoughtfully. He remembered stories he had heard about respectable tradesmen who had been obliged to go through the ignominy of failure through lack of sufficient capital.

“Worried, eh?” he repeated. “Why, how’s that, Mr. Martin? Business is good, isn’t it?”

“Never knew it better,” the gunmaker confessed. “The fact is, sir,” he confided, lowering his voice, “I’ve had a very wonderful offer for amalgamation with another firm—one of the tiptop houses—and I can’t quite make up my mind whether to accept it or not.”

“I see,” Hargrave murmured, by this time thoroughly discouraged. “Well, good luck to you, whichever way you decide.”

Notwithstanding a slight rain he continued his journey on foot and came to the conclusion by the time he had reached his hair-dresser’s that he had never seen a more contented and cheerful-looking lot of pedestrians. At the coiffeur’s he was received with all the consideration due to an occasional but respected client. He submitted himself to the ministrations of his regular attendant, who shaved him and trimmed his hair.

“You’re looking very well, Sir Hargrave, if I may be permitted to say so,” the young man remarked.

“Yes, I’m very well,” Hargrave acknowledged. “Sorry I can’t say the same of you,” he added, with a sudden gleam of hope as he noticed the lines under the young man’s eyes. “You look as though you needed a holiday. A month down at the seaside, eh?”

The assistant leaned confidentially down.

“To tell you the truth, sir,” he admitted, “me and my young woman had a bit of a tiff last night. She’s earning too much money, and that makes her uppish. I worried about it and couldn’t sleep. She’ll be all right to-day, though.”

“I hope so,” Hargrave remarked drily, as he rose to his feet, slipped his usual tip into the young man’s hand and passed into the manicure room.

The manageress bustled forward to meet him.

“Miss Martin is disengaged, sir,” she announced, “the only young lady we have free at the moment.”

“Miss Martin will do very nicely for me,” Hargrave replied, as he seated himself in the vacant cubicle.

Entirely from this recently acquired habit, he looked more closely than ever before into the face of the attendant who had drawn her stool to his side. She was perhaps a little pale, but it was a face entirely free from any signs of discontent. For the first time, he realised that she was, notwithstanding the extreme simplicity of her clothes, a remarkably good-looking young woman. She had a clear skin, utterly untouched by cosmetics, soft hazel-brown eyes, a quantity of neatly arranged light brown hair, and a delightful mouth. Her figure—peculiarly graceful she seemed as she leaned forward—was still the figure of a young girl, and the casual interest with which he had looked at her was merged, somewhat to his surprise, in a genuine admiration. Nevertheless she bent over her task, as he was bound to perceive, with rather less animation than was her custom.

“Is it my fancy,” he asked presently, “or are you not quite as cheerful as usual this morning?”

She looked up at him quickly, almost nervously.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s hard to be cheerful this weather, though, isn’t it?”

“I should think so,” he admitted, looking gloomily out of the window.

“Besides,” she went on, “as a rule you have the air of not wanting to talk much.”

“I’m afraid you must find me a little unsociable.”

She shook her head.

“Not at all. Why should you expect to be talked to or to talk whilst you are having your nails done? Purposeless conversation is so irritating, isn’t it?”

“One might talk more seriously,” he suggested.

She examined one of his nails thoughtfully and changed the file she was using.

“One might,” she admitted, “but it would be rather difficult to find different subjects with one’s casual clients, wouldn’t it? They tell me, for instance, that you’re a hunting man. Well, I don’t know anything about hunting.”

“I hear enough of it down at home,” he remarked. “I’d rather talk about what interests you—the best film to see, or the best show at the theatres.”

“There again, I’m no use,” she confided. “I haven’t been to either for a month.”

Hargrave sat up a little in his chair.

“Why not?” he ventured.

“Lack of invitations, I suppose,” she answered lightly. “One or two people who used to ask me out sometimes don’t bother about me any more. I have come to the conclusion that I am a very unpopular person.”

He looked at her again curiously. Although he was not in any sense of the word a woman’s man, he had very correct tastes, and with them considerable insight. He realised for the first time, in those few moments, that apart from her physical qualities

she was really a young woman of marked attractions. Her expression pleased him. There was a pleasant frankness about her speech, a lack of embarrassment without familiarity which was distinctive. Her personality, too, impressed him more favourably every time he looked at her.

“If I may say so without impertinence,” he remarked, “I should have thought that you would have been a very popular person indeed amongst the younger members of my sex.”

“I really am not,” she assured him, smiling. “Even if I were, I don’t know that it would give me much satisfaction. Most of the young men I meet, at any rate, are painfully alike in every respect.”

“I’m afraid we older ones are pretty well made in the same mould,” he ventured. She looked up at him quickly.

“I would rather think that you weren’t,” she said.

She completed her task, handed him a ticket and rose a little abruptly to her feet. She shook her head dubiously at the tip he laid upon the table.

“You should not give me so much,” she protested.

He affected not to hear, and hurried off. At the door, he glanced around. She was standing with her hands behind her, looking out through the streaming windowpanes, and there was something in her expression which haunted him for the rest of the day.

Hargrave lunched by appointment with Marston at his Club. The conversation was casual enough until the cigars and coffee had arrived. Then Hargrave, after a careful glance around the room to make sure that they were not overheard, leaned forward in his chair.

“John,” he confided, “I want to buy O. P. Trusts.”

The broker nodded.

“For investment?”

“For a speculation.”

Marston looked at his host keenly.

“You know the man who holds nearly all the stock?”

“I know,” Hargrave assented. “Andrea Trentino—the man who broke poor Ned Penlow.”

“A great pal of yours, Ned Penlow, wasn’t he?”

“He was so much of a pal,” Hargrave admitted, “that for the last two years I have been wondering whether I wouldn’t try to get even with that blackguard Trentino. I came to the conclusion that it might cost even more than I could afford.”

Within the last few hours I've changed my mind."

"The Company isn't doing any too well," Marston pointed out, a little dubiously. "I wouldn't get in too deep."

"That's just the reason," Hargrave remarked, "why I think Trentino will be eager to sell. What I want him to be is just a little too eager. So long as he doesn't know who's buying, I should think that might happen."

"You want to control the stock?"

"I want to do more than that—I want to corner it."

Marston considered the matter for a moment or two.

"Well," he said, "it's just the sort of semi-proprietary affair which might make the thing possible, but it's only just to point out that it might involve you in very heavy loss. Trentino's a shrewd fellow."

"I'm willing to lose half a million, if necessary," Hargrave announced.

The stockbroker was not altogether comfortable. Hargrave was considerably more than a client. The two men were really in their way friends, and the memory of last night's conversation loomed up before Marston in sinister fashion.

"You're a bit reckless, aren't you, what?" he ventured.

"There are times in a man's life when he gets that way," was the indifferent reply.

"Apropos of our conversation last night," Marston began—

His companion checked him.

"Get ahead with the buying and let me hear from you continually, John," he directed. "I shall be off to Monte Carlo in a day or two. There's always a bed for you at the villa, or a room at the hotel, if you feel like running down as my guest."

"Shouldn't I love it!" the other sighed, with a glance through the window at the murky obscurity outside. "I might take you at your word."

Hargrave rose to his feet.

"You'll be very welcome at any time," he said, as the two men strolled towards the door together.

At the corner of Bond Street, Hargrave came face to face with Miss Violet Martin. Save for his recently awakened interest, he would certainly have failed to recognise her. She wore a shabby mackintosh, a hat, once becoming enough, but whose antiquity was only justified by the abominable weather, and the umbrella, which she was clutching in her hand, displayed at least one partially naked rib. She looked at him with surprise, as he accosted her.

"A tragedy has happened," he announced solemnly. "Forgive my stopping you, but I have broken a finger nail."

She suddenly laughed, for the humour of his grave tone was irresistible.

“If you’ll come in, I’ll see what I can do for you,” she suggested. He turned as though to accompany her. She shook her head. “In ten minutes, please,” she begged. “I—I have a call to make.” “In ten minutes,” he assented tactfully.

CHAPTER IV

Hargrave, to pass the time, strolled into a famous hatter's and made an unnecessary purchase. A quarter of an hour later, he presented himself at the manicuring room, where the manageress greeted him with extreme affability but some surprise.

"I have an appointment with Miss Martin," he explained, "a slight misfortune to one of my nails."

She ushered him into the room, where the manicurist was already waiting for him. He withdrew his gloves slowly.

"Which is it?" she enquired, leaning forward from her stool.

"As a matter of fact," he confessed, "I made a slight mistake. What I meant to say was that I found your polish not sufficient. I prefer them—er—highly glazed—and I should like you to spend another ten minutes upon them. And in the meanwhile, I have something to say to you."

She looked at him anxiously. The bright light in her pleasant brown eyes had gone; instead there was an expression of cold anxiety.

"It will be nothing," he added hastily, "to which you could possibly take exception."

"I am quite sure of that," she replied, selecting a pad.

"I am proposing," he went on, "to write a book, and incidentally I am studying various types of life. One meets a great many interesting people during the day, but one very seldom gets to know anything about them—their tastes or desires—because one naturally does not wish to seem unduly curious. Will you do me the favour of answering a question—not, I can assure you, an impertinent one."

"Of course," she assented, a little bewildered. "But why come to me, of all people in the world?"

"Because one only comes in touch with a limited number of people of a certain type," he explained patiently, "and you happen to be one of the few who have interested me. You have pleaded guilty to a distinct distaste for life. I take that as the basis of my questions. In the first place, can you tell me why you are dissatisfied, and in the second place, will you tell me what in the whole world would give you the greatest pleasure at the present time, apart from a direct gift of money, which we will rule out of the question."

For a single moment, even her mouth lost its beauty. Her lips were drawn rigidly together; a heavy frown gave her almost a morose expression.

"I am depressed, I suppose," she acknowledged, "because I am full of envy and malice."

She picked up an illustrated paper, which she had been reading when he came in, and tapped with her finger one of the pages. It was a glittering vision of Monte Carlo, bathed in the sunshine, with girls in shady hats and men in flannels. She tapped it almost angrily and pointed out of the window.

"That is the cause of my depression," she told him. "To look at them and think of the amazing happiness of it all, then to look out of the window at that cold, grey rain, and to know that by night-time it will probably have become sleet, the pavements will be wet and the wind will come whirling round the corners."

"Would you like to go to Monte Carlo?" he asked.

She flashed an indignant glance upon him.

"What an insane question!" she exclaimed.—"I beg your pardon," she added hastily, making an effort to restrain herself, "but of course I should. Don't we all love the sunshine—and the cruel part of it is that it really does seem as though I were the only person in the world who is not going."

He looked at her questioningly. She bent a little closer over her imaginary task.

"You know Miss Pownell—Rose Pownell—the short, dark girl who does your nails sometimes. Well, she's going on Monday for a fortnight—with an uncle. Clara Smith is there already—staying with friends. She sent us a picture postcard only a day or two ago, telling us how wonderful it was. And Maisie Green, the tall girl, with the wonderful coloured hair—she's going on Friday—to join a married sister. Even Mrs. Ross herself, the manageress, is off to Cannes next week."

"Have all these young ladies," he asked, a little diffidently, "the good fortune to possess wealthy relatives?"

"Of course not," she snapped. "They each have their own story and they tell it so often that they almost believe it themselves, but they're all going with men they met here."

"And has no one asked you?"

"Oh, they leave me alone now," she answered bitterly. "I used to have invitations of sorts once upon a time. Now, I don't even get asked to the cinema. Perhaps it's as well. It saves me a great deal of trouble."

He hesitated.

"You mean, in plain words, that you are paying the price for keeping straight," he ventured.

"That's just it," she admitted, "and on a day like this one begins to wonder whether it's worth while. All the same, it's a cruel and beastly world."

He sat for several moments in silence. Presently she continued. Her tone was half apologetic, half sadder than ever, with its attempt at cheerfulness.

“I’m afraid I’ve been boring you,” she said. “This terrible weather has got on my nerves, I suppose. I don’t know what I’m grumbling at. Their way of living wouldn’t suit me, after all, so that’s the end of it.—There isn’t a thing more I can do to your nails. I’m afraid you’ll have to pay, although it seems ridiculous.”

He watched her write out the ticket.

“Would you like to come to Monte Carlo on, say, Thursday week?” he asked abruptly. “And stay there for two months?”

Her fingers trembled as she handed him the slip. The look in her eyes, too, hurt him.

“I’m sorry you asked me that,” she said. “I suppose it was my fault, though.”

He spoke almost sharply—perhaps the best thing he could have done.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he begged. “You haven’t even heard my offer, and I can’t imagine why you should think that I am the sort of man to make an ugly bargain with you for the sake of two or three months’ pleasure. Look at me and be honest. Do you think I am?”

“I didn’t think so,” she admitted. “No.”

“Don’t be absurd then,” he went on. “I am rich. If I told you how much money I am worth, you would think that I was romancing. I told you a falsehood when I said that I was writing a book, but all the same I want to make an experiment. I will explain it later on, but all that you need know now is simple enough. I will take you to Monte Carlo, and a sister or a brother—whichever you have who can be spared. I will pay the whole of your expenses and the expenses of your outfit—yours and your companion’s, of course. I will also arrange for your absence from your occupations. When I have done all this, it will cost me as little in proportion to my income as the shilling or eighteen-pence you have spent upon your luncheon. Now, do you begin to understand?”

“But why should you do this for me?” she asked breathlessly.

“Because,” he answered patiently, “you are the first person whom I have come across who exactly fulfills the conditions, since I determined to make my experiment. I offer you two months in the sunshine, without a thought or responsibility in the world, if you care for it, and I guarantee that so far as I am concerned it shall not cost you a single shred of your self-respect.”

She coloured a little.

“I was silly just now,” she confessed. “Please forgive me. All the same, it isn’t possible. Of course it isn’t possible.”

“Think it over,” he suggested. “I shall take some one else who wants a change, if not you. You’ll be a very foolish girl if you don’t come.”

The vision tantalized her. The light swept across her face. She yielded for a moment to the joy of the idea.

“But—where should I stay?” she asked.

“At my villa, if you are able to bring a brother,” he replied. “If not, I should find rooms for you.”

She opened her lips. More than once afterwards he wondered what it was that she had been about to say. Some thought seemed to flash into her mind. She was a little frightened; she kept silent.

“I am not in a position to offer you a long time to think it over,” he continued. “On the other hand, I can’t believe that you’ll be quite so foolish as to need long to make up your mind. Here is my card,” he went on, selecting one and laying it upon the stool, “and I am going to dine at home to-night alone. You will find me in at any time up till midnight. I shall expect you, and bring with you, if you like, your brother or your sister, whichever is available. Remember that it will not cost you a single penny. There will be no trouble about clothes, and I shall arrange for your absence from your work.”

She was too bewildered even to thank him for the customary tip which he laid upon her stool. He took the ticket from her unresisting fingers, and with a brief “good afternoon” passed out—a tall, distinguished-looking figure, with his long, serious face and air of complete detachment. She sat there with the card crushed up in her hand, looking after him.

CHAPTER V

It was the one hour of the day when a gleam of cheerfulness seemed to relieve the gloom of the murky thoroughfares notwithstanding the muddy crossings and the rain-splashed pavements. For the majority of the tired world work was over for the day. The crowd of shoppers had departed; the streams of pedestrians left were either homeward or on pleasure bent. Lights flashed from the restaurants outside which commissionaires, umbrellas in hand, were taking their stands. Cinema palaces and eating houses seemed more than ever havens of refuge full of the promise of warmth and comfort, a shelter from the dreariness they flouted. A meretricious garishness had transformed Piccadilly Circus into a nightmare of blazing sky signs and turned the dripping mist above into a golden haze. Violet, notwithstanding her shabby mackintosh and doubtful hat, excited more than one glance of interest as she passed with flying footsteps up Regent Street, across the Circus and turned into Shaftesbury Avenue. For the first time for many weeks, there was something outside the dreary day-by-day routine to think about; a dream, perhaps utterly impossible, but something the mere thought of which had reacted upon her warm, fresh youth and brought the colour into her cheeks and the light back into her tired eyes. The young man whom she met at the corner of one of the streets near the Palace stared at her.

“Why, what’s the matter, Violet?” he demanded. “Any one left you a fortune?”

She thrust her arm through his. He was wearing a threadbare overcoat, which bore the hall-mark of the ready-made tailor’s appeal to the would-be smart youth of a few seasons ago. His turned-up trousers displayed exceedingly muddy boots and he carried neither stick nor umbrella. His features were without distinction, but fairly good of their sort, although his mouth was querulous. His tone indicated ill-temper.

“No one has left me anything,” she declared, “but I have had a good tip and I have five and seven-pence halfpenny left of my week’s money. No tea and toast to-night, Robert. We are going to the Café Rose.”

“Can’t be done,” he replied gloomily. “You know jolly well it’s a two-shilling dinner and I can’t afford it. I’ll go on to my rooms and get Mrs. Smith——”

“Don’t be an idiot!” Violet interrupted. “As though I should leave you alone! Didn’t I tell you I’d had a good tip? It’s my treat. It’s a filthy day, and a filthy climate, and a filthy life, but we’re going to forget it for half an hour.”

“Whom did you get a good tip from?” he demanded suspiciously.

“A regular customer,” she assured him. “Only he happened to come in twice to-

day. Don't be absurd, please, Robert. I'm so hungry."

He was easily persuaded. He generally was when it was a matter which ministered to his physical comfort. He even breathed a sigh of relief as they sat down in the stuffy little restaurant and studied the menu.

"Hot soup!" he exclaimed. "That's good, Violet. I wonder——"

He felt in his pockets. Violet held out her hand.

"I told you that it was my treat," she insisted.

"That's all right," he repeated. "As a matter of fact it would have to be. I was just wondering whether I could raise the price of two gins and bitters."

"You don't need to," she replied, promptly ordering them. "I'm rolling in money. Didn't I tell you that I actually got a tip to-day like the other girls get sometimes."

"Not for the same reason, I hope," he grumbled.

"As you very well know, so shut up," she retorted calmly.

The gin and bitters came. He began to crumble his bread.

"Will you hear my news first?" he asked.

"All right," she agreed. "Mine wants a lot of talking about."

"Mine doesn't," he rejoined. "I've got the sack."

"Robert!" she exclaimed.

"No fault of mine," he assured her. "I've got a good recommendation, if that's anything. It's the firm that's doing no good. I've been expecting it for a long time. I knew some of us would have to go, and the others had all been there longer than I had. The manager of our department came and told me himself that he was sorry."

She was thoughtful. It was rather a shock, but in one respect it simplified matters. She glanced at the menu.

"After the soup," she said, "there's fish, and some beef. When we've had the soup and the fish, and when we begin the beef and when you've finished your gin and bitters and drank your first glass of claret, I'll tell you my news."

He was curious, but even his curiosity could not prevail against his hunger. She watched him, pretending not to notice, but she knew and her own resolution every moment became stronger. The lack of food to a woman so often seems to her nothing but an inconvenience; to a man she esteems it a tragedy.—She found occasion to transfer a little of her own fish to his plate—they had over-served her, she assured him. She ordered recklessly a further supply of rolls and butter. Then the beef appeared and she leaned forward.

"Robert," she began, "what I am going to tell you sounds incredible, but you must believe it exactly as I tell it to you. You may wonder and speculate just as I do, but you must please believe that everything happened exactly as I tell it."

She knew him so well—jealous even in their misery, grudging her the slightest attentions from others, jealously insistent always upon his rights as her fiancé—he who had nothing to give, whose strongest claim was upon her pity.

“Ever since I have been there,” she went on, “and for a very long time before, I believe, a gentleman has been coming to Tremlett’s to have his hair done and to be manicured afterwards. Somehow or other he drifted into being my customer, and it is he whom I have always told you about who gives me such a large tip.”

“I know,” Robert remarked suspiciously. “You’ve always said that he behaved as though you scarcely existed. What about him?”

“You’ll hardly believe what I’m going to tell you,” she repeated, “but you’ve got to, because it’s the literal truth. To-day I was depressed. He talked to me a little more than usual. He spoke about the sunshine down upon the Riviera and how every one who could was hurrying off there to get away from this awful weather. I told him that several of the girls were going, and I suppose he couldn’t help seeing how I felt about it.”

“So he asked you to go with him, eh?” Robert demanded, with a sudden evil twist to his mouth. “A nice nerve you’ve got to come and tell me about it! Are you going?”

“You promised to listen without interrupting,” she reminded him quietly. “Please keep your word. My story is difficult enough to make you understand without your starting with any wrong ideas. Now, I tell you frankly, I don’t know whether this man is really just like all the others, or a crank, or simply the best-hearted person in the world. He has no personal interest in me; he has never even held my fingers in the way the other men do when I am at work, yet he made me an offer, and he made it in a way that no one could take exception to. You must believe that, Robert,” she added, watching his morose expression, “or I shall not finish what I have to tell you.”

“Well, go on,” he conceded.

“He has a villa at Monte Carlo and he told me that if I could find a brother or a sister to go with me, he would take us down on Thursday week for two months, all our expenses to be paid, and he would be responsible for our situations when we returned.”

The young man laughed unpleasantly.

“Well,” he said, “I suppose there are plenty of that sort of man in the West End.”

Violet looked steadily at her companion across the table. There was a delightful and very becoming firmness in her expression, the whole dignity of a scrupulously clean mind.

“There is one thing, Robert, which you may not say to me,” she reminded him,

“nor may you hint at it. This man is a gentleman, as my father was, and I should trust him in the same way. Shall I go on or shall we consider the subject closed?”

“Yes, go on,” he invited, a little ashamed of himself. “It isn’t you I’m doubting, and anyway, you haven’t a brother or a sister.”

“No,” she assented, “but I have you.”

“Me!”

He stared at her in amazement. The colour rose slightly in her cheeks.

“Robert,” she said, “I’ve had two horrible years, as you know, and during the whole of the struggle I’ve kept my end up. I haven’t even told a fib. I’ve gone just as straight as any human being could. I’ve had the same chances as other girls, and I haven’t considered them. But I’m very human indeed, Robert. I hate misery and ugliness and poverty. I loathe my day-by-day life. A few more years of it would be the end of me. I have made up my mind, if you are willing, to take this chance.”

“If I am willing?” he gasped.

“To be my brother,” she explained. “That is what I propose. You see how quickly I must have made up my mind without knowing it. My first impulse was to tell him that I hadn’t a brother. I didn’t do it. My very silence suggested that I had.”

“You mean me to go to Monte Carlo too?” he muttered, in a bewildered tone.

“That is precisely what I do mean,” she acknowledged calmly. “Now, go on with your dinner, please, before it gets cold, and think for a minute or two. We’ll talk again later.”

He obeyed, and by degrees the idea began to form itself in his mind. He came of middle-class people, comfortably enough placed before the War. The idea of luxury warmed his blood, filled him with all manner of sensuous anticipations. Yet at the same time there was underneath a morbid sense of jealousy. He drank another half-glass of wine.

“Who is this man?” he asked, his tone a little thick.

“His name is Wendever,” she confided; “Sir Hargrave Wendever. He is a Baronet, and I believe very rich indeed. He lives in the country but comes to town for a night most weeks.”

“How old is he?”

“I should think from thirty-eight to forty. You will be able to judge for yourself later on, because I am taking you to see him.”

“What—to-night?”

“To-night. You see, Robert, we’ve got to accept.”

“But we’ll be found out.”

“We’re going to risk it.”

“Why not tell him the truth? Why not tell him you’re engaged to me?” he demanded suspiciously.

For a moment she hesitated. A troubled look passed across her face.

“I want to be quite frank with you, Robert,” she said. “I’m perfectly certain that this man is honest. I am perfectly certain that he has no personal feeling for me at all, except one of pity, and yet underneath you know men are all so much alike in the small things. I can fancy his being generous to me and to a brother of mine. I may be wronging him, he might feel exactly the same towards me and a fiancé, but I’m not sure—I wasn’t sure then—and I dared not risk it.”

“You think he’d back out?”

“It wouldn’t be backing out,” she reminded him, “because I should not be fulfilling the terms. It is for your sake as much as mine that I hesitated. If you say so, we’ll go to him to-night and I’ll admit that I have no brother or sister, but that I’m engaged to you, and I’ll ask him if he’ll take us both. If he says no—well, we’ve lost our chance, that’s all.”

The young man shivered at the bare idea.

“How long was it for?” he asked irrelevantly. “And what about clothes?”

“Two months,” she answered, “and as for clothes, he mentioned that himself. He has promised to arrange it all. Think what it would mean, Robert. We should leave here next week, and twenty-four hours after we left Victoria there would be the sunshine and the music and the sea, no work, nothing to do but to wander about and enjoy ourselves. We should leave behind the taste of the fog in our throats, and the sound of the rain pattering upon the windowpanes, the eight o’clock hammering at the door, the cup of weak tea with black things floating round in it, and the grey skies, the grey hours, the grey days.”

The young man moistened his dry lips feverishly, poured out the last drop of wine and drank it.

“When were we to see him?” he demanded hoarsely.

“To-night. Any time. At his house in Berkeley Square.”

“Let’s go,” he proposed. “I can’t sit still until we know whether it’s true or not.”

CHAPTER VI

The room into which the two young people were ushered upon their arrival seemed to them like a foretaste of the luxury to come. They found themselves seated upon a huge divan, close to a roaring fire, piled with blazing logs. The curtains were thick enough to deaden the sounds from the streets outside. A few impressive oil paintings hung upon the walls. On a massive mahogany sideboard a coffee tray, bottles of liqueur, cigars and cigarettes were displayed. Low bookcases encircled the room, and on the writing table was a marvellous bronze, a replica of Donatello's "David."

"Sir Hargrave is just finishing dinner," the manservant who had shown them in announced. "He desires me to say that he will be with you in a minute or two."

"I am sorry we are so early," Violet said. "Please beg Sir Hargrave not to hurry."

The man bowed and withdrew. They both looked about them in wonderment, Violet especially appreciating the pictures, the books, the statuary, the colouring of the room and the profusion of flowers upon the tables.

"The fellow must have money, all right," Robert observed.

"He must have wonderful taste too," she added. "But then, one might believe that. He looks like it."

"Never felt so shabby in my life," the young man remarked.

"Nor did I," she agreed. "I'm almost sorry that man made me take off my mackintosh. Never mind, Robert, he won't notice, or if he does, he'll pretend not to. He's that sort."

"All right for you," Robert muttered, looking across at her slim, beautiful young body, the lines of which even her shabby, black frock could not conceal. "I would have worn a linen collar anyhow, if I'd known."

"He'll see us just as we are," she sighed. "Perhaps it will be better."

Presently the door was opened and Hargrave entered. His manner was gravely pleasant, but so entirely matter of fact that it was difficult for even Robert to feel embarrassed.

"I'm so glad to see you both," was his greeting—"especially as I hope, Miss Martin, it means that you have decided to accept my offer. This is your brother, I suppose. How do you do."

The two men shook hands. Andrews, who had followed behind his master, brought the coffee tray and liqueurs to a table nearer the fire and silently served them. Hargrave, standing between the two, stirring his coffee, recommended the

brandy to Robert, the cointreau to Violet, and the cigarettes to both of them. He skilfully conducted a general and insignificant conversation until the door was closed behind the retreating servant. Then he turned to Violet.

“I suppose this visit means that you accept?”

“I accept,” she answered. “Who wouldn’t?”

“That is exceedingly pleasant,” Hargrave said. “You understand, Mr. Martin, that you are to be my guest from this evening until your return from Monte Carlo, whenever that may be. Any inconvenience your firm may be put to by your absence will be my concern. It will also be my concern to see that you are re-established with them on your return. The same thing, of course, applies to your sister.”

The young man, who had flinched for a moment at the sound of his name, was for once in his life honest.

“You won’t need to worry about my return, sir,” he said. “I’ve been with a firm of shipbuilders for the last twelve months and they told me to-day that they couldn’t keep me on any longer. They haven’t been doing well lately, and trade’s bad, anyway.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” was Hargrave’s sympathetic comment, “but at any rate it enables you to get away comfortably. I have some influence in shipbuilding circles. I may be able to help you to another post.”

The young man sipped his brandy. It inspired him, perhaps, with confidence.

“That’s very good of you, sir,” he acknowledged. “I wonder whether you’d mind my asking you a question?”

“There is no harm in your asking any question you wish to.”

“Why are you doing this for—my sister and me?”

“I shall give you a reason which is not a reason,” Hargrave replied, leaving the cigarette box near the young man, lighting one himself and subsiding into an easy-chair. “I am doing this for a whim. I am a rich person and I rather enjoy gratifying my fancies. On this occasion I am grateful to your sister for her acquiescence.”

“But we are such strangers,” the young man persisted. “You have never seen me before in your life, and Violet tells me that she has never spoken to you except in the manicure rooms where she is employed and once to-day in the street.”

“That is quite true,” Hargrave admitted. “Your sister is almost as great a stranger to me as you are, yet in her case I will confess frankly that although I have never told her so, I have conceived a certain admiration for her character and deportment. There are special difficulties in connection with the post which your sister is filling, and during my last visit particularly it seemed to me that I had detected a self-respect, a sense of dignity which is not a common quality. It therefore causes me

great pleasure to feel that, in gratifying my own fancy, I am bringing a short period of pleasure into her life. I hope," he went on, with a smile, as he turned towards her, "that I am not talking too much like a schoolmaster, but I am anxious that there should be no misunderstanding between us three."

"I'm afraid you'll be very disappointed in me when you know me better," she warned him.

"I am content to risk it," he assured her. "We will now look upon our jaunt as a thing arranged, and discuss only the details. I shall want you both upon the platform at Victoria Station at ten-fifteen on the morning of Thursday week. My servant who served the coffee will meet you and register your luggage and find you your places, which will be already engaged in the Pullman."

"But our luggage," Violet began, a little hysterically——

"I quite understand," Hargrave interrupted, rising to his feet and unlocking a drawer in his desk. "One of my stipulations is, as you may remember, that you are provided with the small necessities of travel. I shall ask you to accept these packets of notes," he went on, returning and handing an envelope to each. "You will find there one hundred pounds. If you require more clothes, as you certainly will in Monte Carlo, you will find it quite as easy to procure them there as here, so you need only supply yourselves for the voyage and a day or so after our arrival."

His manner was so entirely matter of fact that somehow or other the little packet reposing in the hands of each of them seemed more like the completion of some arrangement than a gift. Even Violet found it difficult to say anything in the nature of thanks.

"I'm afraid, young lady," he continued, "that I can't give you much advice in the way of what clothes to get, but I am quite sure you don't require it. You needn't worry about a dress coat," he added, turning to Robert; "dinner clothes and an occasional white waistcoat are all that are required for the evening."

"There's no work we could do for you, I suppose," Violet suggested, a little timidly. "Robert's been a sort of secretary to the head of his department."

"That's very kind of you," Hargrave replied, "but I want this to be a holiday. I want you both to forget for a short time all the responsibilities of life, to cultivate a little of the true, everyday philosophy, to reflect, if you reflect at all, that whatever has happened before has passed, that whatever may happen in the future is outside your control, but that the present, at any rate, is your own."

"I wish I could understand," the young man persisted, rather stupidly, "why Violet and I——"

"Chance alone selected my beneficiaries," Hargrave interrupted, a little curtly.

They rose to go—perhaps because their host so obviously expected it—yet Violet was conscious of something incomplete in their interview. She longed to send Robert away, to be alone with Hargrave, and to question him, not mechanically like her companion but in her own fashion, in her own words. That, however, was impossible. Hargrave had clearly finished with them for the moment. He touched the bell and they prepared to take their leave.

“Until Thursday week, then,” he wound up. “We shall meet on the train and travel together. When we are once established in Monte Carlo, however, you will be entirely free to enjoy yourselves in your own way. All that I shall ask is that you free yourselves so far as possible from all anxieties and really do enjoy yourselves.”

The front door closed upon them. Both were looking a little dazed as they moved along the pavement.

“Well, what do you think about it all?” Violet asked.

Robert was not inclined to be hurried in his judgment.

“He’s younger than I thought, and better-looking. Seems to think a lot of you, too.”

“Well?”

He suddenly remembered the packet of notes in his pocket, the clothes he was going to buy, the thought of that *train de luxe*, the luxury of the next two months. He knew that Violet, with all her kind-heartedness, her loyalty, her gentleness of disposition, had in her a vein of something which it was never in him to understand. Nothing must be risked.

“I don’t know that it matters, of course,” he admitted. “We are probably just a couple of puppets to him, anyway. It’s a rum go, Violet, but I’m for it.”

CHAPTER VII

Two overwhelmed and speechless young people were seated a few mornings later upon the Bougainvillæa-wreathed balcony of a small but very wonderful villa overlooking the bay of Monaco. In front of each was the inimitably arranged French *petit déjeuner*, with a bowl of roses in the centre of the table; below them spread the bluest and most glittering sea in the world, the soft outline of Cap Martin on one side and the picturesque harbour of Monaco on the other. To their half-starved senses flowers and trees and even the stone and wood smelt of the sunshine. Words had long ago failed them. Violet sipped orange juice after her coffee with an air of blissful content. Robert, as he dealt more seriously with his breakfast, was unable to refrain from an occasional staccato exclamation of wonder. The first word of envy which crept into the palace of their ecstasy came naturally enough from him.

“What in God’s name can any one have done in this world to deserve to own a place like this?” he demanded suddenly.

“What have we done,” she murmured, “to deserve even a few weeks of it.—Hush!”

Hargrave came through the French windows of one of the ground-floor rooms and strolled towards them. They watched his leisurely approach rather as though he were a god, Robert envying his well-cut clothes, his carefully chosen linen and tie, his complete command of externals, Violet studying him with a new curiosity, no longer as the client of a manicure parlour but as a human being, a person whose air of distinction, whose continual reserves, and whose kindly tact when confronted with Robert’s not infrequent gaucheries, were beginning not only to intrigue, but to inspire her with something which was almost devotion.

“Well, young people,” he greeted them pleasantly, “you spent a comfortable night, I hope.”

“Rather!” Robert exclaimed. “To wake up in a place like this, after London, too, takes one’s breath away.”

“I have never seen anything so beautiful as my room,” Violet murmured, with subdued but eager enthusiasm.

Hargrave seated himself carelessly upon the grey balustrade opposite and lit a cigarette.

“I want you two young people to understand,” he said, “that you are now off on your own, as it were. As a rule, I entertain friends at this villa, but this year I have no one else coming, so you will have the place practically to yourselves. You can get up

at what time you like, lunch in or lunch out, as you please, dine here or not, as it suits you. Madame Martelle, the housekeeper, speaks English and is always at your disposition. She will tell you the hours for meals; occasionally I may be in—not very often. In any case, don't worry about me."

They listened in silence. It was all too wonderful. Hargrave knocked the ash from his cigarette.

"The weekly allowance I spoke of will be on your tables every Saturday morning. If you need more, come to me."

"More!" Violet gasped. "How could one possibly spend so much?"

"You may change your ideas," he observed, a little drily. "People sometimes do in this part of the world. You have a little margin for gambling. I shouldn't do much about that, though, if I were you. Play a little, of course, but merely to pass the time."

"But, Sir Hargrave," Violet expostulated, "I haven't spent half the money you gave me in London."

"You'll spend it here quite easily," he assured her. "In Monte Carlo, the first need of a woman's life is frocks, and the second hats. I want you, for once, to gratify both desires."

She looked at him with a suddenly intense light in her beautiful eyes. There was something questioning in them, a faint shadow of something that was almost resentment.

"What are we to you?" she demanded suddenly. "Objects of some curious experiment? I shall begin to believe in that book, after all."

He answered her almost kindly; the slight formality had left his tone.

"You are doing me a favour," he explained, "by allowing me to gratify a whim. Before we part, I may perhaps satisfy your curiosity a little more completely. At present, will you be kind enough to regard it as one of the conditions of our bargain that you accept without qualm or demur.—Is there anything more I can tell you about the place? You are members of the Salles Privées and the Sporting Club, you have a list of the operas, and I have already told you the best restaurants. There is a car here at your disposal at any moment. The man simply waits for your orders. He knows the country for miles around and you will find guidebooks in plenty in the study. There is nothing else you would like to ask me?"

"You have left nothing to be asked," Violet replied. "But—you speak as though we should never see you."

"We are not likely to meet often," he admitted. "I have a large circle of friends here—of both sorts," he added, with a grim little smile. "During the last few years I have rather avoided the gayer side of life out in these parts. It makes considerable

demands upon one's health and time. Upon this occasion, having reached years of discretion, I am inclined to experiment with myself."

She looked at him a little wistfully. Her half-formed thoughts, however, were untranslatable into words. He stood up and pointed downwards.

"You will find a bathing hut at the foot of the garden," he said. "I don't recommend it yet. I had a plunge myself this morning but it was on the cold side.—I wish you what every one wishes each other in Monte Carlo—the pleasure that is there if you know how to accept it."

He turned away with a little nod, gracious enough but perfunctory. His absence left Robert perfectly content—rather more at his ease, in fact; Violet, vaguely regretful.

"I say, that fellow's a topper!" Robert declared. "I'm not going to worry my head about why he's doing all this. The only thing I was afraid of was——"

"Was what?" Violet asked, turning and facing him coolly.

"Well, you know what these chaps are," he went on half apologetically, "and I know what you girls have to put up with in a job like yours. I couldn't help having a sort of idea at the back of my mind that he was trying rather a clever stunt. You're jolly good-looking, you know, Violet."

"If I am," she observed indifferently, "I think you'll admit that Sir Hargrave doesn't seem to notice it."

"He certainly doesn't," Robert agreed, almost too readily. "He has the air of looking through both of us when he's talking. I told you it was only an idea of mine, and it's gone already. I don't believe he even knows the colour of your eyes.—Let's go and explore. I want to try that roulette game."

She rose to her feet and stepped a little forward, basking for a moment in the full glare of the streaming sunshine. Already there seemed to be a new quality in her beatific expression, a sense of worship almost in her wonderful eyes which glorified content.

"I'll be ready in ten minutes," she promised. "I must see which of my new hats goes best with this frock."

They strolled out together like two children and made their way to the Place de Casino. Violet indulged in a little grimace as her companion made his way unfalteringly towards the main entrance of the building itself.

"If you don't mind, Robert, I won't come in just yet," she decided. "I can't bear to leave this sunshine."

"Where shall I find you?" he asked.

"On the Terrace. If you are longer than an hour, I may be looking at the shops."

So, on that first morning, Monte Carlo swallowed them up, accepting each as they went their separate ways with the sphinxlike indifference of a presiding, inevitable genius. Violet wandered happily upon the Terrace and through the gardens, finally climbing the hill to the Boulevard des Moulins. Apart from the panoramic beauty of the background, the place itself seemed to breathe joy to her; the clean, well-ordered streets, the bright *magasins*, the pleasant faces of the passers-by. Here, all the struggle for existence seemed to have become suspended. Shopkeepers offered their wares as though selling were a pastime. They pleaded charmingly for Mademoiselle's custom, but if they failed there was none of that querulous, almost soured discontent to which Violet had become accustomed.

"Mademoiselle would perhaps try on the hat another day."

"Mademoiselle would give them another opportunity to show their frocks."

"Mademoiselle was very gracious—good day."

It seemed to be the same everywhere. Violet found herself almost smiling back at some of the people whom she passed in the street, from sheer happiness. Even the rather too close regard of the men to which she had become accustomed seemed to her here to lack any note of insolence. There were delicate but unspoken suggestions from more than one of the well-groomed young loungers whom she passed that they would find pleasure in making her acquaintance, but on the other hand, the *gaucheries* of the *boulevardiers* of Regent Street seemed nonexistent. There was only one cloud to disturb her happiness. After nearly two hours of wandering, she had found her way up some steps to a little street where a famous bar was situated. At one of the tables Hargrave, who had just ascended from the tennis courts, was seated alone, fingering his racquet. He rose to his feet and accosted her as she passed.

"Alone?"

She nodded in delighted anticipation.

"Robert has gone to the Casino. Fancy wasting a morning like this indoors. I have been finding my way around."

"You are not disenchanted yet?" he asked, looking down at her with a smile.

"I never shall be," she answered simply. "I suppose things could happen to make one unhappy, even here. I can hardly believe it, though."

A breath of soft wind, very delicate and languorous, shook the tassels of the striped umbrellas. From the café, waiters were hurrying back and forth with trays full of cocktails, orangeades, and delectable drinks. Violet looked at them a little wistfully. Hargrave was still standing by her side, but he had not even asked her to sit down. A very wonderful car, with a footman on the box, drew up outside, and a

woman, dark and pale, with big, curiously blue, almost violet eyes and a superb carriage, stepped out, followed immediately by a maid leading two little dogs.

“That is the most beautiful woman I have seen here yet,” Violet confided, under her breath. “Do you know who she is?”

He hesitated for a moment.

“The Princess Putralka, a Russian woman,” he told her. “She is coming to have her morning apéritif with me.”

Something about his tone affected her like a gesture of dismissal. She accepted it gaily enough, but with a curious sensation of disappointment.

“I must go and find Robert,” she said, as she turned away with a little farewell nod.

Hargrave had already moved forward to welcome his guest. As he raised her hand to his lips, she glanced at Violet, at first indifferently enough, then with an expression of unwilling admiration. Violet could almost hear her question, asked in rapid French, as she hurried off.

“Tell me at once who she is, dear friend. I am already jealous. She is the most beautiful young English girl I have ever seen. A protégée of yours? Yes?”

“She might be called so, I suppose,” Hargrave assented, as he held her chair, “a protégée of circumstances.”

The Princess leaned forward to look after Violet’s disappearing figure. Perhaps for a moment she envied its slim girlishness, its possibilities, which she was clever enough to understand. She herself was in her thirty-eighth year.

“Dressed by an artist,” she murmured, “she would be irresistible. But in you, dear Hargrave, I have much confidence. You are of that age in life when a man relies rather upon his taste than his enthusiasms. You prefer exotics to the flowers of youth. Is it not so?”

“Princess,” Hargrave replied, “you are a diviner of men.”

The Princess, who was very much in love with him, sighed gently as she looked at herself in the mirror of her vanity case.

“It is a useless gift,” she murmured.

“You think then that to understand leads nowhere?”

“I think,” she rejoined, “that men resent being understood. If one stumbles upon knowledge, it is best to keep it within. With you, dear Hargrave, I at least shall never make that fatal mistake, for I confess to you, as I confessed to myself this morning, I do not understand you.”

“I am flattered at the suggestion,” Hargrave declared, as he summoned a waiter, “but I am indeed a very simple person.”

He gave an order and held a match for the Princess' cigarette.

"What you are inside, who can tell?" she went on, looking at him almost tenderly through the first faint cloud of smoke. "From all accounts, one would esteem you sometimes the most accomplished of philanderers."

"Is that quite fair?" he complained good-naturedly.

"But what do I find?" she asked. "Our first season here we spent much time together. I had—shall I seem vain if I remind you of it?—many admirers. By degrees they fell away. One by one, I discarded them. A word here, a broken engagement there, and like men of the world, as they all were, they made their bows; but you, dear friend, I kept. Can you guess why? Ah, do not try. I will tell you. I kept you because you were the one who interested me most. It was in you, I thought, that I might find the companion for whom I had longed."

A waiter interrupted them for a moment with the service of *apéritifs*.

"And then," Hargrave reminded her, as soon as they were alone again, "Monsieur le Prince arrived."

The faintest gesture of disgust escaped her.

"It was a blunder," she admitted. "As a rule Henri would not have ventured to join me without my permission. The Grand Duke desired his presence, however, and he came. He created a situation, naturally, which one must accept here as elsewhere. You had no patience, and you left. You went back to that grey, sunless land of yours. To forget, perhaps?"

"Never that," he assured her.

She moved a little uneasily in her place. Her eyes had been searching his face. She shivered a little, though the sunlight was warm.

"Then there is your protégée," she murmured. "Our first meeting alone together this year, and I find you—the child is fond of you, perhaps?"

"A week ago," he replied, "we were strangers. Your suggestion, dear Princess, is verging upon the absurd."

"Am I no longer Stéphanie?"

"Dear Stéphanie, then," he substituted. "I like it better."

"And I," she murmured. "Now tell me, my friend—we meet again—I, alas, a year older, yet inwardly the same. And you?"

His second's hesitation amazed him. She was the one woman of later years whom he had admired whole-heartedly, the one woman of whom he had allowed himself often to think. She possessed all the qualities which had seemed to him admirable. She had taste, charm, the cachet of a great social position, and of her partiality for him she had made no secret. He had arranged his arrival in Monte

Carlo to coincide with hers. Yet that question which should have brought so much gratification left him for an infinitesimal space of time unresponsive. That Violet's little droop of the mouth as she had turned away with her brave farewell words could have had anything to do with it was an absurd thought, yet as he pictured her wandering alone down the hill, there was a faintly uneasy feeling, impossible of analysis, something that was almost a regret. The Princess moved her hand and the flash of the sunlight upon her emeralds brought him instantly back.

"Am I not here?" he said quietly. "The same day as last year, the same place."

"And you bring with you the same heart?" she persisted.

"Stéphanie," he said, and it was one of his rare moments of earnestness, "fortune has been kind to me in life. I have most of the things one craves. Only one gift others seem to possess—I not so completely. Last year, for the first time in my life, I wondered. If it were only for two, for three months, I would be happy to wonder again, because in life one misses something without love.

"One misses everything," she murmured. "Believe that, dear Hargrave, and you are on the royal road. We try it together?"

The loungers had melted away. He raised her slim, ungloved fingers to his lips.

"You are even too good to me," he whispered.

Outside the Casino, Robert came blinking into the almost overwhelming sunshine. He was a little irritated, for although he had played with great care he had lost most of the counters he had allowed himself.

"Monsieur has had the chance?"

He turned around to find standing by his side a pretty French girl whom he had noticed at the tables. The somewhat vivid touch of rouge upon her cheeks, and her full, becarmined lips, gave him almost a shock in the clear light, but her voice was attractive and her eyes delightful.

"If by 'chance' you mean luck," he answered, a little diffidently, "no, I haven't had any. I've lost."

She was almost tenderly sympathetic.

"I, too," she admitted. "Never mind. One must do something. Perhaps a glass of vermouth at the café."

Robert hesitated, met the invitation of her eyes and yielded. They walked across, threading their way through the crowd of people, and seated themselves at one of the round tables.

"You order," he begged; "I can't speak French."

"I give you lessons, yes?" she suggested.

He shook his head regretfully.

“I haven’t enough time here.”

“I teach you very quick,” she promised. “You give me my vermouth, and luncheon, and a louis for luck, and we begin now.”

He was not yet used to French money, but a louis seemed a great deal.

“Well, you might begin by telling me your name,” he proposed evasively.

“My name is Zélie Arnaud,” she confided. “I dance at the Café de France on the hill there, but of that one says nothing, or I should not get my ticket for the Casino. You will come and see me?”

“Of course,” he promised.—“Damn!” he added, under his breath, half rising to his feet and sitting down again, as he caught a glimpse of Violet’s surprised glance.

She hurried on and was almost at once out of sight in the crowd.

“What is it then that has happened?” his companion demanded.

“My sister,” he muttered.

The little Frenchwoman leaned back in her chair.

“Oh, la la!” she laughed. “What does that matter? Why look so serious? This is Monte Carlo, and your sister—she is not stupid, eh? Here all the world speak to all the world. If you talk a little with me, what does it matter? It is better for us both that we sit here together than alone. One enjoys company, and in Monte Carlo one must enjoy.”

The vermouth was brought. The orchestra in the distance began to play. Another breath of that wonderful breeze stirred the air around them pleasantly.

“You’re jolly well right, Mademoiselle,” Robert declared impulsively.

CHAPTER VIII

Robert arrived late for lunch to find Violet seated before an almost Sybaritic repast. A grave manservant stood behind her chair; a maid fluttered around. He felt a little awkward.

"Sorry I'm late," he apologised.

"It really doesn't matter," she assured him.

He took his place and was promptly served.

"Had a good time?" he enquired.

"Wonderful!"

"You didn't mind my having a drink with that young woman?" he asked. "She was standing by me at the tables and helped me with my French."

"Not in the least," Violet replied, a little ruefully, "but it seems to me that Monte Carlo is not a very good place for a respectable young woman like me. I, too, felt very much like an *apéritif* this morning. I found myself passing a *café*, and Sir Hargrave talked to me for five minutes. Then another lady arrived and he sent me away. I came down the hill hoping to meet you, and when I did you were sitting with that little French girl—quite pretty she was, too—and again I got no *apéritif*. What is one to do? I think I must collect an admirer."

"You won't have much trouble," he assured her.

"Honestly, I don't think I should," she admitted. "Something will have to be done another morning."

"Who was the lady Sir Hargrave was waiting for?" Robert enquired.

"A very beautiful Russian woman, the Princess Putralka."

"I heard them talking about her at the *café* this morning when her car went by," he said. "Her husband for some reason or other was with the French army during the War. An Englishman was saying that they were one of the few great Russian families who didn't lose their money. She even had her jewels here."

"She looked wonderful," Violet sighed. "There was something about her clothes which seemed to have been thought into them, and her figure was too beautiful. She is very pale and has large, blue eyes, almost violet. I have never seen any one in the least like her.—Tell me, did you win any money at roulette?"

"I lost," was the gloomy response.

"As soon as the sun goes down," Violet announced, "I am going in to try what I can do. I think I shall go to the Club, though. Until then, Robert, shall we ask if we can have an automobile?"

Robert was half engaged to visit a *thé dansant* at the Café de France, but in a spirit of magnanimity he acquiesced.

“We’ll go just as far as we can into the mountains,” Violet proposed. “Perhaps we can find a little café and have tea. Robert, it will be wonderful! I can scarcely believe that those mountains really exist—that there are really roads to those strange-looking houses.”

“An automobile is entirely at Mademoiselle’s disposition,” the butler interposed respectfully. “It is now just half-past one. Shall I order it for two or before?”

They decided upon a quarter to two. Afterwards they had coffee and smoked cigarettes upon the balcony. Violet shook her head at Robert’s copious liqueur.

“One must take care out here,” she enjoined. “I scarcely dare to drink anything at all. The atmosphere is like wine, and up in the mountains—why, it must be heavenly!”

Robert, after his excellent lunch, was at peace with the whole world. He took Violet’s hand into his without noticing her faint reluctance.

“Sorry if I seemed to be neglectful this morning,” he observed. “That game does take hold of you, and it was just an accident meeting the little girl outside who had helped me.”

“My dear boy, I don’t mind at all,” Violet assured him. “The only thing is, I do hope some one will be able sometimes to look after me.”

“I shall do that,” he promised. “No one is going to take my place, Violet.”

She looked at him with a sudden queer spirit of intuition. In London his very misery, the depression of his daily life, and his need of her, had kept her thoughts loyally from ever wandering. She wondered now what effect this brief period of prosperity might have. His first claim upon her was abruptly removed, and with its absence she was almost horrified to find a faint but distinct loss of interest. His clothes were expensive, but he had been impatient of suggestions, and they were not quite the sort of clothes she would have selected. The pattern of his tie annoyed her. She found herself indulging in a self-conscious comparison—feeling suddenly guilty almost of disloyalty. She took his arm affectionately.

“I’m going to get ready, Robert,” she said. “What a lovely afternoon we shall have!”

Yet there was something unsatisfactory about it. The heights which filled her with wonder made him, he declared, giddy. The fairylike panorama which unrolled itself as they mounted, tongues of green villa-dotted land spitted into the blue sea, Monaco with its Cathedral and Royal Palace, falling into the distant spaces as they

climbed towards La Turbie, the unfamiliar vegetation, the orange trees and the budding mimosa, kept Violet all the time breathless with interest. Robert's responses to her enthusiasms were, to say the least of it, half-hearted. Presently she abandoned attempts at conversation and leaned back in her corner, absorbed in her thoughts. Robert, smoking interminable cigarettes, glanced often backwards at the Casino. They passed Eze, and short of Nice turned into the Lower Corniche. As soon as their faces were once more set towards Monte Carlo, Robert recovered his spirits. He took out his jettons and counted them.

"It's a wonderful life," he declared.

She agreed a little listlessly. Her eyes were upturned towards the hills, her thoughts had wandered. A goatherd was standing motionless upon a ridge of the rock-strewn turf whilst his flock browsed amongst the scanty herbage. He watched them pass without interest or movement. He was almost like a part of the landscape, lifeless, soulless, eternal. A car rushed by them up the slope. They both recognised Hargrave. Robert indulged in a little exclamation of admiration.

"That's the best-looking woman I've seen here yet!" he declared. "I wonder who she is."

"The woman we were speaking of, the Princess Putralka," Violet answered. "He told me he was going over to Cannes this afternoon to play tennis."

"What a life!" Robert murmured enviously. "Fancy being able to do it all the time."

"Couldn't we play tennis now and then?" Violet suggested. "We're neither of us so bad."

He shook his head doubtfully.

"Later on, perhaps. Just at present there's too much to do."

"Tennis would interest me," she observed, a little coldly.

"You can play tennis at any old place in London," he scoffed.

"So can you drink cocktails with beautiful young demimondaines," she retorted.

"You needn't bring that up again," he grumbled. "It's the roulette that interests me, the excitement, the music at the cafés, the people."

They were set down at the Sporting Club, where Robert found a seat and began to play at once. Violet wandered around, watching the play, a little interested, a little bored. Presently she seated herself upon a couch near the table where Robert was playing. A woman, apparently young, and fashionably dressed, seated a few yards away, was talking to a short, round-faced man of good-natured appearance, whose horn-rimmed spectacles and accent pronounced him an American. She held in her hand what appeared to be a cable, and she referred to it more than once. Violet,

after her first careless glance, would have looked away, but for the sudden mention of Hargrave Wendever's name. Afterwards she found herself half subconsciously listening.

"It's a pretty tough proposition to find out what a man like Hargrave Wendever's driving at," the man declared meditatively. "I've been sizing it up all the way coming down. I'd say that it was up to you, Nina."

The woman shook her head doubtfully. Violet had a better view of her now. She seemed to be about thirty-five years old and she was distinctly attractive, fair with a beautiful complexion and perfect figure.

"What chance have I got?" she demanded. "That Putralka woman hangs on to him like grim death, the Duchess is all the time waiting for her look-in, and Diane declared last night, when she sent Charlie Peters away, that Sir Hargrave was the only man here with 'chic'."

The American smiled.

"Say, you're becoming modest, aren't you, Nina?" he remarked. "I've heard you talk differently to that in the old days. I've heard you say that there wasn't a man you couldn't wheedle off his perch if you wanted him."

She rose abruptly to her feet.

"This man is different," she said. "We will go into the bar. There are too many people round here for conversation. Something must be done. The sooner you go over to Nice the better."

Violet watched them disappear with curious eyes. There was nothing unusual about their appearance, but from the first she was conscious of a peculiar feeling of aversion to both of them, of a profound distrust of the good-natured exterior of the man. Whatever their interest in Hargrave Wendever might be, she was convinced that it was an unfriendly one. A sense almost of fear oppressed her, as though they had left some baneful influence in the atmosphere. She rose and moved towards the chair where Robert was seated. Just as she neared him, however, he stood up.

"Going to change my table," he announced. "I can't do any good here and none of the croupiers understand a word of English. That bewigged old Frenchwoman opposite has pinched two of my stakes already."

"Come and have some tea first," she begged.

He assented a little unwillingly, himself drinking a whisky and soda. At the opposite table were seated the man and the woman who had been discussing Hargrave Wendever. They were still talking earnestly, and more than once the woman read extracts from the cable which she held in her hand. Robert listened without much interest to Violet's whispered but breathless confidence.

“Adventurers, I daresay,” he commented. “Sir Hargrave is just the sort of man they would go for. Ripping looking woman!”

“She’s very handsome,” Violet agreed, “but I don’t like her expression.”

They were suddenly conscious that they themselves had become objects of interest to the people whom they were discussing. The woman appeared to have directed her companion’s attention to them.

“Now, what does that mean?” Violet murmured. “They are talking about us.”

Robert shook his head.

“Beyond me,” he admitted. “Besides, I don’t see that it matters much, anyway. Come and watch me start at one of the other tables.”

They left the room, followed by the curious glances of their opposite neighbours. Robert made his way to one of the tables in the further salon, and settled himself down with a little pile of counters before him.

“When these have gone I’ve finished,” he announced.

“I shall risk five louis,” Violet decided, handing a hundred-franc note to the croupier.

She staked her money piece by piece, and lost. Then she rose to her feet and as she strolled away she saw that her place had been taken by the woman who had spoken of Hargrave Wendever.

CHAPTER IX

Robert and Violet were halfway through dinner at the villa one evening a little later in the week, when Hargrave, whom they had not seen for several days, strolled in. He nodded pleasantly to both of them and drew a chair up to the table.

“Do you mind my cigarette?” he asked.

“Of course not,” Violet answered.—“Are you going to dine here?” she added eagerly.

He shook his head.

“I am dining at Beaulieu at nine o’clock,” he explained. “I’ll have a cocktail with you, if I may.”

The butler hastened away to prepare it. Hargrave leaned a little back in his chair. The momentary disappointment in Violet’s face brought him a curious sensation, half of pleasure, half of remorse. After all, he asked himself, was he being faithful to his intentions? He had frankly announced himself for the next few months an egoist, a pleasure seeker at any cost, and he was suddenly conscious that he was exercising throughout the days a rigorous though unacknowledged self-denial. At the present moment nothing would have made him more content than to have taken his place by Violet’s side and forgotten Beaulieu and all that it meant. He abandoned his half-veiled contemplation of her slim perfection, her shy, intriguing earnestness, with a sigh of regret.

“Well,” he asked, after a moment’s pause, “how does it go?”

“It is all too wonderful!” Violet exclaimed.

“I could never have believed that there was anything like it in the world,” Robert declared.

Hargrave nodded approvingly.

“You remember the illustrated paper you threw down by your chair in the manicure room?” he asked the former. “You had conjured it all up to yourself and you were seeing it through that streaming window-pane. Do you find it as beautiful as your fancy?”

“Far more beautiful,” she acknowledged. “The picture was attractive enough, but I don’t think that any words could describe this place when the sun is shining. It isn’t only the beauty of it—every one seems so really gay. I wonder whether it is real happiness? I suppose it is.”

Hargrave was silent for a moment. He reached out his hand for the cocktail which the butler had brought him.

“Well,” he said, “it’s good not to be disappointed when you’re young. May you feel the same about the place when your stay comes to an end.”

“I want to tell you something, please,” Violet begged earnestly. “I’ve been wanting to for days, but I never seem to see you.”

“I’ve been busy,” he interpolated.

“It may not really be anything at all,” she went on, “but the other night in the Sporting Club a woman and a man were sitting next me and they were talking about you.”

He smiled tolerantly.

“Well?”

“I don’t know why,” she went on diffidently, “but it seemed to me somehow that they weren’t exactly friendly. The man seemed to be the Paris agent of some important financier. He was an American himself, I’m quite sure. The woman Robert talked to afterwards—she went and sat next to him, I’m certain on purpose. She was an American, too, but her name, she told Robert, was the Marchesa di Bieni.”

“I know who she is,” Hargrave admitted, with a gleam of interest in his eyes. “So they were talking about me, eh?”

“The woman kept on asking me questions about you, sir,” Robert confided. “She wanted to know whether you were at all accessible. She said that you had some mutual friends and that she was very anxious to meet you.”

Hargrave sipped his cocktail thoughtfully.

“Well, why not, if the opportunity occurs?” he remarked. “It might be amusing. I think your intuition was correct, Miss Violet. I could quite imagine that their interest in me is not altogether a friendly one.—What are you two going to do to-night?”

“Robert wants to play roulette for a time,” Violet answered. “Afterwards I hope he will take me somewhere to dance.”

“Roulette doesn’t amuse you?”

“I always lose,” she confessed simply. “I daresay if I could win once or twice, it might. The other games I can’t understand at all. Robert is coming to the Club to-night, though, and I know I shall enjoy that. I like it so much better than the Salles Privées.”

“There’s a better crowd there,” Hargrave observed, as he rose to his feet. “I may see something of you if you don’t leave too early.”

He strolled out with a little farewell nod. Violet looked after him, unconscious of the faint wistfulness in her eyes. Robert watched her with something that was almost a scowl on his face.

“I wish he’d stay in to dinner one evening,” she sighed. “There are such a lot of

things I should like to ask about the place and the people.”

“Why should he?” Robert rejoined, a little brusquely. “He hasn’t shown any signs of bothering about us the last few days.—Try one of those pears, Violet. What about the mouldy bananas and an apple you used to laugh at when we had that two-bob *table d’hôte* in Soho?”

“That seems a long time ago, doesn’t it?” she reflected.

“We sha’n’t like going back to it,” he groaned.

She made no reply. The curtains, at their own request, had been left only partially drawn, and she was looking out into the violet darkness.

“Thank heavens I haven’t got a morbid disposition,” Robert went on, watching the refilling of his glass. “I can enjoy every minute of this without a thought about the future. We’ve got to-morrow anyhow, and to-morrow we’ve got the next day. That’s far enough.”

“I wonder what effect this will really have upon us afterwards,” Violet speculated. “I remember I used to think that a month’s sunshine and pleasure without any anxiety would be tonic enough to last me for the rest of my life. I wonder?”

“I don’t,” Robert rejoined. “I just don’t think at all. That’s the only way to enjoy life.”

Even at the Sporting Club, on an unusually crowded evening, the entrance of a semi-royal dinner party from Beaulieu created some sensation. There was the royal personage himself, escorted by the Princess Putralka, an English Duchess, superbly bejewelled, an Italian Prince and Princess with historic names, an Englishwoman who announced a little too loudly that she had been bored to death at the party and was dying for some roulette, one or two of lesser interest, and Hargrave himself. He glanced around the room nonchalantly. His eyes rested for a moment with a puzzled expression upon the flower-like figure of Violet, in a plain white frock which had been amongst her recent purchases, standing beside one of the tables. He caught a surprised and delighted flash in her eyes and was ashamedly conscious of a responsive thrill. She herself seemed quite unaware of the admiration she was exciting. He strolled across to her side and her welcoming smile evoked allegorical groans from her many undeclared admirers.

“Winning?” he asked.

She shook her head ruefully.

“I can never win,” she replied. “All the others seem to. I’ve lost the five louis I allow myself.”

He laughed quietly.

“That’s not enough,” he said. “Wait.”

He drew a handful of *mille* notes from his pocket and handed them to the croupier with a whispered instruction.

“I’m betting the maximum on the dozens,” he told Violet. “That is scarcely the game for you. I’m putting a louis *en plein* on fourteen and twenty-nine. I don’t know which it will be but you can get ready to draw the money.”

“An *en plein* would make me delirious,” she confessed. “I don’t think I’ve even seen any one I know win one.”

“Then it’s highly probable,” he confided, “that you are on the threshold of a new experience.”

The monotonous cry of the croupier announced the termination of the staking. There was a little click. The ball fell into its place.

“*Quatorze, rouge, pair et manque,*” was his parrot-like cry.

Hargrave glanced at his companion with a smile.

“We’ve both won,” he pointed out. “You *en plein* and I have the maximum on the middle column.”

“That louis *en plein*!” Violet gasped. “It can’t be mine.”

“It most certainly is,” Hargrave assured her. “We’ll double it and add the *carrés* and *chevaux*.”

There was a further spin and seventeen turned up.

“Two *carrés* and a *cheval*,” Hargrave announced. “Now we double again, put a louis on the number and complete the *carrés* and *chevaux*.”

Again the silence—this time a little longer, as the table was crowded. Then the amazing announcement from the croupier:

“*Quatorze, rouge, pair et manque.*”

Hargrave collected the winnings, thrust a great handful of five-*mille* plaques into his own pocket and pushed a heap of counters of various denominations across to Violet.

“But this can’t all be mine,” she protested.

“Every franc of it,” Hargrave assured her. “Even now I’ve won ten times as much as you. We’d better not try our luck too far. Come into the bar and let’s celebrate with a lemon squash or something.”

She walked happily away by his side. They found a quiet corner and she elected for an orangeade. Hargrave drank brandy.

“A dull dinner,” he confided, “prosy and snobbish. Supper, I am afraid, will be worse, from a different point of view.”

He was undoubtedly a little tired. There were lines of fatigue round his eyes and

about his mouth.

“If you are not amused, why do you do all this?” she demanded. “You get no rest. This morning it was five o’clock before you came in.”

“How do you know?” he asked.

“I was awake and I heard you. I suppose it will be the same time to-morrow morning.”

“Very likely,” he acknowledged. “I shall be host and my guests are of the type who begin the day late.”

She sighed.

“It can’t be good for you.”

“Believe me,” he rejoined, “the miserable people in the world are the people who spend their time wondering what is good for them. Of course it isn’t good for me, but you see it doesn’t last long.”

“What doesn’t?” she asked, puzzled. “You can stay out here as long as you like.”

“We can none of us stay anywhere as long as we like,” he answered, a little wearily. “The duties which call us away may vary, but the call is there just the same.”

His aloofness became more manifest. She sipped her orangeade and felt a desperate desire to say something or do something which would attract him, which would keep him for a little longer by her side. She was conscious of a humiliating sense of unimportance. His very kindness became condescension and lost its savour.

“Your frock is charming,” he said, quite unexpectedly.

She was up again in the clouds. The softening light which sprang into her eyes, and the delicate flush of colour in her cheeks made her astonishingly beautiful. Her heart was beating fast. There had been genuine admiration in his eyes.

“I bought it here yesterday afternoon,” she confided. “I am glad that you like it.”

“You have excellent taste,” he told her. “I think you’ll have to take Robert in hand a little. He seems to have developed rather a flair for the wrong things and people.”

“He is so difficult,” she sighed; “so very irritable if one even suggests things.”

“As his sister you should have some influence,” he observed.

A sudden iciness numbed her spirits. His sister! That was what he believed. That was her lie, the one poisoned spot in her happiness. Her passionate impulse to tell the truth and disclose everything passed, however. There was Robert to be considered.

“I’m afraid he’s lost his head a little out here,” she admitted. “That will soon pass.”

“And you?” he ventured, looking at her earnestly. “Is it my fancy, or have you, during the last few days, not been quite so happy as you were at first?”

“That is a mistake,” she assured him; “only Robert and I enjoy different things. I just adore being at the villa and doing nothing—motoring up in the hills, wandering about in the sunshine, watching the people and listening to the music. I don’t care very much for the gambling, because I hate the atmosphere of the Casino so much, and I don’t like those friendly ladies of Robert’s, but except for those few things no one could be happier than I am here.”

The Princess Putralka, in a marvellous toilette with ropes of pearls, looked into the room, and, seeing Hargrave, approached. He rose to his feet.

“I have just heard of your wonderful supper party to-night, Hargrave,” she said. “I want to join it.”

Hargrave’s little gesture of regret was spontaneous but courtierlike.

“Alas, Princess,” he replied, “it is not possible.”

“Your numbers are full?”

“My company——” he ventured.

She indulged in a little grimace.

“After all, this is Monte Carlo,” she persisted. “There may be some of your guests whom you may not present, but for the rest, I will close my eyes.”

“It is still, alas, impossible,” Hargrave regretted. “The supper is for Mademoiselle Diane from Paris, of whom the world talks just now, and there are others.”

The Princess sighed.

“Why do you flit from world to world with such breathless haste?” she demanded. “It is worth while, you think?”

“Perhaps not,” Hargrave acquiesced. “One learns only by experience.”

“I am very angry,” she told him. “When I make up my mind to a thing I do not like to be disappointed, and I had made up my mind to sup with you.”

“You add to my remorse,” Hargrave assured her, “but at this late hour nothing could be done. If you will fix a night——”

“Oh, I know the sort of party you would get together then,” she complained, turning away. “You disappoint me very much, Hargrave.”

She took her leave abruptly, without other form of farewell. Hargrave resumed his seat, and Violet looked after the Princess wistfully.

“So that is the Princess Putralka!” she murmured.

“A charming but somewhat difficult person,” he observed. “These women of birth all have a sort of idea that there must be something wildly exciting in a party

which consists chiefly of members of the other world. It isn't so at all, as a matter of fact. Each set imitates the other in real life. As a rule, the aristocracy is far more thorough about it. I must go and find Mademoiselle Diane. She is playing *chemin de fer*."

They passed out of the bar together, followed by a good many curious glances.

"I shall have to be careful of my reputation," he remarked lightly, as they paused in the passage. "You may be over twenty, as you assure me, but you look outrageously young. I have no ambition to be taken for the *vieux marcheur*."

She laughed, and leaned for a moment forward.

"My new youth is dedicate to you," she half whispered in his ear.

Then she turned away and passed behind the screen into the roulette room, leaving Hargrave unexpectedly spellbound. The whole place, with its glitter of women's jewels and toilettes, its laughter in every key, the clinking of the glasses, its atmosphere of luxury and well-being, seemed suddenly ugly. The world itself had changed. He realised with unfaltering conviction that this passionate quest of his for sensation, to feel absolutely and completely before the end, was finished in the strangest and most unlikely of places. Her words had been commonplace enough, but underneath them was that curious tremor of truth. Her glance might have been meant to be merely pleasantly and girlishly provocative, yet to him it carried another message. Here was madness, ready for the making! His protégée, a child, trusting in his word, removed from him by her youth, by the hard-fought struggle of her life, by every sense of decency! Yet she had succeeded whilst the others round him failed hour after hour. He looked after her as a man may look at the ghost of his vain desires.

CHAPTER X

There was, after all, some slight delay before Hargrave was able to summon Mademoiselle Diane from the game which enthralled her. Caught up in a little block of people at the entrance to the *chemin de fer* room, he was suddenly accosted by the woman who had excited Violet's curiosity.

"It is Sir Hargrave Wendever, is it not?" she asked, with a smile. "Might I recall myself to your memory? I am the Marchesa di Bieni."

"Nina von Tolger when I had the pleasure of meeting you in New York," he ventured, with a bow.

"That is really nice of you to remember," she declared. "We met on the polo ground at Long Island. I was going to ask you, Sir Hargrave, if you would spare me a moment of your time. It makes it easier that you remember. There are two chairs in the corner there."

She took his acquiescence as a matter of course, and led the way. Hargrave seated himself in silence. He was searching his mind all the time for some story which he had once heard of her, but before he could recall it her opening took him by surprise.

"I am a woman of cosmopolitan tastes," she began, "and since I lost my husband in the War I have extended them perhaps even too widely. I have cosmopolitan friends. Amongst them I number a Mr. Andrea Trentino."

So Violet's story of the cable and her premonition had been no myth! Hargrave was startled, but he recovered himself almost at once.

"Indeed," he murmured. "Then you possess one friend upon whom I cannot congratulate you."

"What have you against him?" she asked, toying with her fan.

Hargrave's gently raised eyebrows indicated his astonishment.

"Marchesa," he said, "it is somewhat early in our acquaintance for confidences."

"Why should we not talk frankly?" she persisted. "You are a man, Sir Hargrave, whom I have long wanted to know. I am a woman who has the name of being difficult. I am not difficult with those who are my friends, with those whom I like."

"It has been Andrea Trentino's good fortune," he asked, "to discover that?"

She looked at him reproachfully. She had beautiful eyes, and she knew well how to use them.

"That is not kind," she persisted. "Andrea Trentino is a friend without a doubt, and since my husband's death—he was killed in the War, as I daresay you know—I

have needed friends.”

The people surged round them. Hargrave was continually forced to exchange remarks with passing acquaintances, most of whom were known also to the Marchesa. She became impatient.

“May I come to see you at your beautiful villa, to-morrow?” she begged. “Or will you permit me to invite you to mine?”

“For the moment, I regret that neither is possible,” Hargrave replied.

Her eyebrows were drawn together and her lips compressed. The man had been reputed difficult; he was more difficult than she had expected.

“Is it that you are no longer a man of gallantry, Sir Hargrave?” she asked. “Or do I come too late upon the scene?”

“Is it a matter of that sort, Marchesa, which you wish to discuss with me?”

Her whole face relaxed. Good humour was best. She laughed softly.

“You are too clever for me,” she admitted. “Here then is my second method. I will say in plain words what I wish to lead up to. I wish to plead for your grace on behalf of Andrea Trentino, and an explanation as to what your intentions are.”

“I am sorry,” Hargrave rejoined. “It is a habit of my life never to talk business with a lady.”

“Pleasure might creep into our conversation,” she ventured.

He shook his head.

“My dealings with Mr. Trentino, or which concern Trentino, are conducted between my stockbroker and his representatives in New York and Buenos Ayres. If it is your business, Marchesa, to ask me to sell Andrea Trentino some of his own shares back again, let me tell you at once that nothing but failure awaits you.”

“Do not be so hasty,” she begged. “As yet I have asked nothing. Why do you wish to ruin this man? You will not profit by it. You will lose, they tell me, a great deal of money if you persist.”

“I have discounted my probable loss,” was the equable reply. “If it were twice as great I should act precisely as I am acting.”

She was silent for a moment. Again stray units of the people who passed claimed their attention.

“It is hard to talk to you here,” she complained. “I wish to plead, to appeal to your kindness, your generosity, your chivalry, but it is so difficult when people interpose all the time with their banalities. My car is outside. Come back to my villa for one half-hour whilst I explain with no one to hear.”

He looked at her curiously. There was not a line upon her face, not a trace of insincerity in the eager invitation of her eyes. It was a touch, he thought, of all that

was artificial in the world which surged round them—the woman willing to give so much to save the man.

“That would not be possible, Marchesa,” he said. “To-night I give a supper party for which I ought already to be collecting my guests.”

She steeled herself to her first failure, to accept the inevitable without admitting it as failure to him or to herself.

“Then I can only plead with you under these very difficult conditions,” she continued, “and if any one sees us and sees these tears which are so near my eyes, they will probably think that I am asking you for one of those jewels such as Diane is wearing, or for a handful of *milles* to gamble with. What do I care? Andrea Trentino may not be of your world, he may be your enemy, but he has been my friend for three years. The War left me penniless. My husband could do nothing for me. His family, although they are one of the noblest in Italy, live on the paltriest of pensions. Andrea met me here when I was in despair. He was kind to me; he gave me the little villa in which I live. He comes every year, and although things between us are not what they were, his friendship is a stern necessity to me.”

“Necessity?” Hargrave murmured. “Your own people were wealthy.”

“My father went down in the Wall Street boom seven years ago,” she answered. “It broke his heart and he died. He left nothing. In my way,” she went on, “I am proud. After my husband’s death, or at any time, I would have married any one who had asked me, but in Europe and these parts to-day one does not marry. The one thing which I could not endure,” she continued, “would be to ask the help of casual friends, the lover of a week or a month, to face the world again, to have all the despair and the anxiety of those unmentionable others. That is why I have clung to Andrea Trentino. Now do you understand?”

“I am beginning to,” Hargrave admitted.

“I have had a long cable from him,” she went on. “I am to make your acquaintance anyhow, I am to use any argument I can think of, to find out what you want, to persuade you to show him this grace which he asks of you. That is why I have sought you out. It is little one can offer so great a man as Sir Hargrave Wendever, yet the whole gratitude of a woman’s heart has sometimes been worth taking.”

“You make me ashamed to seem so obdurate,” he replied, with a certain gentleness in his tone. “I cannot, however, grant your request.”

“But why?” she asked tearfully. “Andrea points out that you will lose far more if you are obstinate and persist in ruining him than you would gain if you would accede to his request. I am not a very good business woman, but I do know that the shares

in his company are falling every day. He is willing to buy from you what he needs at the top price.”

“The situation,” Hargrave admitted, “must be inexplicable to you, Marchesa, as it perhaps is to him; yet the fact remains, I will not sell.”

“You hate Andrea?” she asked, with a little choke in her voice. “You are his enemy?”

He shrugged his shoulders but remained silent.

“And mine?” she persisted.

“Only if you so wish, Marchesa,” he replied, half rising to his feet.

Her hand on his arm held him.

“Listen,” she said, “this may not matter, you perhaps will not believe me, but it is the truth. In my stupid woman’s way I have always had a feeling for you, a liking—call it what you will. It would have made me very happy if you had chosen to notice me as you notice so many of these others.”

“You flatter me, Marchesa.”

“I tell the truth,” she insisted doggedly.

“It is the more unfortunate,” he declared. “We might have experimented in friendship together but for the fact that I know you to be Andrea Trentino’s friend.”

She sat quite still, as though listening to the hum of voices, to the croupiers’ monotonous announcements, to the patter of the cards upon the table. Loungers passed them with greetings each moment. So far as she was concerned, they were unnoticed. Her hand still rested gently upon Hargrave’s arm as though she were afraid that he might make his escape.

“What I am going to say,” she went on at last, “comes from myself—I have indeed no right to say it. You wonder perhaps that Andrea Trentino has attracted me, notwithstanding his wealth. It was not only my loneliness. He has one quality which women worship. He is terribly forceful. He hews his way through difficulties to success. It was like that with me. I resisted for a year. I wished to marry. In any case, it was not Andrea Trentino I desired. In the end I gave in. He does not know how to accept failure. Are you wise to make an enemy of such a man?”

To her surprise, Hargrave laughed—not only smiled but laughed.

“My dear lady,” he said, “to me, of all men in the world, such an argument carries no weight. Life is worth just as much to me as the button you have this moment wrenched from your glove.”

She looked at it ruefully and threw it down.

“But why?” she demanded. “You are young, you have not yet reached middle age, you have the great air, you succeed at sport, in gambling; you succeed when

you will with us poor women. Why do you speak of life so lightly?"

"Marchesa," Hargrave answered, rising to his feet, "I have told you enough of my secrets."

"But let me impress this upon you—just this," she concluded, rising also to her feet. "Andrea Trentino will not be ruined—not by any man. You, if you do this to him, will fall with him—if not one way, another."

He smiled his adieux.

"Marchesa," he said, "those to whom life has no value are naturally indifferent to threats."

Hargrave crossed the room and obeyed the somewhat impatient summons of Mademoiselle Diane. The cheerful-looking little man with the horn-rimmed spectacles appeared from some unexpected place and sunk into his vacant seat.

"Nothing doing, I can see," he observed.

"There's nothing doing," she admitted reluctantly. "He is as hard as steel. Take me to the bar. I am not quite myself."

They threaded their way amongst the people and discovered a retired corner. Even then she found words difficult. Her companion watched her curiously.

"Some brute!" he murmured, with an attempt at sympathy.

"He is a very maddening person," she admitted at last. "I am angry with myself that I have failed. Nothing in the whole world," she went on, her voice trembling a little, "would give me such pleasure as to succeed."

The American—his name was Hobson, known to his intimates as Sam Hobson—smiled to himself as he summoned a waiter. He was a very observant person and after that first glance he had not needed to look at her.

"You couldn't even get wise as to what his game was?" he asked.

"He wouldn't tell me a single thing," she answered.

"He may change his mind," he said softly.

She twisted her fingers one through the other.

"If only I could make him!" she murmured, in a sort of passionate undertone.

"In the meantime," Mr. Hobson observed, "I guess we'd better be getting along with it. Is there anything to be done with the young man?"

"He might be useful," she acknowledged. "I told him yesterday that you represented an American newspaper and were always willing to give a good amount for any news as to the doings of the principal people here. You will probably gain useful information from him."

"I found my man over at Nice," Mr. Hobson announced; "found him working in a garage there and living in a cellar. He's been cleaned up as far as possible, but I

should say that he was some tough.”

The woman shivered a little.

“To-night,” she said, “I am depressed. Get me a champagne cocktail and leave me. Keep that young man away, too. I am in the humour to be rude to any one. Presently I shall go home.”

Mr. Hobson obeyed orders and reluctantly took his leave. Secretly, although he knew better than to even hint at his admiration, he considered the Marchesa the most beautiful and the most attractive woman in the world. He glared resentfully through his thick spectacles at Hargrave, passing down the corridor with Mademoiselle Diane.

“I’ll say that there are some fools who don’t know their luck!” he muttered to himself.

CHAPTER XI

Stéphanie Putralka pushed the drooping roses on one side and leaned forward to greet Hargrave as he brought his Rolls-Royce with a sweep to the front entrance of her villa. He came towards her, hat in hand, a little hesitant. In her cunningly simple white gown, with the welcoming light in her eyes, she seemed, as she moved on one side and stood on the topmost step of the piazza, scarcely more than a girl.

“At last,” she murmured, as he bent over her fingers, “I have you to myself. This is what I have hoped for.”

She led him down the broad balcony, widening at the end into a great winter garden from which exotic odours were caught up and hung languorously upon the softly moving air. In a sheltered corner was a luncheon table laid for two. A servant, in the black-coated livery of the old days, was standing motionless with a salver in his hand upon which were two glasses of exquisite design, slightly frosted and filled with amber liquid. Another servant had relieved Hargrave of his hat and gloves.

“You see, I remember all your weaknesses,” she said, as he raised his glass to his lips. “You like your cocktail the moment you arrive. You like it in a glass of reasonable size, and your cigarette—there it is—at the same time. You like to linger for a moment—here are our chairs. When we are ready, luncheon will be served.”

“You spoil me,” he told her, smiling.

“Perhaps I do,” she answered, a little gravely. “That may be because presently I shall read you a lecture. Your supper party of last night, for instance. Confess at once. Was it very terrible?”

“I thought our dinner was dull,” he confessed, “especially because, alas, as a simple English baronet, I had to sit opposite instead of next to you—but on the whole I think that my supper was duller still.”

“Why must you spend your time pursuing fantasies?” she asked, with a little frown. “I know that men of your position must entertain the other world sometimes, but with you it is becoming a habit. Mademoiselle Diane asserts now that she wears your pearls.”

He flicked the ash from his cigarette.

“Monte Carlo is like a great whispering gallery,” he murmured. “Sometimes the whispers become distorted.”

“You are, I am afraid, a very hopeless person,” she declared. “Do I waste my time upon you, I wonder?”

“It could never be wasted, because it is appreciated,” he answered.

“Not bad,” she admitted. “Tell me, how old are you?”

“I shall be forty on my next birthday.”

“And you have never been married! Well, that may be the reason. It is time, is it not, that you took life more seriously?”

“In England,” he said, “that would mean that I got married, took the hounds and became Chairman of the County Council, or stood for Parliament. Just what does it mean with you?”

“I think that you should marry,” she said.

“And afterwards?”

“Afterwards life becomes more sedate, even if a man’s tastes do not lead him to any actual pursuit. There is always travel—and other possibilities.”

“Marriage,” he reflected, “seems to me, in the world which you adorn, Stéphanie, and into which I am sometimes permitted to enter——”

“You have a place there whenever you choose,” she interrupted quickly. “You are well born, and even if you are of the lesser nobility you have wealth and presence. You are received where you choose. Do not say absurd things.”

“Very well then,” he corrected himself, “marriage in our world seems to make so extraordinarily little difference. One could count upon the fingers of one’s hand the number of men who are here with their wives or wives who are here with their husbands. There is a certain vagueness about matrimonial obligations, especially in this part of the world, which I think would make a bachelor like myself, even if he were inclined to take the plunge, hesitate.”

“There is some reason in what you say,” she admitted, “but the conditions which exist here are not common amongst the great families of Europe. It is very often the fact that people are not happily married, which brings one or the other of them to this place for distraction. I believe that amongst us fidelity in married life is far more usual than amongst the people of other classes.”

“That may be so,” Hargrave conceded thoughtfully.

The Princess made a sign and from somewhere in the background a servant came forward. The glasses were replenished.

“I like these few minutes’ conversation,” she said, “because at luncheon one has one’s servants, and our opportunities for intimate talk are so few. I know what you must be thinking, although naturally you would not allude to it. You are thinking of my own case.”

“I have sometimes wondered,” Hargrave admitted, “as to your relations with your husband.”

“The Prince,” she confided, “is twenty years older than I am. That would not in

itself be an insuperable obstacle to our happiness, but he prefers a life which does not appeal to me. He has represented our lost country, since the days of his boyhood, in Paris, first as military attaché, and afterwards diplomatically, and he is Parisian to his finger tips. He is miserable if he is dragged away. That is why some eight—no, nine years ago—we informally separated. The world does not know this. I visit for two months every year our establishment in Paris, sometimes he spends a month with me with our cousins in Italy, but it is nevertheless a fact that nine years ago he ceased to be more to me than a friend.”

“You never thought of divorce?” Hargrave ventured. “Such a life for a young woman, after all, seems scarcely reasonable.”

“It is strange that you should mention that,” she said. “We will speak of it again, but in connection with my married life there is another thing which I should like to tell you. During that nine years I have been faithful, not to my husband, but to the vows which united me to him.”

Hargrave looked across at her thoughtfully. Notwithstanding its humanity, hers was a wonderfully patrician face. To-day she was more earnest than he had ever known her. There was at that moment something almost saintlike in the stillness of her features which seemed to him a little strange after the frankly girlish pleasure of her greeting.

“That is very wonderful of you,” he acknowledged gravely, “and yet not so wonderful. There is something, after all, a little vulgar about unlegalised attachments, unless they are for all time.”

She smiled deprecatingly but with some approval.

“I am of the same opinion,” she confessed. “I claim no merit for what I have told you, because it is a part of myself. I have never been tempted. Now we have gone so far with our conversation, shall we lunch? I like to feel that we understand each other better, and whilst we lunch you shall tell me of this little protégée of yours. I must admit that I had a queer feeling when I saw her with you that morning last week.”

She glanced around. The major-domo, who had been hovering near the table, hastened forward.

“*Madame la Princesse est servie,*” he announced.

They took their places in high-backed, comfortable chairs, drawn up before a wonderful oval table, with carved legs and a yellow marble top. The luncheon service was of amber-coloured Sèvres china, the glass tinted faintly with the same shade. The food, served with faultless precision and in perfect silence by two servants, overlooked by the tall major-domo who stood motionless behind his

mistress' chair, was as perfect as the efforts of a famous *cordons bleu* could ensure.

"We speak, if you please, of your young protégée," the Princess suggested.

"There is very little to tell you," was the measured reply. "I take some interest in her and her brother in London, where they are both engaged in working for their living. They have never been to Monte Carlo, and the whim seized me to give them two months of happiness."

"It was a generous whim," the Princess murmured. "The girl has not the air of the working class. Tell me how long you have known her."

"A year, perhaps, by sight," he answered; "a day or two before I left England to speak to."

"She has an affection for you?"

"She is naturally grateful," Hargrave replied; "she could scarcely be otherwise. As to anything else—well, whatever her years may be, she is distinctly—it is the most charming part of her—a child. My age you know."

"It is probably a sort of hero worship," the Princess conceded. "You are the fairy prince who is showing her a new world, but be careful, *mon ami*. There are many girls who would never be hurt by a little *tendresse* for an older man, but I am not sure that your little protégée is one of them."

"You are very observant," he murmured, ridiculously anxious to change the conversation.

"I am a very good judge of other people," she said. "That child has in her the good things which so few possess. She has heart and she has soul. She is not to be hurt."

"But you have not spoken to her," Hargrave protested.

"I have watched her more than once," the Princess continued, "and when she thinks she is unobserved it is very seldom that her glances are far from you. When you speak to her she is suddenly beautiful. It is the beauty of a girl who feels pleasant things. Well, we will leave her alone, only you men are sometimes a little bit blind. Be careful!"

Hargrave watched the yellow wine in a long carafe being poured into his glass.

"You are very kind and thoughtful about others, Stéphanie," he said. "Some day I almost think that there is a confidence of my own which I should make to you."

"You will find me always ready to listen," she assured him. "I may not give absolution, but I can give advice. Good advice, too, I think," she went on, "for although I live in the world here and in Rome—sometimes in London, sometimes in Paris, for short visits to Madrid—I think that I am rather an onlooker in life. The rôle suits me. It amuses me to watch my fellow creatures. I have found it sufficient for

many years. Just now, I am not so sure of myself.”

Her eyes met his. He was conscious of a moment almost of embarrassment. She accepted it as due to the presence of the servants, and laughed lightly.

“We speak in English to-day,” she said. “I make a point of having servants who do not understand that language, and Paul here, my protector, speaks very little of anything except Russian. Still, I am tempted, perhaps, to be too discursive. Tell me, you are having a large party for the Bal de L’Or?”

“I have taken a box,” Hargrave answered. “I have done nothing yet about my guests.”

The Princess sighed.

“I, alas,” she said, “must go with my friends upon the hill. It will be tedious but one may escape. I shall look for your aid. You amuse yourself this season as usual?”

“I am not so sure,” he answered. “I came with the idea of amusing myself more. Perhaps for that reason there have been times when I have been a little weary with the life.”

“We all feel that,” she confessed gently. “It is so beautiful and there is so much to attract that we rather rush at it, we embrace it almost to surfeit. I am not sure,” she went on, “that you, my friend, are not a sinner in that respect.”

“Perhaps I am,” he admitted. “I am learning wisdom, though.”

She smiled at him—a smile which seemed to imply some understanding, the happiness of which made him for a moment uneasy. Then he saw the smile fade slowly from her lips, saw the change come into her face. She leaned a little forward, gazing down the terrace in obvious surprise. He followed the direction of her eyes. Preceded by a manservant who had not appeared at the service of luncheon, came a tall, elderly man, of good figure and address. He carried his hat in his hand and his smoothly brushed, grey hair and erect carriage gave him a military appearance.

“Nicholas!” Stéphanie murmured under her breath. “But this is amazing!”

He approached the table with a quick glance at Hargrave. Then he bent low over Stéphanie’s fingers and raised them to his lips.

“I am forgiven, I trust, for this surprise,” he said. “Your letter brought me.”

“You are very welcome, of course,” she answered gravely. “Hargrave, I must introduce you to my husband. Sir Hargrave Wendever—Prince Nicholas.”

The two men shook hands. The Prince accepted a chair and some coffee.

“I lunched early upon the train,” he explained. “I may renew my acquaintance with the wonderful art of Antoine if I am permitted to dine.”

“But naturally,” Stéphanie replied. “You will stay here, of course. They will be seeing about your rooms.”

“Mine will be a very brief visit,” the Prince said, “but you are very kind.”

The conversation, which had merged into French, became a little disjointed. After he had finished his coffee, Hargrave rose.

“You will excuse me, Princess,” he begged, “if I make a somewhat hasty departure.”

“But I would prefer you to stay,” she protested, “and know my husband better.”

Prince Nicholas looked across the table, and it seemed to Hargrave that he was looking into the eyes of an enemy.

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure,” the former said coldly.

“I shall hope to have another opportunity,” Hargrave observed. “This afternoon, I have been foolish enough to engage myself to play tennis.”

The two men exchanged bows. Stéphanie rose deliberately to her feet and walked away with Hargrave.

“This visit,” she confided, as they drew out of earshot of the table, “has been a complete surprise to me. It is without doubt the result of a letter which I wrote to Nicholas.”

“Is it my fancy,” Hargrave asked, “or did your husband resent my presence with you *tête-à-tête*?”

“He has not the right,” she answered calmly. “But men are always unreasonable—Russians in particular. There is a strain of the Cossack, too, in Nicholas, although he is at heart a great gentleman. Whilst he is here, I must entertain him. I must listen to what he has to say. When he goes, I send to tell you. You understand?”

“Perfectly.”

“And you are content?”

“Naturally.”

She raised her fingers almost to his lips before she turned away. Hargrave, as he commenced to descend the steps to where the car was waiting, caught a little view of the man seated at the deserted luncheon table, watching them with a frown.

CHAPTER XII

A morning or two later, Hargrave, mounting the winding path from the bathing hut a little later than usual, found Violet taking her breakfast upon the terrace. She greeted him half eagerly, half shyly.

“Late this morning, aren’t you?” he asked.

“I have nothing particular to do,” she answered. “It’s delightful to dawdle here.”

He sank into a chair by her side and gave an order to his servant who had been following him with towels.

“If I may,” he proposed, “I will have my coffee with you.”

“If you may!” she repeated, a little scornfully.

“What time did you get home last night?” he enquired.

“About ten o’clock.”

“But why?” he asked, frowning. “Surely I saw you going out with Robert?”

She stirred her coffee thoughtfully. She was capable of great reserves, but an impulse to let him know something of the truth assailed her and she yielded to it.

“Brothers don’t seem to count for much in Monte Carlo,” she confided. “We went to the Salles Privées because Robert thinks he wins there more easily. He spent the first part of the evening with a little French *danseuse* from the Café de France, and afterwards he disappeared altogether, either with her or some one else. I’m not complaining—please don’t think that,” she went on hastily. “I want Robert to enjoy himself, but to wander about the Rooms by oneself isn’t too pleasant, and although I don’t think I’m a prude I rather like to choose my own acquaintances. That’s why for the last three nights I’ve gone to bed at about ten o’clock, and got up in time to watch you, disapprovingly, from up there,” she concluded, pointing to her balcony.

“I’m afraid I’ve been very thoughtless,” he admitted. “I must disturb you coming home at that hour of the morning.”

“You don’t disturb me,” she assured him, “because I’m always awake. The birds are singing and there’s a sort of wonderful half light before the sun comes up which draws me out of bed. Sometimes I can’t believe it is real. It is like the prelude to some great opera, and I keep on expecting the curtain to go up. Then I hear that horn and see those great lights of yours come flashing round the corner, watch you turn up the avenue, and I realise just where I am. Then I get into bed again.”

“I’ll come the back way to-night,” he declared.

She was almost pathetically in earnest.

“Please don’t—please promise that you won’t,” she begged. “I shall lie awake

for I don't know how long if you do. I like watching the car come up the avenue and knowing that you are safe at home. I always go to sleep afterwards."

"What am I going to do about you?" he asked, after a brief pause, during which she had poured out his coffee. "I'm afraid you are getting a little lonely."

"I am quite satisfied to be alone," she assured him. "That doesn't mean being lonely in the least. If I may have these gardens and the sunshine and the birds in the morning and those mountains to look at and the car now and then, I am perfectly and entirely happy. Robert enjoys himself after a different fashion, but it doesn't interfere with me. Believe me, I am perfectly and entirely content. I'd rather be left alone than go out with people who don't interest me."

He stirred his coffee thoughtfully. No one but himself knew how tight a hold he had kept upon all his inclinations during the last few days. Stéphanie's warning and his own dimly awakened feelings had been always in his mind. Still, there were limits to the restrictions he had forced upon himself. There was no reason why he should deny himself the pleasure of seeing her happy.

"Would you like to go a little higher up into the mountains than you have been yet?" he asked. "Up to Mont Agel with me and lunch and walk round whilst I play a hole or two of golf? I need some exercise and I'm rather bored with the tennis crowd."

"I shouldn't just like it," she told him sincerely; "it would be heavenly. I have been through La Turbie. Robert had an hour to spare the day before yesterday and we had tea at that pink place up there. But do you really mean it—lunch with you there? Don't you want to take some one to play with you?"

"I'd much rather take you," he answered. "I'll have a few holes before lunch and a few after. You don't by any chance play yourself, I suppose?"

"I have played," she admitted, "years ago. My father belonged to the little golf club in the village where I was born. He was the local doctor there, and he and the clergyman started it."

He concealed his surprise admirably. It occurred to him that he had never asked her a single question as to her parentage.

"So much the better," he declared. "You shall play with some of my clubs. I will go and complete my toilette and be down in twenty minutes. You won't find it any too warm," he added, glancing at her light frock.

"I'll put on a tweed skirt and jumper," she told him. "How heavenly!"

She met Robert as she flew up the stairs. He held out his arm and stopped her.

"Why the hurry?"

"I'm going to lunch with Sir Hargrave at Mont Agel and play golf," she

answered, breathlessly.

“So that’s what he’s going to do this morning,” Robert observed. “No tennis at Cannes, eh?”

“No, he’s taking me up to Mont Agel in half an hour, so you will have a whole long morning and afternoon to yourself. You can invite Mademoiselle Zélie to have an apéritif with you, and lunch if you will with some one else, and have tea with whomever you please. I’m off your hands.”

“You seem pretty pleased about it,” he remarked.

She swung round suddenly and looked at him.

“Do you blame me?” she asked.

A wonderful morning! Violet sat proudly and happily by Hargrave’s side, and he drove his two-seater Rolls-Royce, which was the envy of all the motorists in the place. The end of their journey was like entering paradise. They were on a level with the snows, almost with the clouds, but the whole place was bathed in sunshine, the air was like wine. He took her out at once on to the links.

“Have your luncheon here, Johnson,” he told the chauffeur. “We shall be at least two hours and a half.”

There were few people playing and they were able to drive off from the first tee at once. Hargrave, putting his driver into Violet’s hands, after a moment’s hesitation, was amazed at the result. She drove with a fine, free swing, hitting the ball well down the course, and although she topped her next shot she atoned by a long putt on the first green. When they arrived on the second, he took her straight to the professional’s shop.

“A set of lady’s clubs and a bag at once,” he ordered. “My dear child, you should have told me about this.”

She coloured with pleasure.

“I wasn’t at all sure how I should play again,” she said. “I used to be fairly good, but it was so long ago.”

“I shall give you a half,” he announced, as they emerged again. “I shall think myself lucky if I can hold my own.”

They played the first few holes almost in silence, Violet fulfilling the promise of her first shot and almost breathless with excitement. From the dizzy height of the fourth tee they paused to look down for a moment upon the dazzling panorama below.

“Look at that speck on the road,” Violet exclaimed; “right down as far as you can see. How fast it is moving!”

The speck on the road was a black motor bicycle, climbing the hill at a wicked speed. Hargrave frowned as he looked at it and turned away.

“Some madman,” he muttered; “deserves to break his neck!”

They played the whole eighteen holes before luncheon, Hargrave keenly interested and Violet rapturously happy. When they entered the restaurant, where a table in the window had been reserved for them, she gave another little cry of wonder. The white peaks with which they were surrounded seemed almost within reach, a ribbon of blue mist hung over one of the nearer mountains, above all there was the sunlight. Hargrave watched his companion’s face with a queer little sense of emotion. There was something childlike, almost pagan, in her worship of beauty.

“One must lunch,” he whispered presently.

She turned around. After her brief visit to the clouds she was entirely and warmly human.

“Why, I hope so,” she declared. “I was never so hungry in my life. And a cocktail! This is quite my happiest morning.”

It was a good and excellently served lunch, and Violet’s high spirits were infectious. Hargrave thrust problems behind him and let himself go. He devoted himself with complete success to his companion’s entertainment. He was occasionally personal, and permitted himself to be paternally tender. She mocked at his affectation of superior years.

“Do you know how old I am?” she asked him. “I have told you once, but you appear to forget. I am twenty-four years old. You are thirty-nine. I know because I looked you up in one of those books. There’s no difference between us at all. You have no right to talk to me as though you’d lived in the world for years and years before I was born.”

“How old is Robert?”

For almost the first time the light died out of her face.

“Robert is twenty-five,” she said. “He looks older, but then he has had rather a bad time and he hasn’t the disposition which makes the best of things.”

“I remember wondering once,” he remarked, with a little smile, “whether you had.”

She laughed outright, very softly and very musically, yet with a real ring of mirth.

“What you must have thought of me, growling and grumbling on my stool,” she exclaimed. “I was so miserable those few days, though, and I never dreamed that you were going to turn out to be my fairy prince.”

“I wonder if I have,” he reflected.

“Then don’t wonder any more,” she begged softly. “If, when the end of my visit

comes, I die, I shall die happy, because I have known happiness. No one can say more. I was honest when I said that I was starving for just this. I've had it and I don't mind. All that I feel is pity for people who have never once been really happy before they die."

"You generally have a thought for others," he observed.

"I have had one for you the last few mornings," she told him, tenderly but a little reproachfully. "I have hated to see you come in between four and five o'clock, looking so tired. I have gone back to bed more than once with a heartache."

He tried to remain indifferent.

"Life here makes demands upon one," he murmured.

"Necessarily?"

"You little inquisitoress!"

"You don't mind?" she appealed. "How could I help thinking that it would be so good for you if you would have just one or two quiet evenings."

"We'll have one together sometime," he proposed rashly.

She was silent, but the look she flashed across the table brought him a moment's disquietude. And yet, after all, he asked himself, as he looked beyond her high up to the snows, what did it matter? He had come here with the deliberate intention of taking his dole of the best there was in life. Why deny himself the crumbs of her offering? Day by day he realised that she was becoming to him the centre of all his emotions. The rest of the people, excepting only Stéphanie, were puppets, creatures made to play with and forget, to amuse, if they could, the passing months of a dying man. But happiness! Why not a month or more of it? After all, the path to the end was only relatively short or long. He could compensate, he could leave her wealth. Why deny himself?

"What do you see away there in the distance?" she asked him abruptly.

The rush of his thoughts was checked. He laughed a little uneasily and helped himself to wine.

"I see a shadow falling upon the mountains, child," he said, "a blue mist turning to grey. It means that we must finish our lunch and hurry downwards."

"The wonderful things are finished so soon," she sighed.

He wrapped her cloak around her and they drove off. She leaned back by his side with a little sigh of content as they glided away from the clubhouse. The demon of his disquietude leaped out again. He watched her long, capable fingers, lying for a moment ungloved upon the rug, and wondered whether she had left them there on purpose. Never once had he held them. He glanced at her lips, full and soft and sweet, and thought for a moment of the miracle of the one unforgettable kiss he

knew so well was there for the asking, watched her slim body as she leaned forward and then back again in her place. Suddenly he found her watching him. She smiled.

“Forgive me,” she begged. “To-day you look so natural. You seem so much more like yourself. Since we have been out here, is it my fancy, or have you been just a little schoolmasterish with me? I don’t know why. I don’t want you to be like that.”

He swung round the corner to the second lacet. He had been driving, perhaps, a little faster than usual and his foot sought the brake. There was no response. The car was gathering speed. He reached for the hand brake. Then he knew the worst.

“What’s happened, Johnson?” he asked, without turning his head.

The man leaned over from the dickey.

“I wanted to ask you when you got in, Sir Hargrave, to let me try the brakes, only you were off so soon,” he replied. “I don’t understand. They were all right when we came up.—My God!”

They swung round a corner on two wheels. A foot from them on the right was a sheer drop, of many hundreds of feet. They were racing now down a long incline. Hargrave bent over the wheel.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I’m afraid we shall have a bit of a smash. I’ll do the best I can.”

“I’m not afraid,” she whispered softly.

He felt her fingers resting very gently upon his arm—gently as though not to incommode him, but seeking for the comfort of his nearness. Their touch seemed to quicken his brain and steel his nerve. At the bottom of the descent was a peasant’s farmhouse, built of stone and flush with the road. He drove towards it, steered to an inch so that the wing brushed hard against the masonry, turned with that first check a little further in still, so that the whole of one side of the car, shattering and splintering along the front of the house, was nevertheless subjected to the brake of its contact. They came almost to a standstill, swung around, crashed sideways into a wooden gate and with their impetus lessened knocked only a stone or two with their rear wheels off the wall which overhung the precipice.

“Jump, dear!” he cried quickly.

As another stone began to loosen she came fearlessly into his arms. Johnson was on his feet by now and a huge boulder was rolled behind the wheels just in time. Hargrave drew himself up.

“Well, we’re out of that!” he exclaimed.

“It was the finest save I ever did see, Sir Hargrave,” the man declared vehemently. “I don’t believe there is another man breathing could have done it. I

thought we were goners.”

Violet, very slowly, very reluctantly, drew away from Hargrave’s grasp. He still held both her hands in his. On the whole the moment had its compensations.—A car came rushing up the hill. The omnibus which had been behind them was already pulling up. Johnson crawled out from underneath the car.

“What I want to know, sir, is who’s been tampering with my brakes?” he said fiercely. “It’s been done on purpose!”

Hargrave was puzzled.

“They were certainly in perfect order when we came up,” he declared.

The chauffeur pointed under the car.

“The nuts have all been withdrawn from both bolts, sir,” he announced. “It was a put-up job. No accident unscrewed a dozen nuts.”

They were by this time surrounded. Hargrave handed Violet into the ’bus and took his place by her side.

“You had better go up in the other car, Johnson,” he directed, “and make enquiries. See if any strangers were lounging about, and tell Mr. Dickson, the secretary, just what’s happened. Don’t talk about it to any one else.”

“Very good, Sir Hargrave.”

The ’bus fortunately was empty. Violet sat with her arm tightly through her companion’s.

“Did your chauffeur think that some one had done this on purpose?” she asked.

“Well, it seems absurd,” he replied. “Still, there you are. Brakes don’t go like that all of their own accord.”

“But who could have done it?” she demanded wonderingly. “You haven’t any enemies, have you?”

“Well, I wouldn’t go so far as to say that, but who could have known that I was lunching at La Turbie?”

Violet reflected for a moment.

“Well, Robert knew,” she remarked. “He may have told Mr. Hobson.”

“And who may he be?”

“He’s an American journalist,” she explained. “I’ve seen him talking to the Marchesa di Bieni.”

Hargrave was silent for a moment. His face had grown very stern.

“What makes you think that Robert might have told him?” he asked.

She indulged in a little grimace.

“Well, just something that the Marchesa said. I heard her tell Robert that Mr. Hobson was making his living by reporting the doings of well-known people here,

and she asked him whenever he had a chance to let him know where you were lurching or dining. That didn't matter, did it?"

"What could matter," he answered lightly, "so long as we are here and safe? All the same, perhaps you had better warn Robert to be careful. Mr. Hobson is not quite the sort of journalist I care for."

CHAPTER XIII

“Will you tell me, if you please,” begged the woman who sat by Pellingham’s side at dinner in the Princess’ wonderful villa, “just who may be this Englishman, Sir Hargrave Wendever, and why he is host to-night?”

Pellingham glanced furtively at the small card which lay by the side of his place.

“You did not hear my name, perhaps,” his companion continued. “It is not strange, for Stéphanie was indistinct this evening. I am the Comtesse Fedora Fayaldi. There is more, but I spare it to you. I am either Hungarian or Polish, whichever you will, for my husband owned estates in both countries, and I arrived here to-night. I stay with my friend the Princess and at dinner—it is a most interesting party, this, is it not?—I find as host a very distinguished-looking man, but a stranger.”

“Sir Hargrave Wendever is his name,” Pellingham confided. “He is a pal of mine, an Englishman, a man of great wealth and very popular upon the Riviera. It was rather a surprise to me to find him playing the part of host, but I know that the Princess’ cousin, the Grand Duke, sent his excuses at the last moment. That’s why Wendever brought me along, to make the numbers right. I only arrived this afternoon.”

“Tell me about this man,” the Comtesse begged.

Pellingham stole a glance at his questioner. She was *petite*, a brunette, dainty, with large, mysterious eyes and beautiful hands and fingers.

“Well,” he said, “Monte Carlo, as you know, is a strange place. Every season there is one man or one woman who seems to dominate it. This year they tell me that it is Hargrave Wendever.”

“This is very interesting,” she murmured, her eyes fixed upon Hargrave.

“How he lives the life, I can’t imagine,” Pellingham went on, “for in England he’s rather a quiet sort of chap. Out here they tell me he is either a guest or he gives a party every night. He mixes with the best of every sort—royalty for dinner, perhaps, and the *haute demimonde* for supper. He is popular with them all—goes through it like a man—and yet he plays golf, tennis, owns a racing motor car and is a great gambler when he feels like it.”

“A full life,” she reflected. “Tell me, you who are his friend, is he an easy man to understand?”

“Until lately, I should have said one of the easiest in the world. Last time I saw him in London, though, he seemed a little queer, and out here he seems to have gone off the rails altogether. You could never really get him going in London. He was

always wanting to keep fit for hunting or racquets, and that sort of thing.”

“He has the *affaires* with women?”

Pellingham shrugged his shoulders.

“He is rather off them in England,” he replied. “Out here I suppose we all run a bit wild.”

The Comtesse was silent for a few minutes. She glanced around the table. There were sixteen guests in a wonderful dining room, panelled with sycamore, and with a floor of ebony. The chairs were exquisite models of Louis XV period, upholstered in faded yellow silk. The whole of the walls and the ceiling had been decorated by one of the most famous Italian artists of the sixteenth century. The night was so warm that the French windows stood open, disclosing rows of marble steps leading down to a grove of olive trees. A fountain threw little jets of water into a porphyry basin and fairy lights glimmered out from hidden places. From somewhere in the distance, the smallest but choicest of orchestras was playing fragments of Russian ballet music.

“These entertainments of Stéphanie’s, in such a perfect setting, are scarcely fair to a susceptible woman,” the Comtesse sighed. “I arrive only to-day from the snows of a château high amongst pine mountains, a château which is like a fortress, where we have to burn great wood fires to keep us warm indoors, and furnaces outside to frighten the wolves away from the farmyards. One starts the journey here by sleigh, then by car, then by train—oh, so horrible a train—then a *train de luxe*, and all the time the skies grow kinder, the air warmer, flowers come and the pink-blossomed trees and the song of birds. And one finishes here!”

Pellingham was not altogether comfortable. He felt that his seat at table had not been chosen with discrimination.

“Comtesse,” he said, “I believe that you are a poetess.”

“Every one of my race,” she answered, “is either a poetess or a musician or a painter. I have another gift.”

“And what is it?”

She looked at him again, not unkindly but critically.

“I fear that you are of the type who will smile when I tell you,” she said. “Still, it makes so little difference whether you believe or not. I, like my ancestresses many hundreds of years ago, can read fragments of the future.”

Pellingham held out a brown, well-shaped hand. She pushed it away with a little flick of her fan.

“My dear man,” she declared, “you are one of those whose future is too obvious. There is nothing there for me. A child could tell you everything. You will eat and drink, wed and gamble. You will have your share of fortune and misfortune. All

the same, the Gods are not greatly concerned about you.”

“Most unfeeling of them,” Pellingham grumbled. “I lost ten *milles* this afternoon, and I want to know whether there is any chance of getting it back again.”

She looked at him with an inscrutable smile.

“You would ask one to climb to the stars to bring you down word as to whether you are to win or lose a few *mille* notes!” she scoffed. “You are a very pleasant dinner companion, Lord Edward, but your destiny is already written.”

“I’m a commonplace sort of fellow, I know,” he confessed, “but something might be going to happen to me.”

“You are going to ask for a match that I may light a cigarette,” she told him.

Some one addressed her across the table and Pellingham found himself talking polo with his other neighbour. Presently they all followed the Princess through a great portière, the magnificent curtains of which had been drawn aside, into a winter garden filled with marvellous beds of flowers, many fountains and gaily plumaged birds. A table was set out with coffee and liqueurs.

“You need not be afraid of the cold, any one,” the Princess assured them. “The place is warmed, although the windows are open. Thank you so much, dear friend,” she added, her fingers resting for a moment on Hargrave’s arm, “for your help tonight.”

“It has been a great pleasure,” he answered, “as well as an honour—an honour to which I fear that I have very little right,” he concluded, glancing at two white-headed old gentlemen who were whispering together significantly.

The Princess shrugged her beautiful shoulders.

“What do I care?” she murmured. “What is the use of being oneself if one may not do what one wishes? I have a beautiful home here, I have everything to make life wonderful, and only a few years in which to live it. I pluck the fruit I choose.”

His eyes glittered for a moment.

“Stéphanie,” he said, under his breath, “I wish that I dared embrace your philosophy.”

A servant brought the coffee and she retreated a little further beneath the shadow of an enormous palm. He followed her and they sank into cushioned cane chairs.

“Well,” she asked softly, “have you been wondering?”

“I have indeed,” he assured her.

“Nicholas left me this afternoon,” she went on. “He came, as you may imagine, without warning. He has gone to Rome to consult his cousin.”

Hargrave said nothing. He simply listened with a little frown.

“You are not curious,” she continued, “as to his visit?”

“Curiosity,” Hargrave replied, “is one of the few vices which I do not possess.” She seemed displeased.

“I receive an unexpected visit from my husband, and I disappear altogether from your life for three days,” she said. “He departs to Rome to consult with the head of our family. Do these things suggest nothing to you?”

“They suggest only what you wish to tell me,” he answered.

She sat by his side in silence for several moments.

“I suppose,” she admitted at last, “that your attitude is the correct one, when one comes to think of it. Still, it seems so little in keeping with the rest of you—you, who, they all say, are living now as though each day were your last.”

“You exaggerate my misdemeanours,” he assured her, smiling. “I live as many others out here.”

She shook her head.

“You live for the moment which you fear to lose,” she declared. “There is a difference. Are you sure that by doing so you are not missing something better worth having?”

There was a second’s pause. The musicians had ranged themselves at the end of the winter garden and their faint, languorous music was drifting through the air already a little overladen with the perfume of myriads of lilies.

“Who can tell?” he answered. “One draws down the bough one can reach.”

“That is because one lacks patience,” she whispered. “One has only to wait for the winds of chance, and the topmost twigs of the tree may bend and come within one’s reach. Are you weary of allegories, my friend?” she added, suddenly dropping her voice. “Nicholas will stay no more than three days in Rome.”

Her hand touched his arm. She glanced backward into the recesses of the garden. He followed her example and rose to his feet. Just then the one person who had sufficient courage to accost them crossed the tessellated pavement. Stéphanie paused, although with obvious reluctance.

“I pray,” the Comtesse said, “that I do not intrude. Dear Stéphanie, I ask something of you. You will present me to your companion, please?”

Stéphanie, for a moment, was silent. It was probable that Fedora Fayaldi was the only woman in the world from whom she would have suffered this intrusion. As it was she simulated resignation.

“Hargrave,” she confided, “this is one of my dearest friends, although sometimes, as at this moment, a nuisance. Sir Hargrave Wendever—the Comtesse Fayaldi.”

Hargrave bent over the offered hand—offered with a graceful little droop of the fingers for his lips.

“Madame la Comtesse arrived only this evening, I am told,” he said.

“Only this evening,” she replied. “You will talk to me for a little while? I have something to say.”

Stéphanie turned regretfully away. There were other of her guests who had the right to expect her notice.

“Soon I shall return,” she said. “I leave you together with all confidence. Fedora—my dearest friend, by the bye—loves only the wild spirits of her mountains, and you, dear man——”

“And what of me?” he asked, as she hesitated slightly.

“They say that Fedora has second sight,” Stéphanie replied. “She may find out more about you than I know myself.”

She left them alone. There was no trace of a smile upon the Comtesse’s face as she accepted the chair which Hargrave placed for her. She was very serious, very much in earnest.

“Monsieur does not believe in second sight?” she ventured.

“There is nothing in the world which I disbelieve,” he answered, “and very little which I believe.”

“It is a speech which has the makings of an epigram but it is not philosophy,” she observed. “Perhaps I shall make you believe. Who knows?”

“In what, Madame?”

“In what I tell you.”

Hargrave, matter of fact almost to the point of materialism, was conscious of a sudden disturbance. Her eyes were like great pools of light, although much of their expression had gone. Her fingers were resting upon his wrist.

“Now and then in life,” she continued, “one meets some one like you—some one whose knowledge of their own fate is reflected in their face. I watched you at dinner time. I could not eat. I was aching all the time to reach you.”

“I never realised that I was an object of so much interest,” he remarked, a little startled.

“It is not that,” she explained calmly. “You have the hidden things in your face which so few of us understand—I, for one. Test me. You will be surprised. You do not know what to ask? Then listen. I arrived in Monte Carlo this afternoon. I have never heard of you before. I know nothing whatever about you. You have just escaped from death. The shadow of death is around you all the time.”

“I have just escaped,” he admitted, with a slight start, “from what might have been a very serious accident.”

“It might have been death,” she persisted. “And it is not yet finished. Within

forty-eight hours death will threaten you again.”

“You are rather alarming,” he observed. “Can you tell me what I have done to deserve these unwelcome attentions?”

“That is naturally outside my province,” she answered. “I find that you have an enemy ranged against you in the ordinary affairs of life, who tests your courage and your fortune. So far you have escaped, but it is not that which interests me. Monsieur Sir Hargrave, do you carry with you any secret knowledge—the knowledge of death?”

He looked at her fixedly.

“Why do you ask that question?”

“I am foolish that I ask it,” she admitted. “There is no necessity. I ask what I already know. You walk through life by day, you lie in your bed by night, with the ghost of death by your side.”

“Comtesse,” he said uneasily, “I am glad that the whole world has not your perceptions.”

Her eyes were set in a dreamy stare. She looked not at him but through him. Her tone had become monotonous. She was like one who reads from a written page.

“There it is in your brain and in your heart,” she went on, “and there is another weakness, a new thing to you, not yet come to flower. It is like the wonderful and silent joy of my forests. It is like the vision of an oasis in the sandy wastes of a desert life. Will you reach it, I wonder? Will you pull down the pine boughs of my trees and revel in their perfume? Will you drink from those springs in the cool places, or shall you miss the wonders that you are finding so late in life?”

Hargrave moved restlessly in his chair. Even his composure had gone. Every nerve in his body was tense. His heart was throbbing.

“Where on earth do you come from and who are you?” he demanded.

“Never mind,” she answered. “The almanacks would satisfy your curiosity. Stéphanie would tell you what my life’s history has been, but I am also one of the few in the world who are without any real home, or who belong neither to this world nor any other that we know of.”

The music suddenly changed to obey the whim of a royal personage. The strains of a modern waltz floated out into an atmosphere surcharged with other things. The Comtesse leaned back in her chair and laughed. Her eyes had lost their fixed look. Her lips had become intensely human. Hargrave, who was still half dazed, looked at her in astonishment. The music and the sound of the different voices beyond the palms caught him up too in a marvellous wave of reasserted modernity. From the distance, the Princess, escaped from her duties, came hastening towards them.

“Well?” she asked, looking from one to the other.

“Your *chef d’orchestre*,” the Comtesse replied, “has much to answer for.”

Hargrave, leaning back in the corner seat of his limousine, drove home in the pearl-grey morning, faint lines of rose and salmon pink showing through a haze of violet over the peaks of the mountains. Monte Carlo itself was indulging in its brief beauty sleep. It was a little late for the roysterers, too early for the street cleaners. The birds alone disturbed a silence beautiful even to fantasy. The sea, as he turned downwards again towards the villa, lay like a sheet of placid glass undisturbed by a single ripple. It was to watch it that Hargrave was leaning out of the window of the car as it swept in at the avenue. From the steps of the terrace, advancing with flying footsteps towards them, her hands upraised above her head, her ungirdled dressing gown floating behind her, her limbs like the limbs of a young Diana, came Violet through the lightening twilight, horror on her face, words of terror breaking from her lips.

“Stop!” she cried. “Stop the car! Stop where you are!”

Crash went the brakes grinding against the hubs. The avenue was steep and they stopped within a few yards. The car swung round. Hargrave leaped to his feet, had scarcely steadied himself before a dark figure sprang from a great syringa bush, crossed the avenue and plunged into the shrubbery. There was the glimmer of a pale face as the intruder disappeared, a queer yellow streak of fire and the crack of a pistol as his arm swung out. The bullet missed Hargrave and buried itself in the coachwork of the car. There was a crash in the bushes,—then silence.

“Come on, Johnson! After him!” Hargrave cried.

Johnson was ready enough, but from the first they had little chance. The marauder, whoever he might have been, had scaled the high wall which encircled the villa with amazing agility, and disappeared in a tangled orchard of olive trees with thick copses here and there—a strip of land half cultivated and half allowed to run wild. Hargrave, with his hands upon the wall, paused.

“I don’t think so, Johnson,” he decided. “The fellow may be taking cover anywhere in there. I think we’ll give him best.”

Hargrave made his way back to the car. Violet, the sash of her dressing gown now tied around her, was standing panting in the avenue. She sobbed with relief as Hargrave appeared.

“Oh, I’m so thankful you didn’t go after him,” she cried. “Come into the house. Come now, quickly—quicker!”

She forced him to hurry. He asked her questions, but she took no notice. It was

not until after she had shut the front door that she drew a long breath of relief. They passed into the lounge and she sank exhausted into a chair. Hargrave poured out some water from a carafe upon the sideboard and gave it to her.

“Tell me how you happened to appear just in time?” he asked.

“I always wake for your return,” she reminded him. “I like to watch the lights and to see you turn in. Then I go to sleep again afterwards.”

“My dear child!” he murmured.

“Well, it’s foolish, but I like to do it. This morning I woke with a start. I couldn’t hear the car and yet I fancied that there was something moving in the garden. I saw it was five o’clock and I got out of bed. I put on my dressing gown, pushed open the window softly and stood on the balcony. There was a man standing in the shadow of that cypress tree near the gate, looking along the road. At first I nearly called out. Then I thought I would wait. Whilst I stood there, I saw the flashing of your lights and heard your horn. So did he, I suppose, for he left the gate, came up the avenue, keeping in the shadow of the shrubs, and hid behind a syringa bush. Then I saw him put his hand in his pocket and draw something out that looked like a pistol. I flew downstairs to try to stop you.”

“Which you did,” Hargrave told her quietly. “My dear, it was very brave of you. If that man really meant mischief—and it certainly seemed like it—you have probably saved my life. Both the windows of the car were down, I was leaning out and I don’t see how he could possibly have missed me.”

“But why have you enemies,” she asked, bewildered, “you, the most generous, the kindest of men?”

He smiled at her a little sadly.

“There are many people,” he assured her, “who would call me neither kind nor generous.”

“Then they don’t know you,” she declared passionately.

She was leaning towards him, her lips a little parted, her eyes shining. The sheer beauty of her against that dark background, with the joy of the morning already beginning to stream in through the windows, almost took his senses away. He stood and looked at her, and something that was almost fear stole into his heart. The words of the Hungarian woman flamed in his memory, youth burned in his veins, the self-control of long habitude tottered. He felt the call of her eyes, the call of her fresh, young life, for the affection which was her heritage. An emotional craving, he told himself, feverishly born of the hour and the danger through which they had passed.—A clock close at hand struck shrilly, breaking in upon the tenseness of the moment. He found a curious relief in listening to and following the mechanical sounds.

“Six o’clock,” he counted. “My dear, you must go to bed. You’re cold down here.”

He had moved away; the spell was broken. Her eyes followed him round the room as he fastened the windows and opened the door.

“Come along,” he insisted.

She rose wearily to her feet. A sudden darkness seemed to have crept under her eyes. For a moment he wondered whether she too had felt something of the resurgent passion of those few seconds. He thrust the idea aside, but he dared not trust himself to speech. They walked side by side up the smooth and shining stairs, his hand resting gently upon her shoulder, she walking with the still, detached air of a ghost. Outside her room, he raised her fingers to his lips—very cold little fingers they were. The closing of his own door behind him seemed like the attainment of some fiercely craved-for yet hated sanctuary.

CHAPTER XIV

Hargrave awoke after a few hours of troubled sleep with a sense of dangers escaped. Of the bullet which had missed him by a few feet he thought nothing; of those few minutes with Violet, when she had lingered with him alone in the deserted, shadow-filled room, still quivering with excitement, still—both of them—a little unbalanced by the hoverings of tragedy, he thought a great deal. He found himself going back in his thoughts to the beginning of their acquaintance, recollecting the look almost of scorn which she had flashed upon him, a stranger, when he had first hinted at his proposition, her relief when she had realised her momentary misunderstanding. He had accepted his trust then without a moment's demur. He had taken no thought of possible miracles—for it was a miracle which had happened, he told himself, as he listened to the water running into his bath. He was able to tell himself truthfully that in London she had been simply and solely the object of Philip Gorse's suggested experiment. What she had become now, he dared not attempt to analyse. He was a little tired when François presented him with his bathrobe. His limbs felt heavy, and there was a weariness of body as well as of head. He counted the time since his visit to Harley Street; already nearly two months had passed. This was probably the beginning. He felt a slight pain as he swung himself out of bed. He gave his orders for the day listlessly. Even when he found Violet lingering over her breakfast on the balcony he could do no more than smile a welcome to her as she sank into a chair. She looked at him pathetically. The sight of her, untired, fresh, beautiful, strong, for all her delicate girlhood, brought him a wave of depressing sanity.

"I'm sure you haven't slept," she murmured. "Let me give you your coffee."

"What about you?" he asked.

"I went to bed at half-past nine," she confessed, laughing, "and I slept until four. It really didn't seem to be worth while going out last night, and to-night Robert has promised to take me to the Carlton—so you see I really had a night's sleep before _____"

She broke off with a little shiver.

"Are you going to the police about that man?" she concluded.

"It scarcely seems worth the trouble," he replied. "I couldn't describe him. Johnson went round this morning, though. François told me when I had my bath that they took a great many notes but had nothing to say."

Andrews brought out a salver laden with letters and telegrams. Hargrave looked

at them a little wearily, selecting the latter and leaving the former unopened. Gorse was coming out to join his mother who had a villa at Mentone. Marston was leaving that day for a consultation with his client. He pushed the rest of his letters towards Violet.

“Open them,” he begged. “I am afflicted this morning with an intolerable laziness. If they are invitations refuse them.”

“What fun!” she murmured. “I am now established as your secretary.”

She indulged in a little grimace, as she tore open one of the envelopes, drew out a sheet of mauve, heavily scented paper, and read the few lines scrawled upon it.

“Mademoiselle Diane,” she announced, “still awaits your promised visit. She suggests supper to-night—or to-morrow night—after her dance. You had better answer that yourself. Here is another one from a lady who signs herself Stéphanie and invites you to lunch.”

He touched a bell and gave orders for some telephone messages. She read out a list of further invitations, and a few charitable appeals. He swept them all aside.

“Deal with them this afternoon,” he said. “This morning I will take you both to Nice.”

“Both?” she repeated, with a slight lift of the eyebrows. “I like being alone with you best.”

“You’re a flattering child,” he replied, “but, when I come to think of it, I’m afraid I’ve rather neglected your brother. We’ll take him too, if he wants to come.”

As it happened, Robert, who just then made his appearance, had no pressing engagement, and accepted. Hargrave, whose morning lassitude seemed to continue, ordered a limousine and dismissed the two young people in the Place Massena.

“Go and amuse yourselves as much as you can for an hour,” he directed. “You can meet me then at the Negresco for lunch.”

Violet looked a little disappointed. *Tête-à-têtes* with Robert were things she carefully avoided in these days. Nevertheless, she departed with him cheerfully enough. They started for a walk along the Promenade des Anglais, but Robert soon subsided into a seat. He looked across the road at a café.

“What about a cocktail together, Violet?” he suggested. “We don’t often have the chance.”

“That is scarcely my fault, is it?” she ventured.

“Oh, don’t begin that,” he exclaimed irritably. “Come along.”

“It’s very early,” she objected. “You can go, and I’ll sit here.”

“Oh, I’ll wait if you like,” he said sulkily. “I can’t leave you here alone.”

She rose without further dissent, and accompanied him, drinking an orangeade

whilst he disposed of two Martinis.

“Do you think, Robert,” she asked him, “that you are making altogether the best of this wonderful holiday?”

“I’m enjoying myself,” he said stubbornly. “That’s what we’re here for, isn’t it?”

She looked out across the Promenade, listened for a moment to an itinerant orchestra playing near at hand, and caught glimpses of the blue sea through the ceaseless stream of passers-by.

“I suppose if you’re enjoying yourself that’s the great thing,” she admitted. “I’m not quite sure that I approve of the way you’re doing it.”

“You wouldn’t,” he answered. “You’re always finding fault with me. Some day or other I may have a few things to say about you.”

“About me?” she repeated, a little startled. “What do I do that any one could object to? I don’t gamble, I don’t sit up late, I don’t make objectionable acquaintances, I am living just the sort of life I always longed to live.”

“Oh, you’re a pattern, of course,” he scoffed. “All the same, if I were a jealous man I could find just as much fault with you as you’re finding with me.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, suddenly quiet.

“I mean,” he continued doggedly, “that any fool can see you’re half in love with Sir Hargrave. I’m not at all sure that he isn’t amusing himself with you.”

She turned her head and looked at him—a long, level gaze.

“You cad!” she exclaimed.

He winced perceptibly. This was the first time in his recollection that she had ever retaliated.

“Here! Steady!” he protested. “None of that, Miss Violet!”

“You are asking for some truths,” she said. “You shall have them. When we started, I imagined this was going to be a wonderful holiday together. You drifted away from me the first day. Things I found pleasure in meant nothing to you. You went your own way without considering me for a moment. Even Sir Hargrave saw it, and naturally that made him kinder to me. He is just kind and nothing more. I sometimes wish—no, I won’t lie about it—I wish all the time, that I could compete with all these other wonderful women here.”

“You do, eh?” he exclaimed. “You mean that you’re in love with him?”

She shuddered a little. Somehow or other such a question from Robert, amidst such surroundings, hurt. All her thoughts of Hargrave belonged to other places.

“It isn’t for any one like me to be, as you say, in love with a man like Sir Hargrave,” she objected. “He is just outside our world. He is kind to me—never anything else.”

“Has he ever shown any signs of wanting to be anything else?” Robert persisted.

She hesitated. After all, once when they had sat side by side in the ’bus—again last night—she had fancied dimly that he too, for a moment, had seemed unnatural, that he was putting some restraint upon himself, that if she had dared, that if she had had the courage!—The colour mounted in her cheeks.

“He has always behaved to me,” she declared, a little sadly, “exactly as I knew he would. You see, Robert, Sir Hargrave is a great gentleman. He will never forget.”

Even Robert had flashes of inspiration. He leaned forward.

“I believe you wish to God he would,” he said.

She rose to her feet. He watched her as she moved off with a little gesture forbidding him to follow. In some mysterious way she seemed to have passed out of his world, to be carrying something with her he could never share. His intuition carried him no further towards complete understanding. He failed to realise that it had been his sufferings, his misfortunes, the daily misery of his life in the old days out of which had grown her tenderness towards him.

The luncheon at the Negresco was not a complete success. Robert, whose perceptions once awakened, were now entirely alert, worked himself, before the meal was over, into a state of bitter jealousy. He contrasted Hargrave’s attitude towards Violet with his attitude towards himself. There was, without a doubt, a difference. Perhaps neither of the other two were aware how they had progressed in intimacy. Words sometimes were scarcely necessary for an understanding. Little flashes of humour, references, half-completed sentences, even unspoken words, seemed to envelop them in a harmony of thought from which he was debarred. They never neglected him. Hargrave was always polite, Violet friendly, yet he was all the time conscious of being somehow outside; a position which he resented but was unable to successfully combat. He drank a great deal of wine, but its effect was only to make him more sullen. Hargrave, who had planned the day’s expedition with the idea of resuming his original position towards the two, continued his effort, but only half-heartedly. He was polite to Robert, but he permitted himself the luxury of a more intimate understanding with Violet. After all, he told himself, he was without pledge in the matter. Violet’s brother was always sure of his consideration. That was all which was his due. He even left Robert behind at the end of the meal, and taking Violet lightly by the arm led her to one of the fascinating little shops in the rotunda and insisted upon buying her a hat and shoes which she had admired. She came back with all the natural joy of a girl who has unexpectedly acquired the things she loves.

“The most adorable hat, Robert,” she confided, “and just the shoes I have been

longing to have! You are good to us, Sir Hargrave.”

The speech, perhaps, was a little unfortunate. Hargrave hastened to try to counteract its effect.

“Very good shops here, Martin,” he said. “If there’s anything you’d care for—a little memento of Nice—I’d be delighted.”

“Thank you,” Robert answered gruffly. “There’s nothing I want just now.”

Nevertheless, Hargrave pressed a box of choice cigars upon him when they left.

“We’ll start home now, if you don’t mind,” he proposed. “You’ll have to drop me at the Villa Miramar, and send the car back. I must pay my duty call on the Princess.”

Violet was silent for several moments after they had started on their return journey. Suddenly she turned and smiled at Hargrave, by whose side she was seated.

“What a cat I am!” she exclaimed. “I was actually disappointed because you weren’t going all the way back with us.”

“Does it make so much difference?” he asked impulsively.

“It always does,” she answered. “I am foolish enough to like best of the day always just those minutes you are kind enough to spare us.”

His tiredness had passed a little. The sun was warm and pleasant. A breath of ozone had just swept in from the wonderful sea.

“We’ll compromise,” he suggested. “You shall come back with the car for me, will you?”

“Won’t I?” she answered. “Rather!”

Her eyes danced with pleasure. Her hand slid underneath the rug and held his for a moment. He returned the pressure of her fingers, but a moment later withdrew his to search for his cigarette case.

“There is something I want to tell you, child,” he said, “about my visit to Nice this morning. To a certain extent it was on your account and on your brother’s.”

“Sir Hargrave!” she exclaimed. “What do you mean?”

“Although you affect to ignore the fact,” he continued, “I am, as a matter of fact, an ancient person compared to either of you.”

“If you say that again,” she threatened, “I’ll——”

He turned his head.

“What will you do?”

Her eyes shone with provocative light.

“Well——”

She leaned over and kissed him on the temple.

“There,” she said, “that’s nothing. That’s only to show you what I am capable of.”

“Don’t disturb my paternal attitude,” he begged. “What I wanted to tell you was this: I don’t want you to have the remainder of your holiday spoiled by any undue fears for the future. Whilst I am here, of course I shall keep my word, but, in case anything should happen, I’ve executed a codicil to my will at my lawyer’s this morning. I’ve left you a little more than will bring in as much as you’re likely to earn, and I’ve left something for your brother too. That’s all. I don’t want any thanks, please. You can tell your brother sometime. It may make a difference to him. As for you,” he went on, “I’m afraid you’re one of those very, very nice people who don’t think about themselves at all.”

“I shouldn’t want anything that came from you when you weren’t here,” she declared, almost under her breath.

“That, dear, is sweet but unreasonable,” he said.

“But why should you leave me money?” she demanded, with a sudden and entirely unexpected note of passion in her tone. “I’ve done nothing for you, I can give you nothing, I can make you no happier. I’ve nothing, nothing, nothing in the world to offer, and all these other women have so much. I won’t accept anything.”

“Violet!” he exclaimed.

He would have held her hand, but she suddenly withdrew herself.

“Why do you do these things?” she persisted. “Leave Robert out. I’m not even a plaything. The hours you give to me are given out of kindness. You know it makes me happy if you notice me, so you notice me. We live here wonderfully. It is like the dream of my life come true, and it all comes from you. And I—there is nothing you want that I can give—nothing. I am ashamed.”

She was sobbing pitifully. He thrust his arm through hers, stirred by an infinite compassion.

“Violet,” he pleaded, “nothing that you say is true. You are absolutely morbid in your exaggerations. I have many friends here, as you know. I have too many. I have been happier with you than any of them. You are my refuge. I come to you, and I am rested. I come to you, and I am as nearly happy as I ever am. You have brought many things to me, just now, when I need them. Your stay at the villa—my thought for you in Nice this morning—are utterly inadequate returns for the joy I have had with you, and that is the truth. You know, don’t you, that with all my faults I am a man who speaks the truth.”

The sobs had ceased. She turned and looked at him, half ashamed. The tears had done nothing to detract from her beauty. She reminded him of a very beautiful

passion flower after April rain.

“No one but you could have said that,” she declared. “I don’t mind whether you mean it or not, I’m going to believe it. I will believe it.”

She clung to his arm with a force and passion which he could never have believed possible. Then she settled down once more in her place.

“You have made me happy,” she whispered. “You have made me very happy indeed.”

CHAPTER XV

Philip Gorse, the least clerical-looking being on earth in his flannels and grey Homburg hat, sipped his mixed vermouth meditatively and breathed a sigh of deep content. The few days immediately after his arrival had been given ungrudgingly to his mother who owned a small villa on the outskirts of Mentone. This was his first escape for a time to the rarer atmosphere of Monte Carlo.

“Let no one speak to me of the paganism of this place,” he insisted. “I have not seen so many happy faces for years. After all, you know, Hargrave, happiness is a gift complete in itself, wherever it comes from, and if it’s real happiness, there’s the real stuff underneath.”

The two men were seated outside the Café de Paris, the morning after Gorse’s arrival. There had been a grey day or two by way of contrast, but this morning the sky was flawlessly blue, the sunshine dazzling, the music from the Gipsy Band in their picturesque uniforms seductive yet stirring. Every table was occupied by little groups engaged in pleasant conversation, and the ceaseless stream of promenaders completed the summery effect of the day, the men mostly in flannels, the women, obeying the most wisely ordained fashion of recent years, in short and diaphanous frocks of many colours; here and there was a sprinkling of the more athletic in white tennis clothes with racquets. All the time a little crowd flowed in and out of the Casino whose stucco-like splendour seemed to add a fantastic note to the gay scene.

“Thank God you are not one of those preachers, Philip, who find this place a den of iniquity,” Hargrave exclaimed.

“I should become a sinner myself if I did. What time are you expecting Johnnie Marston?”

“Any moment. He came by the *train bleu* and was punctual for once. He’s tidying up over at the hotel there. You’d better lunch.”

Gorse shook his head regretfully.

“I promised I’d be back. My mother is alone for the day, and she likes me to take her down to the Salles Privées afterwards and find her a comfortable place near a croupier. The dear old lady has a system—a ruinous thing which she abandons two or three times a week—it amuses her though.—There’s a beautiful girl, if you like, Hargrave. She knows you too.”

Violet came across the Place towards them, a tentative smile upon her lips—a Violet so completely changed from the somewhat sullen, white-clad myrmidon of

Bond Street, that every time he saw her unexpectedly Hargrave himself was filled with wonder. Her slim body had always possessed its own peculiar grace but in her fashionable clothes she seemed to have developed an unusual elegance, just as the joy of living shining out of her face had banished the querulous little droop of the mouth, had given her a new and radiant beauty. At Hargrave's answering smile and gesture of invitation, she threaded her way between the tables towards them.

"A protégée of mine, Philip," Hargrave confided. "I wanted you to meet her. She and her brother are staying at my villa. I shall have something to tell you about them afterwards."

Violet accepted a chair and begged for an iced drink. She shook hands with Philip Gorse, recognising him with frank interest.

"I have heard you preach so often," she confided.

"And for that reason, I suppose you are surprised to see me here?" he remarked, translating her expression. "Still, you must admit that nothing you have ever heard in my sermons would induce you to think that I took too severe a view of life."

"I think that's why we all love to come and hear you," she replied, a little shyly. "It seems more like one of ourselves talking."

"The sort of testimonial I love to have," he confessed, with a smile of pleasure.

"Where have you come from?" Hargrave asked her. "And where's Robert? I haven't seen him since the day before yesterday."

She indulged in a characteristic grimace. It was very attractive, that quick pursing together of the lips, the half querulous frown.

"Robert's just the same as ever about the mornings," she declared. "I can't convert him. I love to walk; he likes to get up late, stroll round the place—that generally means having a drink at any and every bar that he comes across—and look in at the Casino. This morning I went up to La Turbie by the funicular and walked down."

"If you are so fond of exercise, I wonder whether you play tennis, Miss Martin?" Philip Gorse asked.

"Much too badly for this part of the world," she confessed.

"I have a sister," he protested earnestly, "who scarcely knows one end of a racquet from the other. Let us play one morning. Hargrave would be too good for us, but I daresay we could get another duffer. Pellingham's about my form."

"Nonsense!" Hargrave intervened. "I'm very little better than you, Philip. I'm tired of the strenuous game. All these competitions last too long."

"I should love to play," Violet declared, "but I'm afraid Sir Hargrave would be

too good for us, unless he played with me,” she added, looking across at him invitingly.

“Of course I will,” he promised. “To-morrow morning, if you like. We can’t have you wandering all over the place alone.”

“I’m not at all sure that I mind it so much,” she said. “So long as I’m out of doors and in the sunshine I’m happy.”

“Is this your first visit down here?” Gorse enquired.

“My first,” she admitted. “I’m afraid every one would know that. I’m so enthusiastic. Anyhow, I can’t help it. I dreamed of the Riviera until I was nearly heart-sick, and now I find it even more wonderful than I had imagined.”

She leaned back, sipping her orangeade with an air of deep and profound content. Her head kept time slowly to the music.

“There’s Johnnie coming down the steps,” Hargrave pointed out. “Would you like to lunch with us, Violet?”

She shook her head regretfully.

“You will want to talk business with Mr. Marston,” she reminded him. “I should only be in the way. Besides, to-day I must lunch at the villa. Madame Martelle has arranged with the chef for a wonderful omelette, and she asked me especially not to be late.”

“Madame has quite taken you under her wing,” Hargrave observed.

“She is the dearest soul in the world,” Violet declared enthusiastically. “She doesn’t even mind my practising my French upon her.”

Marston advanced across the road, and Violet rose to her feet.

“I must go,” she announced.

“So must I,” Philip Gorse echoed. “In which direction are you going, Miss Martin?”

“I am staying at Sir Hargrave’s villa,” she told him.

“On my way,” he lied cheerfully. “Come along.”

They departed side by side, Gorse leaning deferentially towards his companion. Hargrave watched them for a moment with a smile, half amused, half wistful. Then he turned to his stockbroker friend who, fresh from his tub and change of clothes, was making his way between the tables with the jaunty air of a man transplanted to pleasant places.

“This is something like, Hargrave!” he exclaimed. “My God, what weather!”

“Better than Throgmorton Street, you money grubber,” Hargrave replied.

“I should say so,” Marston agreed, as he sank into a chair. “But after all you butterflies wouldn’t be able to flap your wings out here if you hadn’t us grubs

working for you at home.”

“How do I stand?” Hargrave asked.

“You own the O. P. Trust,” was the prompt reply. “Such as it is you’ve got it safe and sound, practically every share that was ever issued and a few over. Glad it’s you, not I.”

“And delivery?”

“They are thirty thousand shares short,” Marston answered. “That is what I have come to see you about. The shares themselves have dropped. We forced them up to start with, by our continual buying, but to-day you’re a pretty heavy loser on paper.”

“And the thirty thousand shares I’m owed?”

“Trentino could no more get them than he could buy the Pyramids,” Marston confided.

“Capital!” his client exclaimed. “Let’s lunch.”

They talked of indifferent matters during the consumption of the meal. It was not until the arrival of coffee that Hargrave returned to the subject of his speculation.

“You warned me once, Johnnie,” he observed, “that Trentino was a dangerous man to run up against. You were quite right.”

“What do you know about it?”

“Very nearly more than was good for me. Whilst his firm, I suppose, have been trying to get you to sell or to cancel, he himself has been indulging in other forms of persuasion down here. He has a lady friend on the spot—a very charming woman, by the bye—who first tried to cajole and then threatened me. She didn’t succeed as well as she expected, and since then things have moved on a stage. I don’t mind confessing, Johnnie, that I’ve had two close shaves.”

“What do you mean?” Marston demanded.

“Well, first of all,” Hargrave continued, “some wandering chauffeur mechanic on a motor bicycle, whom no one has been able to lay their hands upon yet, put both my brakes out of action up at Mont Agel one day lately. There was only a foot or two of masonry between me and paradise that time. Since then another blackguard, or it may be the same fellow, hid in the gardens of the villa and took a pot shot at me as I was coming home one morning.”

Marston was for a moment incredulous.

“You’re not telling me this seriously, Hargrave?”

“I am indeed,” his friend assured him. “Both things took place exactly as I have told you, and, as I haven’t another enemy in the world, what am I to think? The beautiful lady who professed to have a *penchant* for me gave me the straight tip when she found that I wasn’t to be cajoled.”

“Have you told the police?”

“Twice. The chief was very concerned and I think they’ve done their best. They’ve probably frightened that particular rascal out of the Principality. Nothing has happened since, anyway.”

Marston settled down to the task which was the chief reason of his journey.

“Look here, Hargrave,” he began. “We’ve carried out your instructions rather too literally if anything. Of course, I know why you’ve engineered this affair. It is because of poor old Ned, isn’t it?”

“Entirely,” Hargrave admitted. “I’ve nothing personally against Trentino. He broke Ned in a particularly brutal manner, and I’ve always had it in my mind that I’d like to come back at him.”

“Well, you’ve done it,” Marston pointed out. “He’s on the carpet, all right. If you insist, he’ll pay you a million for his shortage and take the shares back at what you gave for them. He made that offer definitely by cable the day before yesterday.”

“Nothing doing,” was the curt refusal.

“But look here,” Marston argued, “we’ve all talked this matter over in the office and it was agreed that I should come out and see you. Revenge is all very well, but it isn’t business. You’ve shown Trentino what you can do. You’ve given him a nasty dusting, and you can make him pay like hell. I’m certain he’s as sorry as any man could be that he ever interfered with Ned. You’ve gone as far as you can. I’d drop it now. If you pull Trentino down over this matter, the shares will drop with a wallop and you’ll stand to lose at least half a million—pounds, I mean—instead of making nearly as much. You’re a rich man, I know, old chap, but you can spend it if any one can, and half a million, even to you, will make a difference.”

“It will ease my death duties,” Hargrave observed.

The stockbroker looked at him curiously. He was very spruce and pink and white, even after his journey, but he had a kindly expression.

“I say, Hargrave, old fellow,” he ventured, “there’s nothing wrong, is there—nothing you haven’t told your friends about yourself? It doesn’t seem to me that you’ve been the same man since the night of that little dinner you gave us in your flat.”

“Nothing for any one to worry about,” was the quiet reply.

“You’re looking thundering fit, and according to the papers you’re supposed to be quite the leader of the revels here,” Marston went on thoughtfully. “All the same, I’ve never forgotten that question you put to us, and somehow or other one mixes it up in one’s mind with this affair. Makes one think, you know, what?”

“Ah, well, don’t,” Hargrave begged, “at any rate so long as you’re down here.

I'm glad to see you, but you can put business out of your mind for a day or two. Anything might happen. A kindlier impulse might swamp my present intentions, or the Marchesa—a most attractive woman, Johnnie—might find me in a soft moment and beguile me—she's rather one's conception of a light-complexioned Delilah—but at present things remain as they are. That's my last word.—Come along, let's get your tickets for the Rooms.”

The stockbroker knew quite well when argument was useless. He rose to his feet and followed his host.

“Well,” he admitted, “my sympathies are with Delilah, and I'd like to meet her, but I'm dying to have a louis on zéro.”

CHAPTER XVI

Hargrave, towards midnight that evening, with a word of apology to his guests, crossed the floor of the Carlton in the brief interval between two dances and approached a small table in the background where Violet was seated alone. Although she was a little nervous at his coming, her eyes welcomed him with delight.

“Where is your brother?” he enquired.

“Robert,” she confided, “is behaving rather badly. I think that it is only because he is thoughtless,” she went on, “but I do not like being left here at all. He is talking to some friends somewhere.”

Hargrave glanced round the room. Robert was seated at the table of the little French *danseuse*, Mademoiselle Zélie.

“I am afraid he is a little annoyed with me,” Violet explained. “You see, although I know what Monte Carlo is, and that everybody knows one another here, I didn’t wish to have Mademoiselle sit with us.”

“You are perfectly right,” Hargrave declared shortly. “Robert ought to have known better than to leave you alone.”

“I don’t so much mind,” she said, “but it is just a little awkward. Some of the men here, I am sure, think that I am one of the professional dancers. Two of them have already asked me to dance.”

“And now,” he told her, “a third is going to take that liberty.”

She looked up at him with sudden delight and rose swiftly to her feet.

“You mean that you will dance with me!” she exclaimed. “How nice of you. I had no idea that you—you cared for it.”

“I’m not sure that I do very much,” he confided, as they glided away to the music of the string band in the balcony.

“You are being good-natured,” she murmured, a little disappointed.

He looked down at her with a smile.

“If it is good nature, I am being amply repaid,” he assured her. “I think we must forgive those young men who took you for a *danseuse*.”

“But you,” she murmured, as she crept a little closer to him, “you are wonderful. I have tried so hard to teach Robert but he really is a very bad dancer. To dance with him is nothing like this.”

The lights were lowered. The music of the Blues grew softer and more languorous. Finally it died away. There were loud demands for an encore. Hargrave glanced at the leader of the orchestra and the music immediately recommenced.

“Who are all those wonderful people at your table?” she asked him.

“I don’t know that they are very wonderful,” he replied, suddenly remembering their existence. “There is the Princess Putralka, whom you saw at the Royalty Bar the other morning, and afterwards at the Sporting Club, Philip Gorse and his sister, a Hungarian woman—the Comtesse Fayaldi—two Frenchmen—the Marquis de Villebois and Monsieur de Parian, and the tall, thin man is Lord Edward Pellingham. By the bye, how did you like Philip Gorse?”

“Immensely,” she declared with enthusiasm. “I adore his humanity too. To think of his coming to a place like this, and dancing. No wonder he understands men and women. You have heard him preach?”

“At Oxford, years ago,” Hargrave replied, “and once or twice in London. He’ll be a Bishop all right some day.”

“Nothing could ever make him a greater man than he is,” she said simply.

The dying away of the music found them near Hargrave’s table.

“I shall ask you to join us,” he decided. “I cannot have you sitting all alone.”

She was suddenly nervous.

“You mustn’t do that,” she protested. “They wouldn’t like it if they knew who I was.”

“They would welcome a friend of mine at any time,” he assured her quietly. “I think that Gorse, who has just recognised you, will do more than welcome you. Come along.”

Every one was very amiable and a place was found at once for Violet. She was scarcely allowed to sit down, however, before Gorse had taken her away to dance. The Princess watched her curiously.

“Your little protégée is very beautiful,” she remarked. “How did she find herself here alone?”

“Her brother,” Hargrave explained, “is rather a young cub. He is over there talking to Mademoiselle Zélie, the *danseuse*.”

The Princess continued to follow Violet’s graceful movements. She was talking a little shyly but with great interest to her partner.

“I am not sure,” she confided, “being in a somewhat jealous mood, that I quite approve of your ménage, Hargrave. If I were a man, I should find it somewhat distracting to live under the same roof as that girl. However, you are not susceptible, are you?”

“The sufferings I endure are proof to the contrary,” he declared.

“Gallantly spoken but untrue,” she rejoined. “I do not know whether it has been so all your life, but to-day women spoil you. What have you done to the world and

to all of us, dear man, that we should have made a sort of god of you? To be asked to one of your parties is almost equivalent to a royal command. And the women—well, I think as a person who has a certain claim upon your attentions that too many of them are in love with you. The child, I am sure, adores you. I never saw any one look so supremely happy in my life as she did when you were dancing with her.”

He struggled against the pleasure which her words gave him.

“She was being a little neglected,” he pointed out. “Look at her now.”

“Not the same thing at all,” the Princess declared. “At this moment it is simply *joie de vivre*; with you it was personal ecstasy. How do you do it, dear host? Do you carry love potions?”

“If you continue to make fun of me,” he threatened, “I shall invite you to dance.”

She rose to her feet.

“Well,” she said, “you know I very seldom dance in these places, but to-night I am of a different mind.”

They were a very distinguished-looking couple, and the one or two journalists who were present took quick note of the fact that the Princess had broken her usual custom. Her movements lacked the vitality of Violet’s joyous abandon, but she was always in her way graceful and amazingly light.

“We have danced together very seldom, Hargrave,” she murmured.

“Only twice before to my knowledge,” he answered.

“I think that we miss something,” she confessed. “I have been sometimes a little foolish, I think. I cling too closely to the traditions of a world which has passed away. Do you remember that I told you at dinner time that I had received an important letter?”

“I remember it quite well.”

“It was from my uncle,” she confided. “He has given his consent, if I choose, to my remarriage, provided Nicholas’ mission to Rome is successful.”

“Your uncle?” Hargrave murmured thoughtfully.

“He is the head of my side of the family,” she explained, “and the trustee of my property. I could not consider such a step without consulting him, especially——”

She hesitated. Hargrave read her thoughts but took care not to translate them.

“I have lived all these years alone,” she went on, “without a thought of divorce, because I believed that it would be impossible for me to marry again. There seemed to be no men left in Europe who could be acceptable to me except those of my race. The years humanize one, however. The time comes when one realises that it is more important to feel oneself a woman than to remember that one belongs to a royal family of the past.”

“Not only a woman, but a very beautiful woman,” he murmured.

She looked at him with a smile. The light in her violet eyes was very kind indeed.

“You have gifts,” she whispered. “You are one of the few men in the world who could make a speech like that without banality. After all, I do not wonder that the child was so happy. You must not turn her head, though. They too have hearts.”

“The child, as you call her,” he said, “is twenty-four years old.”

“That makes it more dangerous,” the Princess observed. “I think I shall have to talk to you seriously about one or two things, Hargrave. See, she is dancing now with Lord Edward.”

They had resumed their places. The Comtesse Fayaldi claimed Hargrave’s attention.

“I have been eager for your return,” she confessed. “I must know who she is, this girl whom you brought to the table and who is dancing now with Lord Edward.”

“A protégée of mine, Comtesse,” Hargrave replied. “She is staying at my villa with her brother. He is behaving rather badly to-night, so I brought her over here.”

“You have made her very happy,” the Comtesse observed.

“It appears to be Sir Hargrave’s mission in life,” the Princess remarked, “to make people happy. Does one approve, I wonder? It is a capacity which has its dangerous side.”

“You had better talk to Gorse about that,” Hargrave suggested. “Indirectly he is responsible for the presence of those two young people here.”

There was a pause for some exhibition dancing in which Mademoiselle Zélie took part. Robert had returned to his deserted table, and becoming aware of Violet’s absence, he at once crossed the room. The latter rose to her feet at his approach, but at a gesture from Hargrave she resumed her place.

“You have lost your sister for the evening, Martin,” Hargrave announced calmly. “I have invited her to join my party. You need not disturb yourself on her account. I will see that she reaches the villa safely.”

The young man felt the rebuke and was conscious too of the fact that it was well deserved. He hesitated for a single moment, as though hoping to be asked to sit down, but Hargrave had already turned to address a remark to another of his guests. A little awkwardly, he retreated to his table. The Comtesse watched him thoughtfully. Presently she touched her host upon the arm.

“Did I understand you to say that the young man was Miss Martin’s brother?”

“That is so.”

The Comtesse looked across at Violet speculatively.

“The likeness,” she murmured, “is not manifest.”

“There is no likeness at all,” Hargrave agreed.

She leaned a little closer towards her host. Her voice had dropped to a whisper.

“Are you trying to deceive the world, or are you yourself being deceived?”

“I scarcely understand your question,” he replied, with a sudden cold surge of ugly doubt.

“I have gifts—that you know,” the Comtesse said calmly. “I have told you things about yourself which no other person could have told you. I will tell you this also, because it is a thing which I have the power to divine. There is no relationship whatever between those two young people.”

Hargrave looked across at Violet. She had just returned from dancing and sat between Lord Edward and Gorse—already declared rivals—the picture of happiness and gaiety.

“With your powers of divination, Comtesse,” Hargrave asked, “does that appear to you to be the face of a deceitful young woman?”

The Comtesse shook her head.

“It is without doubt, dear host,” she admitted, “the face of a young woman who means well in the world. But then you must remember that even the best of our sex is allowed one lie in her lifetime.”

Later in the evening, there was a sudden disturbance at the further end of the room. Violet suddenly broke off her eager conversation with Gorse, rose to her feet and leaned over Hargrave’s chair with a look of trouble in her face.

“Sir Hargrave,” she whispered, “I am worried about Robert. I think he has had too much to drink. What are they doing down there?”

Hargrave looked across the room. Robert, who had been standing for the last few minutes amongst some empty tables in the background near the bar, had now approached the table where another man had seated himself with Mademoiselle Zélie, and appeared to be talking angrily. His face was inflamed and his voice carried above the hubbub of the room. Mademoiselle Zélie leaned back in her chair and laughed. The man by her side—a Frenchman—seemed half puzzled, half indifferent. Suddenly Robert leaned forward and aimed a clumsy blow at the latter. For a moment there was pandemonium. Robert struggled to his feet from the floor, his coat covered with dust, the manager’s hand upon his collar. They watched him being ejected summarily from the room. Violet began to tremble.

“I must go and take him home,” she faltered.

Hargrave frowned slightly.

“You must do nothing of the sort,” he declared.

“But anything might happen to him.”

A fit of obstinacy strengthened Hargrave's decision. If, by any horrible chance, there was truth in the Comtesse's words, now might be the time for discoveries.

"Your brother behaved very badly," he pointed out, "and he must take the consequences. We cannot plead his cause. He was obviously the aggressor and deserves to be turned out."

Violet, a little reluctantly, resumed her seat. The Princess, to whom the idea of a *fracas* had been distasteful, glanced at her watch.

"It has been a wonderful party," she said, "but I think it is time we broke up. The people here are becoming unruly."

Hargrave took the hint and paid his bill. They made their way towards the door, preceded by a little retinue of attendants, headed by the manager himself.

"I regret very much, Sir Hargrave," the latter apologised anxiously, "that there was some slight disturbance. The young man had drunk too much. He was angry because Mademoiselle Zélie had invited some one else to share her table."

Hargrave nodded.

"I suppose these things can't be helped," he admitted.

Outside, Hargrave tactfully managed to make his adieux to his guests as brief as possible. At the last moment, only the Princess and Violet were left. They passed through the door and, as he had half expected, found Robert standing there, his overcoat still upon his arm, his hat at the back of his head, his expression dogged. As they crossed the pavement, he accosted them.

"Violet," he announced, "I am here—to take you home."

Hargrave looked at him steadily.

"You are not in a fit condition," he said coldly, "to be any one's escort. Your sister will remain with me.—Pardon me, Princess."

He handed her into the car.

"Why not leave them?" she whispered. "After all, the young man is her brother."

Hargrave shook his head.

"One moment, Princess, if you please."

He turned back. Violet was talking earnestly to Robert—earnestly but obviously without effect.

"If you are ready, Violet," he said firmly.

"I am taking her home myself," Robert reiterated. "We are going to walk."

"You will do nothing of the sort," was the quiet rejoinder. "You are drunk, and your behaviour in the restaurant has been disgraceful."

The young man swayed a little upon his feet.

"My behaviour is my business," he answered—"mine and hers—not yours."

“Robert!” Violet exclaimed.

“I don’t care,” he went on. “I don’t understand why he took you away. You’re good enough for his friends apparently, and I’m not. Had enough of it. Violet’s coming home with me.”

“Your sister needed protection,” Hargrave said calmly.

“Sister be damned!” was the fierce retort. “Take your hand off her arm and leave her alone. She’s not my sister. We’re engaged to be married, and the sooner you know it the better.”

The attendants had melted away; a single glance from Hargrave had sent them in other directions. He turned to Violet.

“Is this true?” he asked.

All the colour had died out of her face. She was like a child with great frightened eyes.

“Yes,” she faltered.

“In that case,” Hargrave said, with a horrible and unnatural quiescence, “I withdraw my interference. You had better get the *commissionaire* to put you into a *voiture*.”

She cried out something—a tangle of words which stabbed at his heart through the darkness as he crossed the pavement. He took his place by the Princess’ side and waved to the chauffeur to proceed.

“For once then,” she murmured, as she drew aside her sables to make room for him, “you have given way.”

“For once,” he admitted, looking with cold eyes straight into the darkness ahead.

CHAPTER XVII

Hargrave, as an hour later his car turned in at the winding approach to the villa, raised his eyes involuntarily to the window of Violet's room. There was no light there, no sign of that vigil to which she had confessed. In the chill hour before the dawn there seemed to be something lifeless about the place, its white front with its row of black windows unilluminated save by the paling moon. He himself, now that the time for reflection had come, was conscious of a curious depression, in part, he told himself, a natural reaction from the last few weeks of strenuous, joyous life. From a long-established custom no one was permitted to sit up for him, and inside as well as out the villa was as silent as the grave. More from habit than from anything else he lingered for a few minutes in the salon, mixed himself a whisky and soda and lit a cigarette. Afterwards he mounted the smoothly polished stairs and made his way to his own room. Even there he felt no desire for rest. He stepped out on to the balcony, only to find as it were the whole world in melancholy attune with his own sadness. The cypresses bordering the first tier of gardens pointed blackly to a lowering sky. Even the soothing placidity of the sea was disturbed by a long, restless swell. He turned back into the room, closing the window behind him, and lingered for a moment looking into the mirror before he commenced to undress. There was a vein of humiliation oppressing him, mingled with that deeper sadness which he refused altogether to analyse. With his years and experience, to have been so easily duped; worse still, to have cherished, even for a moment, that absurd and yet amazing dream. The idea, immeasurably bitter yet also curiously sweet, tortured him, that in these perhaps the closing months of his life there should have come something which had evaded him through all the years only to mock him with its tawdry unreality. He began to undress. With his coat removed and his waistcoat half drawn off, he paused suddenly. The door of his room had been softly opened. He stood without movement, paralysed with amazement. It was Violet who had entered—Violet, in her blue dressing gown, walking as though in her sleep. She closed and locked the door, then, turning deliberately around, came towards him. His words sounded half unintelligible. His brain had refused to act. There was a look in her face, a light in her eyes, incomprehensibly beautiful. He had a few seconds' vivid recollection of the nun in the "Miracle."

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. "Why did you do that?"

"I came here because I wanted to talk to you," she answered, "and I locked the door because—I do not wish to be disturbed."

“You can’t stay—here,” he insisted, a little helplessly. “I am going to unlock the door.”

She held out her hand.

“Please don’t.”

He was driven in those few astonishing seconds to mechanical actions, which in view of the turmoil of his senses seemed somehow ridiculous. He drew on his waistcoat again and commenced to retie his cravat. She sat upon the sofa at the end of his bed.

“Will you listen to me, please,” she said. “I am bitterly and miserably ashamed. The truth never seemed so terrible as now. Both Robert and I—we are horrible. But listen, please. Robert had been ill—his cough in London was dreadful—and the doctor declared that he must spend some time in a warmer climate, or he might develop consumption. We used to read through the columns of the newspapers for cheap trips to the South, we used to read of the sunshine and the warm air, and after all it was a waste of time. We had no money. I myself—every part of me—was aching to get away from those grey, miserable days, somewhere where one could be happy, if it was only for a month—where the sun shone. Those streaming windowpanes! You know how I hated them—and there was Robert. Then you made me that curious offer. You know that at first I did not listen. Then I was tempted—strangely and horribly tempted.”

“But why did you tell me,” he asked, “that Robert was your brother?”

“That is the most humiliating part of it all,” she confessed, “because it was so unnecessary. I did believe in you, even then. I liked you so much. I knew you weren’t like those others, and yet—if you can realise how I have suffered, what a persecution it has been sometimes, you would understand just a little. I knew in my heart that you would always behave the only way you could behave. I had no real fear of anything, and yet, in that foolish moment before we decided to tell this lie, I couldn’t help thinking, after all there must be something in you like other men. You would lose interest if you thought that there was some one like that in my life, however little you meant anything that was wrong. You had never looked at me as though you admired me very much. You always behaved like a *grand seigneur*, and yet, you see how vain I was—I thought, if you knew, you mightn’t bring us.”

It was a pathetic little story, so reasonable yet with its curious strain of meanness, apparent because of its very naturalness, hopelessly exposed. Already he felt most of the bitterness passing away. The question he asked forced itself to his lips. In view of what had happened it was almost irrelevant and yet it seemed to him the most important thing in the world.

“Are you so much in love with this young man then?”

She rose deliberately to her feet. Her hands rested upon his shoulders. He could see the quivering of her slim body a few inches away, as her eyes pleaded with him for belief.

“I was never in love with Robert,” she declared. “From the very first I pitied him, and I suppose that grew. I was never in love with him. I was the stronger of the two. I felt that he must be looked after and I tried to do it. Now that is over. I have told him to-night that nothing could ever induce me to marry him. It was not a surprise. I think that he had already realised it. The little ring I have been wearing around my neck has been given back. He will probably give it to Mademoiselle Zélie; she will throw it away.”

Hargrave, who a minute or two before had felt the chill of the room, was suddenly conscious of being half stifled. Those long, white fingers of hers were clutching his shoulders hysterically. Her eyes were beseeching his. He ground his heels into the carpet.

“Violet,” he said, “I am glad that you have told me this. I shall forget the little deceit. You are forgiven. We will talk about it all to-morrow. Just now you must go.”

Her lips quivered.

“But I don’t want to go,” she protested.

He put her hands away from him, drew her back to her place upon the sofa and seated himself by her side.

“You despise me,” she murmured.

“Don’t be absurd,” he answered, with an attempt at lightness.

“But I know it. I feel it,” she went on, her voice shaking. “You think that I’ve cheated, that I wanted all the beautiful things those other girls had, that I wanted your kindness, this amazing holiday, all that you have given me, and that I wanted it all without paying.”

“Hush!” he begged her. “I never had so mean a thought.”

“But it is true,” she cried passionately. “You know yourself that it is true. I have been horrible. I have deceived you, the dearest, the kindest, the most wonderful person in the world. But can’t you understand me now,” she added, suddenly throwing her arms around his neck. “I want to pay—not to pay, to give—with all my heart—with everything.”

She clung to him hysterically rather than passionately, trying to hide her face, her slim body shaking with sobs. In those few seconds, side by side with a sort of exquisite content, he seemed like a drowning man to be suddenly and acutely conscious of the vital crises of life. He heard the physician’s few solemn words. He

saw Philip Gorse's kindly, sensitive face somewhere close at hand. He was proudly conscious in those few, unreal seconds, of the innate and unmasculine purity of his life, of those latent qualities which had made him always the protector of weaker people. Quietly, almost joyously, his arms suddenly went round her. He picked her up and carried her to the door.

"What are you doing with me?" she whispered, her hands still clasped around his neck.

"You shall see," he answered.

He took the key from the pocket of her dressing gown, unlocked the door, carried her across to her own room, carried her to her bed, and with masculine clumsiness drew up the coverlet. Then he leaned down and for the first time his lips met hers. He held her face in both his hands, whilst he kissed her tenderly. Then he stood away. Her arms fell listlessly on to the counterpane.

"To-morrow, child," he said, "we will have a long talk. You shall give me all your confidence. To-morrow I will give you some of mine."

She made no reply. He moved uneasily across the room towards the window, opened it a little wider, picked up her frock, some of her clothes which she seemed to have discarded recklessly, and hung them over the back of a chair. Then he turned towards the door.

"Good night," he said.

Her lips moved, but soundlessly. She was sitting up a little, leaning upon the palms of her hands, her eyes following his every movement. He opened the door and looked back. She was still there, still watching him. He closed it softly, crossed the landing and entered his own room.—Now that it was over, now that he was able to fit things into his mind, he was conscious of a sense of relief, a sense of peace which surprised him. All the bitterness, the humiliation of the evening, had passed. He opened the window for a moment before he turned into bed, to find a fine rain falling and a mantle of velvety blackness upon the earth.

CHAPTER XVIII

François, Hargrave's French valet, was a little earlier than usual when he presented himself in his master's bedroom on the following morning. Hargrave looked at him reproachfully.

"What is it?" he enquired.

"I thought that Monsieur would like to know," the man replied, "that Mademoiselle has left."

"What?" Hargrave exclaimed, suddenly awake.

"Mademoiselle packed her own bag early this morning and descended, without giving notice to anybody. She requested one of the underservants who was at work in the hall to fetch her a *voiture*. She left, one must believe, to catch the morning train to Paris."

"What time is it now?" Hargrave demanded, springing out of bed.

"Half-past nine, Monsieur. The train leaves at nine-forty from the *gare*."

"Some clothes as quick as you can," was the prompt command. "Never mind about the bath. Call down for some one to bring the Rolls-Royce round."

A quarter of an hour later Hargrave drew up outside the station in the hope that the train might have been late. He found, however, that it had left, punctual almost to the minute, and the station was empty. He took his place once more at the wheel, drove as fast as he dared down the Rue Grimaldi and turned into the main road. At Eze a cloud of black smoke lent him temporary hope. As he drew near the station, however, the train passed out. He kept behind until it had disappeared from view, then shot by. He was on the platform when it entered the station at Beaulieu, and after a frantic search of a moment or two threw open the door of a second-class carriage.

"Come!" he commanded, holding out his hand.

Violet was wedged in between a stout *commis voyageur* and a woman with her basket on the way to Nice market. She looked at him for a moment piteously, then with a gleam of insurgent hope in her tired eyes. At his reiterated injunction she rose with passive obedience. The whistle had already sounded. He lifted her on to the platform. The *commis voyageur*, with a good-humoured grunt, tugged her bag from the rack and threw it after them. They stood there watching the train crawl out.

"Thank God I've found you!" he exclaimed, with a breath of relief.

She was very pale, but a little smile parted her lips at his words.

"You really mean that?" she asked eagerly. "I thought you'd be so glad to get rid

of me.”

“You poor dear!” he replied, taking her by the arm and summoning a porter for her bag. “I was never so glad to see any one in my life. I should have followed you all the way to Paris. Come along and I’ll put you in the car.”

She gave a little sigh—this time of happiness.

“I didn’t dream of your coming to fetch me back,” she confessed weakly, “but I’m very glad you did.”

She sank into the luxuriously cushioned seat by his side with a murmur of content. There was in her face a great weariness, and he changed his first design of returning at once to the villa.

“You had some breakfast before you started?” he enquired.

She shook her head.

“Nothing at all?”

“Nothing. There wasn’t time.”

He turned into the narrow winding road which led upwards to the Middle Corniche and cut through it higher still.

“We’ll take our coffee in the clouds,” he told her.

“How did you know?” she asked timidly. “I thought I’d stolen away without a sound.”

“François told me,” he replied. “Like a sensible fellow he came and told me directly he knew himself.”

They climbed to an unfamiliar country. Mont Agel was lost in a wreath of mist, and they too passed through fingers of cloud on their way upwards. Everywhere around them a soft rain was falling—rain which was fresh and sweet, and which seemed to come to them warmed with the sunlight hidden behind the clouds. Hargrave drew up before the pink stucco-like hotel at the top of the hill. Very soon they were seated in a large, almost empty room, at one of the tables looking down on the panorama of the Principality. The hot coffee and rolls were quickly brought, and a faint tinge of colour returned to Violet’s cheeks.

“I haven’t had time yet to be angry with you,” he remarked.

“I couldn’t help it,” she told him. “Does this matter?”

She took off her close-fitting little hat and laid it on a chair by her side. Her beautiful brown hair had a strangely cramped and unkempt appearance. She pushed it back from her forehead with an air of relief. Even at the touch of her fingers the light seemed to spring from it.

“I have felt so miserable,” she confided. “First of all I had a horribly mean feeling. I was ashamed—just as ashamed as any one could possibly be—and then

when I sat down to think about it and fancied I had found a way out, a way to prove how I really felt about you and your kindness and everything, why you treated me as though I were a little child, not a woman, aching to give. You just patted me and carried me back to bed. It was divinely sweet, but how do you suppose I felt when you left me there and closed the door?"

He stirred in his chair uneasily. Somehow or other the sacrifice which at the time had filled him with a sense of elation seemed to have become tinged in view of her humiliation with a taint of melodrama, to have in it instead of the gold he had fancied, something of meretricious egoism. She was, after all, of an age to know her own mind, to resent the one unpardonable refusal. A sense almost of contrition touched him. It seemed to him that apart from her physical exhaustion she had changed during the last few hours, that she had lost something of that spontaneous spirit of joyousness, joyousness always struggling for expression, even under the shadow of hard times. He came to a sudden decision.

"Violet," he said, "I am going to tell you a secret, something that will help you to understand, something which you alone will know."

"I knew that you had one," she told him simply. "I have always felt it."

"When I came to you in Bond Street," he went on, "when I made you that offer of a holiday out here, I had just received a shock. I had been told—of course one never knows—but I had been warned that after the next six months I might find myself more or less of an invalid."

Her fingers came across the table and clutched his firm, brown hand. Her eyes hung upon his.

"I had an accident," he continued. "I thought nothing of it at the time, but my local doctor insisted upon my consulting a heart specialist. I came up to see Horridge. Well, that was his warning. I decided then to live as though the next six months were my last. I had a dinner party of men that night and I put to them the problem: suppose you had reason to believe that after twelve months you might be called upon to disappear, how would you spend the time? They all gave me typical answers. It was Philip Gorse's which resulted in my offer to you."

"Philip Gorse whom I know—the clergyman?"

"Yes. He didn't for a moment suggest my giving large sums to charity, or even interesting myself in any scheme to assist the poor. What he did suggest was that if I could find only one or two people who were starving not for food but for a little happiness, I should try to bring it to them."

"So that was why!" she murmured.

"That was why," he told her gravely.

She played with her coffee spoon for a time, gazing downward with unseeing eyes. Finally she leaned back and looked at him anxiously.

“But you are better now,” she said. “You don’t really believe now that you are going to be ill?”

“One never knows,” he answered evasively. “I hope not. At any rate, I have found out one thing. It is of no use trying to hurry life, to attempt pleasure after pleasure, and taste the full flavour of all of them. One loses one’s taste and one reaches surfeit sooner.”

“Then I,” she murmured irrelevantly—“Robert and I—we were just an experiment. Personally we didn’t—I didn’t that is to say—exist?”

“That was almost true then,” he admitted. “It isn’t true now.”

“What do you mean?” she asked eagerly.

He did a thing which thrilled her with pleasure. He took her hand in his and held it tightly.

“Violet dear,” he said, “it has done me good to have you here. I have grown fond of you. I grow fonder of you every day.”

“But this is wonderful, wonderful!” she murmured ecstatically.

“It is the truth,” he assured her.

“I love to have you talk to me like that,” she confided, “but why do you always speak as though you were leaning down from some other world?”

“Leaning down from another generation, perhaps,” he reminded her.

“Rubbish!” she expostulated, with a sudden flash in her eyes. “You are a man and I a woman. I have been so light-hearted here that I may have seemed younger than my years. You all treat me sometimes as though I were a child—but I am not. I am a woman to your man and the years that are between us are as nothing. I don’t want to be treated as though I were a child, something to be taken care of and spoilt, something that doesn’t come into the real world of dangers and sorrows and passion. I am a woman like other women. You ought to know that by now.”

It was a strange time and place for love-making. The room at that hour of the morning was bare and unprepossessing, and notwithstanding the stove which an attentive *maitre d’hôtel* had lit, chilly. Even the waiters were a little sleepy-eyed. Yet Hargrave felt the blood surge through his veins; his hand tightened upon hers.

“My dear,” he warned her, “you are turning my head.”

She laughed, happily enough yet with some touch of irony.

“I turn your head! You whom they all treat down below like an uncrowned king. I do not aspire so high, sir. I am on my knees to you and I pray for a little kindness. Treat me as though I counted. Don’t leave me out of your daily life except for a

pleasant word when you think of it. That is, if you are really taking me back to the villa?"

"I will treat you any way you will," he declared, a little recklessly.

She laughed at him with her eyes. A little tinge of colour which was almost a blush drove the pallor from her cheeks.

"You would feel terribly if I were to hold you to your word," she whispered. "However, there we are. We start afresh, don't we? And you must be taken care of. If there is still really any risk of your being ill, you must lead a different life. I believe that I should make an excellent nurse."

"I am afraid that nothing of that sort would make any difference," he sighed. "Still, if this weakness passes——"

"Well?"

Her monosyllable thrilled with passionate expectancy. Her lips were parted. Her eyes implored him. Still he was silent. Then with a little wave of the hand he pointed downward. A band of mist had fallen around them almost like a ribbon, through which the tops of the cypress trees showed strangely. Below, it hung close to the ground, on the vineyards and amongst the olive trees, but curiously enough down in Monte Carlo the sun was shining and little opaque shafts of light lay here and there on the nearer stretches of cloud.

"We have come to the mountains," he said, "in search of truth. I will not equivocate. If this weakness passes—then we will finish our conversation."

She pouted a little. He had hinted at his secret so lightly that his words had carried little weight. The idea of serious illness seldom finds a home in the brain of the really young and healthy.

"And in the meantime," she complained, "the Princess Putralka will telephone for you at all hours of the day and expect you to dine with her at her command. That very wicked but beautiful Mademoiselle la Diane will want her share of your time too, and then there are all the others. Just for this month I should like a little place of my own in your life."

"You shall have it," he promised her.

They rose to their feet for a last look downward before leaving and saw a strange sight. From out of a finger of mist beyond the harbour there slowly crept into sight the bows and huge remainder of a great steamer—black and almost sinister-looking. It emerged from the obscurity into a sea flecked with sunlight, a sea which seemed instantly to become less beautiful. A harsh siren call, ringing up even to the mountains, seemed like an obtrusive note, a reminder of a forgotten world. She passed her arm through Hargrave's and looked up into his face with a wrinkled

forehead.

“I am becoming fanciful,” she declared. “I have a feeling that I dislike that great, ugly monster steaming into our fairyland.”

Once more the siren blew and a tug moved screeching out of the harbour. Hargrave led her away.

“It has just dawned upon me,” he confided, “that we are due to play tennis with Gorse and his sister at eleven o’clock.”

She laughed happily.

“I sha’n’t hit a ball,” she declared, “but how wonderful to feel that I am back again!”

CHAPTER XIX

Robert was decidedly in no frame of mind for adventures as he sat outside the Café de Paris later on that morning and gloomily sipped his mixed vermouth. Nevertheless he could scarcely refrain from a glance of admiration at the girl who, with her obvious father and mother, had taken the table next to his. They had just come up the hill from the port, part of the crowd of tourists who had disembarked from the great American liner, and who were now thronging the place. She possessed a small, piquant face, a dress, whose skirt was short even for Monte Carlo, and legs as daringly displayed and with at least as good reason as any of the frequenters of the Principality. She lit a cigarette and, as though conscious of Robert's regard, leaned across towards him.

"Say, you're English, aren't you?" she enquired.

"I am," he replied. "Am I right in thinking that you are American?"

"You certainly are," she admitted. "We've just landed from the steamer. We haven't got the hang of this place yet. I want to take father and mother into the Casino. What do we have to do about it?"

"Have you got your passports?" he enquired.

"Right here," she answered, touching the bag she was carrying. "The trouble of it is, Ma and Dad think I'm a great French scholar, which I just am not. I can't even read the notices."

Robert considered the little party reflectively. Ma and Dad, as she designated her parents, were distinctly of the prosperous class, pleasant looking if a little ill at ease in their foreign surroundings. The man had a strong, clean-shaven face with a heavy jaw and shrewd expression. The woman was of more nondescript appearance but her expression was distinctly kindly. The girl, with her closely trimmed hair and the provocative gleam in her eyes, was without a doubt attractive.

"If you like," he suggested, "I'll take you in and help you. How long are you here for?"

"We're going to stay for a month right over there at the Hotel de Paris. Sure you don't mind?"

"Not in the least," he assured her.

She whispered to her father and mother. Then she turned once more to Robert.

"I'd like you to know my people," she said. "What name?"

"Robert Martin," he told her.

"Ma, this is Mr. Robert Martin. Shake hands with Dad too, please. Mr. Robert

Martin—Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Wegges. I am Sadie Wegges. Mr. Martin's going to take us right across and help get our tickets."

"That's very kind of you, young man," Mr. Wegges acknowledged. "This is our first visit over and I guess Sadie's French isn't all we thought it was. I have a friend along who's used to the place, but he's kind of busy his first morning."

"You follow us," Miss Sadie directed, leading Robert on. "How long are you staying here, Mr. Martin?"

"Just at present I can't say," he answered, a little dismally at the thought of what might be in store for him. "A week or so, I hope."

"The place looks just as good to me as I imagined," she observed, throwing her cigarette away on the steps. "I'm glad to get off the steamer. The young men were nuts and the food was rotten. Are you at the Hotel de Paris?"

"I'm staying at a villa," he told her. "This way."

The business of getting the tickets occupied some little time, after which Robert felt regretfully obliged to decline an invitation for lunch. He agreed to dine with them, however.

"Eight o'clock at the Hotel de Paris," were Sadie's farewell words. "We will be in the hall. Afterwards, if you have nothing particular to do, you can show me where they dance."

Robert made his way back to the villa, filled with gloomy apprehensions now that the distraction of his morning's adventure was over. He climbed the steps on to the terrace just as Hargrave and Violet drove up from their tennis. Violet hurried off upstairs with a little wave of the hand. Hargrave nodded a curt "good morning."

"Come this way, Martin," he invited. "I want to have a word with you before luncheon."

Robert followed obediently into the smaller of the two salons. As soon as the door was closed, Hargrave put the young man out of his misery.

"Young fellow," he said, helping himself to a cocktail from the tray and pushing it towards Robert, "you were drunk last night and you behaved disgracefully."

"I know it, sir," Robert admitted.

"With regard to the deception which you and Violet have practised upon me," Hargrave continued, "she and I have come to an understanding and I have decided to overlook it. Your stay here, if you wish it, can be continued, and until you leave you had better keep up the legend of your relationship. So far as you're concerned though, I have one or two conditions to make."

Robert, filled with a sense of overwhelming relief, listened eagerly. There were very few conditions to which he was not willing to submit.

“You are not benefiting as you ought to by your stay here,” Hargrave went on. “I suggest that you do not visit the Casino until after four o’clock. There is, as you know, a car always ready for you and although Violet will not have as much of her time to give you as she had before you neglected her, you can always, I daresay, find a companion. You must remember that health is a thing worth having, especially at your time of life. Enjoy yourself as much as you like, but do so with a certain amount of moderation. Above all, take exercise. We will find you some tennis, if that is what you prefer, and I will make you a member of the Golf Club. This place, I know,” he concluded, his voice losing a little of its sternness, “goes to the heads of newcomers. I do not forget that, and we will say nothing more about what is past. Try to make the best of the remainder of your stay and remember, you need have no particular anxiety as to your immediate future. I shall make it my business to see that when you go back to work you start at least as favourably as before the War.”

Robert was suddenly touched.

“I don’t know why you’re so good to us, sir,” he said, with a catch in his voice.

“You needn’t bother about that,” Hargrave told him. “I have more money than any man ought to have and the little I can do for you young people doesn’t count. It just came my way. There is one thing more: I understand that your engagement with Violet is broken.”

“Serves me right, sir,” the young man acknowledged.

Hargrave hesitated. He was watching his companion closely.

“I’m afraid you will find it difficult to reestablish yourself so far as Violet is concerned,” he said.

Robert nodded gloomily.

“I know that, sir,” he admitted. “Violet’s fed up with me and I don’t wonder at it. She always was too good for me,” he added, with a burst of candor. “I think we’ll get on better as pals.”

“I’m glad,” Hargrave confessed, “to find that you are so sensible. That ends our talk then.”

The curtains were thrown back. The butler appeared with a little bow.

“*Monsieur est servi,*” he announced, as Violet entered the room.

At luncheon it seemed to both of them that Hargrave unbent more thoroughly than on any previous occasion. That curious air of aloofness, almost of reserve, which even Violet had found at times depressing, had in large measure vanished. He talked to them both with perfect naturalness, asking Robert in particular questions as to the nature and scope of his employment and his desires for the future. Violet joined in now and then but of direct conversation between her and Hargrave there

was very little. Nevertheless, since the crisis of the night, since the morning in the mountains, a swiftly born change was already showing itself, a new, although more subdued happiness, seemed to be rapidly transforming her from a light-hearted girl into a woman of poise and vivacity. Even Hargrave was surprised more than once by the evidences of this sudden evolution. She seemed immeasurably withdrawn all at once from any kinship with the life which the young man who had been her late companion lived or could have lived. Robert, listening to her a little jealously, found himself more than once surprised. She had definitely, as it seemed, left his world, without trouble or effort. Already these other two—Hargrave and she—seldom though they addressed each other—were finding a common language, some understanding from which he seemed barred. He spoke to her about it whilst Hargrave had left them temporarily to answer the earnest solicitations of a would-be hostess upon the telephone.

“What has happened between you and Sir Hargrave, Violet?” he asked, a little suspiciously. “You seem on different terms somehow.”

“I daresay we do,” she admitted. “Nothing much has happened, except that I started for London this morning and he came after me and brought me back.”

“Because of last night?”

“Because of last night,” she assented.

He moved uneasily in his chair.

“I suppose really,” he said, “it is I who ought to have cleared out.”

“The whole matter is finished,” she told him. “Don’t bring it up again. It is perhaps for the best.”

“You mean that you are glad to have had an opportunity of chucking me,” he grumbled.

“That is not a man’s speech, Robert,” she answered. “You and I both know that it is you who have chucked me. You left me alone day after day to spend my time anyhow, with any one, whilst you spent yours with Mademoiselle Zélie and any one else who happened to amuse you. It wasn’t a fair bargain, Robert. That is why I was glad of an opportunity of ending it.”

“I got what I deserved, I suppose,” he admitted. “But Violet——”

“Well?”

“You’re not going to be idiot enough to fall in love with Sir Hargrave, are you?”

She listened for a moment. In the distance they could hear the conversation at the telephone still proceeding. She leaned across the table. There was a defiant expression in her face.

“This is a matter, Robert,” she said, “upon which there need be no

misunderstanding between us. I think that I have been in love with him all the time. Last night I was sure of it; this morning I was more than ever convinced. I haven't a chance, I know. I can't compete with all these other women of his world. Still, you asked me a question and I have told you the truth."

"You're a fool," he declared shortly.

"I know it," she answered, "but at least no one else will pay for my folly."

Robert gulped down his coffee. The pathos of the situation, as he saw it, penetrated his selfishness, even touched his heart.

"I'm awfully sorry, old girl," he said. "I think you'd better let me take you back to London."

She laughed at him softly. He was surprised at the new strength and sweetness in her face.

"That's nice of you, Robert," she admitted, "but you don't understand."

In the distance they could hear Hargrave's reluctant voice.

"Very well then, at half-past three."

Violet indulged in a little grimace.

"That damned Russian woman!" she sighed.

CHAPTER XX

Andrea Trentino, fellow passenger with Mr. Daniel Wegges, wife and daughter, from New York, entered the salon of the little suite which had been allotted to him at the Hotel de Paris, with his usual deliberate gait. He kissed the fingers of the woman who awaited him—the Marchesa di Bieni—with the full measure of that gallantry which came to him as an inheritance from his Spanish ancestors. Afterwards he held her for a moment in his arms.

“Andrea!” she exclaimed. “What ages you have been away!”

He gently disengaged himself and stood away, looking at her enquiringly. He was of rather less than medium height, with frail figure, complexion of waxen pallor, and dark eyes, the effect of which was a little spoiled by his slightly protuberant eyeballs. He was clean shaven—his chin and cheeks always showing a little blue—and although he was fifty years old his hair was still plentiful and jet black. When he spoke there was a sort of drawl about his voice. His manner this morning denoted neither haste nor impatience, yet behind it all, triumphing over his natural nonchalance, there were signs of suppressed anxiety, which he could not altogether conceal. The woman who knew him so well and who knew that her tidings were bad sighed.

“Andrea,” she confided, “that man Hargrave Wendever is a rock. I have indeed tried my best.”

“Ah!”

His interjection was little more than an indrawn breath. She felt, however, the full measure of its reproof.

“You must not blame me, Andrea,” she went on, as she sat by his side on a divan and caressed his delicate-looking, white hand. “I did what I could. You see, he is no ordinary man. It seems as though he has only to lift his finger for any woman in this place to do his bidding. What had I to offer?”

“Women are sometimes wonderful in that way,” he remarked slowly.

“The woman who could move Hargrave Wendever against his will must possess gifts which I lack then,” she declared sorrowfully. “I led him to hope for everything. He quite well understood that, although he was too polite to admit it. It was useless.”

“You weren’t at the boat,” he said, after a moment’s pause—“neither you nor Hobson.”

“My dear Andrea,” she reminded him, “you came in eight hours before you were expected. I saw the ship from my window as I dressed, and I hastened here as

quickly as I could. When I got your last cable warning me how things were, I sold the car at once and discharged two of the servants. I am living up there with just one *bonne-à-tout-faire*.”

“You misunderstood,” he murmured. “The trouble is not yet here. And Hobson?”

“I have not seen him for two days,” she answered. “I think he is hiding somewhere. The police have been making enquiries.”

“Something has been attempted then?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Two attempts,” she confided. “Both failures.”

“It is strange,” Trentino sighed, “how it seems nowadays that I can find no one but blunderers to help me.”

“But how does it happen,” she asked, “that you have come up against such a man as Hargrave Wendever?”

“I did not choose him for an enemy,” he assured her. “The move was his.”

“He had some reason?”

Trentino’s shoulders were slightly elevated.

“Years ago,” he explained, “I did business with a friend of his. The friend lost his money. All this time has passed during which Hargrave Wendever does nothing. Now, without any warning, he sets in motion a plot to ruin me. You wonder, perhaps, that I should have been caught, but after all these years who would dream that this man, a stranger, was harbouring evil against me? Who would have believed that there was any sane person willing to sacrifice a million—perhaps two million dollars—simply and solely to bring about my ruin? When the demand for the shares set in, naturally I sold everywhere. Communications between Buenos Ayres, New York and London lapsed for twenty-four hours. During that time the brokers went on selling. That is how it has come about that I owe shares which I cannot deliver. To-day I am a wealthy man. In less than a fortnight, if Hargrave Wendever insists, I am ruined.”

“You may be able to do something with him yourself,” she suggested hopefully.

“I may,” he admitted. “If I do not, there are several things which may happen.”

She shuddered a little. His manner was deliberately calm, but to one who knew him as she did there was menace underneath.

“You will come to the villa?” she asked.

“Presently. I must remain here for a day or two. In the meanwhile you will find money at the bank. I have cabled some over. Tell me, what is the opera to-night?”

“‘Samson’, I think.”

"You can fetch me then at seven o'clock," he told her. "Between now and then I shall try to see Wendever."

He moved towards the door and opened it. She accepted her dismissal meekly.

"Seven o'clock," she reminded him. "There is one love at least to which you have been faithful."

He raised her fingers to his lips.

"Music remains always the same with me," he replied. "In a day or two," he added, answering her unspoken remonstrance, "if I succeed with Wendever you will find me a changed man."

Trentino's first day on land was not apparently an inspiring one. After the Marchesa's departure he commanded the services of a coiffeur and manicurist, but although the sun was shining outside and the music from the Café de Paris floated in through the windows, although the open doors of the Casino reminded him that he was a natural and incorrigible gambler, he remained indoors, seemingly doing nothing. He was served with luncheon at one o'clock. Just as he was finishing, Hobson was announced.

"I expected to have seen you on the quay," he observed coldly.

Hobson took off his spectacles and wiped his eyes.

"I guess the quay wasn't a particularly healthy place for me," he replied. "These chaps over here haven't got much zip to them, but when they do get an idea about you they stick to it. They've got an idea about me, blast them!"

Trentino leaned back in his chair and tapped a cigarette upon the tablecloth.

"You should have learned, during your long experience, how to conduct a little affair of this sort without inviting police interference," he observed.

"Oh, talk sense!" was the irritated reply. "If it had been New York or Chicago, why I'm right there. Wendever would have got his all right and you would have been spared the trouble of getting off the steamer. This sort of place makes me tired, though. I got in right with my pal over at Nice, and he found me a man from Marseilles who was hiding from the cops and who was willing to do anything—the whole job if necessary—for twenty *milles*. He had two tries, and I'll say he's no bungler, but Wendever had the devil's own luck."

"Where is he now—your assassin friend?" Trentino enquired.

"Hiding. They saw us together once; that's why they're watching me. Talk about luck! My man took the place of a mechanic who was telephoned for at Nice to see a car that had gone wrong at Mont Agel, and he disconnected both the brakes of Wendever's Rolls-Royce. The fellow ought to have gone over the precipice and

broken his neck. He managed to run the car along the side of a wall and escaped by about half a foot. Then Morot got hold of an automatic and thought he'd finish the business. Would you believe it? At five o'clock in the morning a girl in the villa saw him moving about in the garden and gave the alarm. He only had time to fire one shot."

"It should have been enough," Trentino sighed. "These foreigners are no good with a gun."

"They're all so excitable," Hobson agreed. "It takes a New Yorker to stand and plug 'em."

There was a brief pause. Trentino finished his wine and lit another cigarette.

"I am to gather then," he recommenced quietly, "that having now lost touch with your Marseilles friend, you have no suggestions to make for the moment."

Hobson fumbled in his pocket, produced half a sheet of notepaper and threw it over the table.

"What about that?" he asked. "I got it the day after the attempt in the villa grounds."

Trentino smoothed it out and glanced first at the signature—"Hargrave Wendever." Then he read it with interest:

MY DEAR SIR,

Is it worth while? I should so much prefer a peaceful death, and Monte Carlo is not New York. The police are already making enquiries about your antecedents. As a matter of fact your efforts are ill-directed. Whilst I live, who knows what may happen. Any man may change his mind. If any regrettable accident should happen to me I have to-day deposited with my broker, who is here in Monte Carlo, firm and absolute instructions forbidding him to sell a single O. P. Trust share.

Again, I ask you, is it worth while?

Faithfully yours,

HARGRAVE WENDEVER.

"Clever," Trentino commented, "very clever indeed. Under the circumstances, Sam, I think that we had better retire behind the barriers of legalised effort."

"I tell you, he's the big noise out here," Hobson declared. "He helps himself to what he wants in life. They all kowtow to him—entertains royalty and that sort of thing—and he must be spending pots of money. Mademoiselle Diane tells every one that her diamonds came from him, and the women surround him in the Sporting Club

every night like flies.”

“The Sporting Club,” Trentino mused. “That then is a good place to meet him.”

“He plays there every night from eleven until twelve,” Hobson replied. “They say that he has already won several million francs. The croupiers hate to see him at the table. He has what they call in this part of the world ‘Dying Man’s Luck’.”

Trentino smiled.

“That indeed may be the explanation,” he remarked, “because there is one thing, and only one thing which is absolutely certain about this business: if I go down, he goes out. By the bye, Sam, there is that other matter.”

“The Jane’s all right,” was Hobson’s emphatic declaration. “I’ll answer for it that Wendever hasn’t been once to her villa, nor any other man, so far as I can make out.”

Trentino nodded thoughtfully but in his nod there was a suggestion of a scowl.

“All the same,” he said, “there is something about this man Wendever which I do not like. He is too successful. He has gifts—without a doubt he has gifts. It was the first time for many years that Madame has not been on the quay to meet me. She speaks, too, of Wendever as though he were some sort of God. He takes the fancy, this man. It was I who sent her to him. Perhaps my vanity was greater than my wisdom. That I shall find out.”

“She’s all right so far,” Hobson persisted. “It was the softest job I ever had to keep her shadowed. She spends most of every morning painting in the woods, the afternoons in the Sporting Club, and generally dines alone in her villa and reads in the evenings.”

Trentino listened meditatively, but made no further sign of satisfaction. He waved his hand towards the door.

“You had better resume your place as my secretary,” he said. “I prefer you to be near me and it will shelter you from suspicion. Hire or buy a typewriter and come back this afternoon.”

The visitor took his leave and Trentino, after a few minutes’ reflection, descended to the hall of the hotel. He was welcomed everywhere by waiters, *maitres d’hôtel* and the staff generally with enthusiastic courtesy. He was a regular patron of reputedly great wealth whose liberality could be relied upon. He stopped to shake hands with several acquaintances, and afterwards took the underground passage to the Casino and secured his *cartes* of admission. He had no intention of playing, but he wandered for a moment into the Salles Privées and stood watching the numbers at the nearest roulette table. The gambler’s instinct in him asserted itself. He changed a *mille* note into plaques and handed some of them to the chef.

“The maximum on twenty-nine,” he directed.

He watched the ball during the spin with expressionless face. A maximum stake on a number was so rare an event at a somewhat dull table that every one was interested and at the croupier’s monotonous announcement of “*Rien ne va plus*” even those whose stake was nominal leaned over anxiously to watch the ball. It hovered for a moment over the twenty-nine, half fell and then at the last second seemed to be diverted in some curious way and tumbled into the seven. Trentino selected another handful of plaques, and passed them to the croupier.

“The maximum on seventeen,” he directed.

Again the ball went on its course. This time it did not hesitate, but fell into its place and remained there.

“*Vingt-neuf, noir, impair et passe.*”

Trentino brushed the cigarette ash from his coat as he turned away. He was full of the depression of the superstitious man.

“Decidedly,” he murmured to himself as he passed through the exit, unconscious of the salutations of its guardians, “the luck is against me.”

CHAPTER XXI

The crowd at the Sporting Club was greater that night than usual. Hargrave, making his way to the seat he usually occupied at the high *chemin de fer* table—a seat zealously kept for him—had to pass through a crowd of eager spectators on the outside of the velvet rope. Violet, her eyes already lit with excitement, walked by his side to his place and sank into the chair a little way behind, which was immediately tendered to her by the obsequious attendant.

“This is most exciting,” she whispered. “It is so good of you to bring me. I have always longed to see some really big gambling, and I can never get near enough when I am alone.”

Hargrave glanced around the table. His eyes lingered for a moment upon Trentino who sat almost opposite. He bowed to the Marchesa, his neighbour, courteously.

“I am not sure,” he said, “that there will be any very high play to-night. Our Greek friend doesn’t appear to be here.”

He handed a little packet of fifty *milles* to the *changeur*, and received some huge plaques. The bank was at the top end of the table and Hargrave devoted himself for a minute or two to explaining the game to his companion. Presently the shoe arrived at Trentino who deliberately counted out some plaques and thrust them into the middle.

“*Une banque de vingt milles francs,*” the croupier announced. “*Qui fait le banquo?*”

The man on Trentino’s right touched the table lightly with his forefinger. He took no card. Trentino with immovable face displayed a nine. Again the croupier’s parrot-like announcement. The same man followed and lost. There was a little buzz after the croupier’s next announcement.

“*Qui fait le banquo? Si le banquo n’est pas fait, faites vos jeux.*”

An American banker a little way down the table extended his hand for the cards. He drew one—a four. Trentino, who had disclosed a five, drew again—a three, and won the coup.

“We come now,” Hargrave whispered, “to some gambling. The bank, you see, is a hundred and sixty thousand francs, less the *cagnotte*. I think it is possible,” he added, fingering his counters, “that our friend opposite may pass the hand.”

The croupier’s announcement this time was followed by a moment’s silence. People round the table were busy staking. Hargrave looked across to find Trentino

regarding him fixedly as though he recognised the commencement of their duel. Both were, in their way, of the better type of gambler. The Argentine's expression was that of a sphinx. His small, white hands which toyed with the box were as steady as a rock. Hargrave, if he lacked the other's almost flamboyant *insouciance*, was nevertheless in his way as emotionless.

"*Banquo*," he announced.

The silence was broken. Opposite, Trentino seemed for a moment to consider the matter. Finally, with the slightest of bows towards Hargrave, he gave him two cards, and drew two himself. Hargrave glanced at his with immovable face. He held two kings.

"*Carte*," he demanded.

Trentino threw upon the table a knave and a two. The card which he passed to Hargrave was a three. He himself drew an eight.

"*Baccarat*," the croupier announced, commencing his task of counting the money.

"You won!" Violet whispered under her breath.

Hargrave nodded. Opposite, Trentino with steady fingers was lighting a cigarette. He turned and whispered something to the Marchesa. She was a little distraught, her eyes fixed upon the great disappearing heap of plaques. She looked from them to Hargrave and then at Violet. She, too, seemed to feel in some indefinable manner the depression of an evil augury and her eyes rested upon the conqueror. The game proceeded with varying fortunes. Hargrave's bank ran only twice, broken by a lady gambler a few places away. Again it reached Trentino. He started it as before with twenty *milles* and won the first two coups. Hargrave had been whispering to Violet and had been temporarily inattentive. At the sound of the croupier's voice, however, he turned his head.

"*Banquo*," he challenged.

Once more the eyes of the two men met. The Marchesa watched them eagerly. The first shadow of indecision stole into Trentino's face. He distinctly hesitated. Then, with a little shrug of the shoulders, he leaned back in his chair.

"*La main passe*," he announced.

"What does that mean?" Violet whispered.

Hargrave smiled.

"It means," he explained, "that the gentleman opposite declines my challenge. He contents himself with what he has won already."

"Why not?" Violet murmured. "Besides, you seem always to win."

Hargrave shrugged his shoulders. His eyes had met the Marchesa's for a

moment. He realised their message. She disapproved. She was for the conqueror.

"Perhaps you are right," Hargrave observed. "One has one's choice. One can always refuse to accept a fight."

It was as though the purport of his words themselves, inaudible at such a distance, had travelled across the table. Trentino looked up for one moment and this time there was a distinct frown upon his face.

"Do you know who he is?" Violet asked.

"I can guess. I have never met him but I think that his name is Trentino—Andrea Trentino."

The play became uneventful. Presently Hargrave and Violet left their places and strolled into the crowded roulette room. They looked into the bar. Hargrave felt a touch upon his arm and turned around to face the Marchesa.

"Sir Hargrave," she said, "my friend, Mr. Trentino, is very anxious to meet you. Mr. Trentino—Sir Hargrave Wendever."

Hargrave acknowledged the introduction easily enough, but contented himself with a slight bow. Trentino, who had been watching closely, accepted the hint and did not offer his own hand.

"I asked the Marchesa to make us known, Sir Hargrave," he said, "because there is a little matter of business which I think we might discuss to our mutual benefit."

"Scarcely here," was the murmured response.

"A most unsuitable environment, I admit," Trentino agreed. "I could ask you to take a glass of wine here but scarcely to discuss a momentous affair. My attorney, Mr. Wegges, is in Monte Carlo. Will you spare us half an hour at any time to-morrow?"

"Where are you staying?"

"At the Hotel de Paris."

Hargrave reflected for a moment.

"I can tell you at once, Mr. Trentino," he said, "that there is no prospect of our interview terminating in a manner satisfactory to yourself. I am willing, however, to hear what you have to say. I will be at the Hotel de Paris at half-past eleven to-morrow morning."

"You will be eagerly expected," was the quiet reply.

It was obvious that he was about to repeat his former half-framed suggestion, for he had turned towards four vacant seats near the bar. Hargrave, however, anticipated his invitation and prevented it.

"In the meanwhile," he continued, his fingers resting upon Violet's arm, "I have

promised to give my young friend here a lesson in how to win at roulette. At half-past eleven to-morrow, Mr. Trentino.”

His farewell bow included the Marchesa and was without a doubt final. He led Violet back into the roulette room.

“What a strange-looking little man!” she remarked. “What does he do in the world besides gamble?”

“He has been more or less of a financial power all his life,” Hargrave told her. “An Argentine by birth, I think, but he has large interests in New York and London.”

They found two seats at the further roulette table. Violet shook eleven louis out of her bag.

“This is all I have until next Monday morning,” she announced.

“I may perhaps amend that unfortunate situation,” he suggested, smiling.

“Please not,” she begged. “You are already too generous. I should like to play with just my eleven louis and no more, only you must tell me what to do.”

She was obviously in earnest. Hargrave accepted the situation gracefully.

“The trouble is,” he explained, “that whilst I know I can win with my own money, I am not quite so certain about being able to win with yours. Will you, in the event of unforeseen disaster overtaking us, allow me to lend you, say ten louis out of next week’s allowance?”

“Of course,” she laughed.

He took her eleven counters and passed them up to the croupier.

“*Quatorze et les carrés,*” he directed. “*Trois louis transversal treize-quinze, trois louis seize-dix-huit.*”

“But that’s all I’ve got!” she gasped.

“Ten more to come,” he reminded her, “and the ten will be my money, not yours.”

Twenty-four turned up. She looked at him a little ruefully.

“Perhaps your luck is not the same when you play for any one else,” she suggested, watching her eleven louis being swept away.

“We’ll see,” he answered.

He selected eleven louis from the little heap in front of him and pushed them towards the croupier.

“*Le même jeu,*” he directed.

Violet watched the spinning of the wheel eagerly.

“This is wildly exciting,” she confided. “I’ve never had more than two louis on before.”

Fifteen turned up.

“We win a little,” Hargrave explained. “Forty-nine louis, less our original stake.” He threw a louis to the *boîte* and pushed a further little heap forward.

“*Le même jeu,*” he told the croupier once more, “*en doublant les gagnants. Ajoutez les chevaux de quatorze.*”

Again the ball spun. Hargrave, glancing up, recognised the Comtesse Fayaldi, watching him intently from the other side of the table. His bow, however, at first passed unnoticed. There was a peculiar quality of vagueness in her eyes which puzzled him. Then came the click of the ball and the amazing announcement of the croupier.

“*Quatorze, rouge, pair et manque.*”

Violet forgot herself. Her startled exclamation was almost hysterical. She clutched her companion by the arm.

“Sir Hargrave!” she exclaimed. “Please look! Fourteen!”

He smiled, still conscious of that steadfast regard from the other side of the table.

“It was a certainty with my money,” he assured her.

A stream of counters and plaques which seemed to Violet inexhaustible were pushed across towards her. She accepted them in dumb wonderment.

“How ever much have I won?” she asked.

“Over four *milles,*” he told her.

He tossed two plaques to the chef and swept the remainder into Violet’s *sacque*. The *mise* he left without doubling. Thirty-four turned up. He rose to his feet.

“You now,” he confided, “learn the second lesson in the playing of this elusive game. You pocket your winnings and you leave off.”

“Leave off,” she exclaimed incredulously. “Why, I could play all the evening with these. I have never been so excited in my life.”

“It is obvious then,” he declared, “that your nerves need calming. We will find a quiet corner in the bar and you shall gloat over your winnings.”

She rose to her feet willingly enough, although with a glance of regret at the table. The Comtesse Fayaldi left her place and intercepted them. Her expression was once more perfectly natural. She greeted Hargrave charmingly.

“Your good fortune remains,” she observed.

“I win at these games,” he admitted.

“May I know your companion?” she enquired. “It is such a pleasure, if you will forgive my saying so, to watch her.”

Hargrave murmured a brief introduction. The Comtesse said a few agreeable words, and turned back to Hargrave.

“The other night, my friend,” she confided, “you interested me greatly but you

did not puzzle me. Now I am more than puzzled—I am bewildered. I should like, if I might, to ask you a question.”

“Why?”

“You have at times a somewhat grim expression—that, you know, of course—the air of a man who is finding life either wearisome or something of a dogged task. Do you agree, Mademoiselle?” she added, turning to Violet.

“Sometimes I have seen that expression,” Violet assented.

“One would imagine,” the Comtesse continued, “that your thoughts were riveted upon the business of the moment. You so seldom relax. Yet you cannot be altogether a materialist. You have other gifts which plentifully contradict such a horrible idea. I want to ask you whether you have any belief in the modern theory that this unharnessed quality of psychic power is given to some and withheld from others?”

“It seems to me very possible,” Hargrave admitted.

“You ought not to possess it but you do,” she said, with a sudden impatience. “You saw that number before it turned up.”

“I really believe I did,” Hargrave confessed. “Do you think I ought to return the money?”

She laughed gaily.

“You men are never serious,” she exclaimed.

She hurried away with the slightest of farewell nods. Violet watched her in amazement.

“What a strange woman!” she murmured. “Who is she?”

“I believe that she comes of a great Hungarian family, but she told me herself that she had also Gipsy blood,” Hargrave explained. “Fedora Fayaldi, her name is.”

“But do you really believe in what she was talking about?”

They made their way slowly through the crowded rooms.

“I feel that I have just learned enough in life,” he confided, “to absolutely disbelieve in nothing.—Here’s Philip Gorse, by Jove, and Pellingham! We’ll take them out for a drink.”

She made a little grimace.

“Why do you always avoid being alone with me?” she complained.

There was a note of banter in his reply, but a note also of something else.

“I am a faithful disciple of Mrs. Grundy,” he told her, “and my reputation here, this season, at any rate, is that of a very black sheep. Come along, you fellows, we’re going to the bar.”

They all sat together very happily whilst Violet told the story of her winnings. Presently Hargrave was sent for. A great personage had arrived and had asked for

him. He left the place almost unnoticed. Violet was still telling the story of her lesson at roulette and both men were listening eagerly. From the doorway, Hargrave looked back. The recital, apparently, was not yet concluded. No one seemed to have noticed his departure. The expression in both the men's faces was one of utter devotion.

CHAPTER XXII

The next morning's conference at the Hotel de Paris arrived very soon at an *impasse*. Mr. Wegges, Trentino's attorney, presented his case a little ponderously but clearly; Trentino himself had ventured upon a few words. To both Hargrave had listened at first in impassive silence. When he spoke, however, there was a finality about his words which seemed to make further discussion unprofitable.

"I am quite aware," he said, "that I am the nominal holder of every share in the O. P. Trust, and of a few also that do not exist. It is not my intention to part with a single one."

Mr. Wegges tapped with his pencil upon the table.

"Your own broker, Sir Hargrave, Mr. Marston here, has pointed out to you that the shares are falling every day. The present price of the dollar share is seventy-two cents. My client is prepared to give you par for sixty thousand. He is prepared to go further than that. If you have bought these shares believing that they have prospects of advancement beyond that, my client will give you an undertaking, which I guarantee shall be absolutely binding, to return to you at any time you choose to say the word, the difference between par and the highest price they may touch."

"A generous suggestion," Hargrave admitted. "I am not, however, a seller."

Trentino was leaning back in his chair with the carefully cultivated pose of an indifferent auditor. His pallor seemed a shade more pronounced. Otherwise he showed no sign of disappointment.

"When you say that you are not a seller, Sir Hargrave," he asked, "do you mean at any price?"

"At any price," was the firm response. "I do not pretend to be a very wealthy man but I am wealthy enough to indulge in my whims. One of my whims is not to sell one of those shares."

"The idea being, I presume, to break me."

Hargrave shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not feel myself called upon," he said, "to explain my action."

"A few years ago," Trentino recounted, looking intently for a moment at his finger nails, "I came up against an Englishman, Ned Penlow. Ours was a perfectly fair business duel. I broke him, and he went down. Penlow was your friend, I believe, Sir Hargrave?"

"He was."

"This little effort of yours then, I presume, is purely one of revenge—a profitless

revenge, I might remind you. You paid between eighty and ninety yourself for many of these shares, but the day I am hammered they will go down to fifty.”

“I shall without a doubt suffer financial loss,” Hargrave agreed.

“Yet you think it worth while,” Trentino continued speculatively, with the air of one discussing a subject in which he was only impersonally interested.

“I most decidedly think it worth while,” Hargrave agreed.

“Personally,” Trentino went on, after a moment’s pause, “that concludes the matter so far as I am concerned. You must remember, however, Sir Hargrave, that your present action brings us two into a narrower arena. You have made use of the fields of commerce for an unworthy purpose—your proposal to ruin me out of revenge. I do not threaten, but I too am human.”

“One takes one’s risks,” Hargrave remarked carelessly. “As a matter of fact, there have been incidents during the last few days which may be taken to suggest the nature of your further enterprises.—If you are ready, Marston, we might as well be going. There is nothing more to be said.”

“You will allow me just one word,” the attorney begged. “There is a whole lot of this transaction that I fail to understand, but I’d have you know, Sir Hargrave, that working it out upon the most favourable basis, you stand to lose about seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars if Andrea Trentino goes down. O. P. Trusts, with Trentino at the back of them, may be a reasonably solid stock. Without him you won’t find much market.”

“I will not question your figures,” Hargrave replied. “A large sum of money, without a doubt.”

“It’s up to you to say whether you mean to lose it or not,” the attorney persisted.

“I have already given you my decision,” Hargrave reminded him, a little wearily.

“Say, is there any use appealing to you, Mr. Marston?” the lawyer demanded. “You’re a man of common sense. You know what this thing means to my client, and the loss yours will have to face if he stays obstinate. Can’t you bring them together somehow?”

Marston shrugged his shoulders.

“My client,” he announced, “is acting entirely against my advice and I may say that Ned Penlow was a friend of mine as well as of his. I have already reasoned with him. I can do no more. I believe we stand to lose at least as much as you say.”

“There is just this last one word to be added,” Trentino observed calmly. “There are eleven days, and during those eleven days my offer remains open. I will be at this hotel; so will my attorney. We will be at your disposition until then.”

Hargrave made no reply. Marston had already opened the door and they passed

out together.

“You think I’m an idiot?” the former remarked, as they stepped into the lift.

“I do,” was the unhesitating reply. “It wasn’t that I was thinking, just at that moment, though.”

“What was it then?”

“I was thinking of that dinner party when you asked us a certain question. My reply I remember was, ‘a gigantic speculation.’ A few days later you placed in my hands instructions for the largest enterprise in which I have ever been concerned. Was it of yourself then, Hargrave, that you were thinking when you asked that question?”

They passed across the crowded hall of the Paris and out into the sunshine. Hargrave led the way on to the Terrace.

“Well,” he admitted at last, “perhaps I was thinking of myself.”

“But in what way?” Marston demanded, puzzled.

“You’re fit enough, aren’t you? I never saw a man look better.”

Hargrave walked on for several moments before he replied.

“One can’t always tell, John,” he confided. “You have the gift of silence, so I don’t mind so much being frank with you. That last spill I had didn’t do me any good.”

Marston for a moment was shocked into silence. For the first time, it seemed to him, he noticed a change in Hargrave, who had seated himself a little wearily upon the stone wall of the Terrace with his back to the *Tir Aux Pigeons*.

“Doctors are not infallible, I know,” the latter continued, “but it seems that I did something—injured something, or ruptured something—which might turn awkward in a few months’ time. Anyhow, that’s where I got the idea from. I asked myself out of sheer curiosity, what should I do if the worst were true? I collected impressions from you others. I experimented. I am living these few months as though it were so.”

Marston deliberately lit a cigarette.

“What blithering idiot of a doctor did you go to?” he demanded.

“Horridge,” was the laconic reply.

Marston was temporarily silenced; the name of Horridge was beyond criticism.

“He didn’t commit any breach of medical etiquette by telling me in plain words that I was going to die,” Hargrave continued. “He fenced about the matter—a little clumsily, by the bye, for a man with his experience—and doubled his fee. But one would have had to have been a fool not to be able to read between the lines. At any rate, I have adopted the idea that this year may see me through. That is why I am living, or have been living, to the last ounce in me.”

Marston looked at his companion critically.

"If I were you," he advised, "I should go to another physician. Considering the life you are supposed to be leading and to which you yourself plead guilty, I never saw you looking better. These fellows always come a cropper now and then, you know."

Hargrave smiled reflectively.

"The life I am supposed to be leading!" he repeated. "Well, to tell you the truth, Marston, it isn't always exactly what it seems. I have my restraints—a good many more than people imagine. However, that's nothing. I have no fancy for going through that all again with another doctor. I don't think Horridge makes mistakes."

"He's a pretty safe man," Marston acknowledged. "All the same, I'd never rely upon one man's opinion in a matter so serious as this.—By Jove, Hargrave, who's the girl with Philip? She's as good-looking a young woman as I've seen on the Riviera!"

Hargrave eyed the approaching couple reflectively. Violet, all her former awe of him departed, was laughing up into her companion's face. She had developed, Hargrave was bound to admit, during the last few weeks, a flair for clothes, which, considering her former strict economy, was remarkable. Her plain tennis gown, fashionably but not daringly short, was entirely in the mode of the moment, and her little hat the last word in smartness. The admiration in Gorse's face as he leaned towards her was manifest.

"A young friend of mine, Miss Martin," Hargrave observed. "I wonder you haven't met her before."

"A friend of Philip's too, I should think," the stockbroker remarked meaningly.

There was a voluble exchange of greetings as they met.

"We've had wonderful tennis, although we missed you," Violet confided to Hargrave. "Mr. Gorse wanted to take me up to the Royalty for an orangeade but I thought we might meet you along here."

Hargrave wondered, as they climbed the hill, at the sensation of positive pleasure which her words had given him. It was curious how, since the inception of their present somewhat negative relations, he had been conscious almost for the first time in his life of certain qualms of jealousy when he had watched Violet in the company of younger men. It was only a month of her he dared to claim, he told himself continually, but each day of that month he found himself restricting or abandoning his own engagements, grudging every moment she gave to others. He took himself to task concerning this attitude of his for the hundredth time as they sat in the café, but he was nevertheless conscious of the same little sensation of pleasure as one by one

the others reluctantly departed, leaving them alone.

“Do you know that the car is outside?” she told him, as she leaned over to help herself to an almond.

He nodded.

“I ordered it to be here at half-past twelve. I thought if you cared to we might go a little way into the country for lunch.”

Her eyes flashed with pleasure.

“You really have no engagements?” she exclaimed. “I was going to be all alone. Robert is lunching with his new friends, the Wegges.”

“I had an engagement, but I put it off,” he admitted. “I thought I should need an antidote after my interview with my Argentine friend this morning.”

“And can I supply it?” she asked, holding his hand for a moment frankly.

He permitted himself a moment’s weakness.

“Like no one else,” he answered.

They crossed the brown, vineyard-covered slopes and threaded their way through the pleasant valley to the Gorge du Loup. The almond trees were in blossom, lending a new fragrance to the air, odorous already with the scent of the pines and the sunbaked undergrowth, and far below them the river forced its tortuous way over its rocky bed. They chose the smallest of the restaurants at the Gorge du Loup, and whilst they waited, they ate *hors d’oeuvres* and sipped their cocktails. Somewhere in the street a vagrant Italian was strumming upon the guitar, singing now and then in a throaty tenor a verse of a Neapolitan love song. Violet became almost grave.

“I am serious with happiness,” she confided, in reply to a remark of his. “I want to keep time standing still. I am afraid of it all. It is so beautiful and I am so happy.”

“You must never lose your courage,” he told her. “Indeed, remember that there is no need for you to. Perhaps I can guess what is in your mind. You need never go back to that old life unless you wish to.”

“What am I to do then?” she demanded. “I can’t live on charity—not even yours. I can’t accept bounty for which I give nothing.”

His weakness of the early morning had passed. He smiled at her pleasantly.

“My dear,” he said, “I don’t know whether you realise it, but you are rapidly becoming one of the most admired young women in Monte Carlo. There are half a dozen young men I know of at least who would give a great deal to be in my place.”

“They do not interest me,” she declared indifferently. “You know that.”

“Not even Philip Gorse?”

“Of course he’s different,” she confessed, “but you would not call him a young

man. To me he seems older than you.”

Hargrave smiled. After all, now he came to think of it, Philip Gorse was only four years younger.

“Well, there are plenty of others.”

“Yes,” she admitted. “There is your friend Lord Edward Pellingham. He asked me to lunch with him somewhere in the country to-day. He even suggested a chaperon when I refused.”

“There you are,” Hargrave pointed out. “Pellingham is supposed to be a very critical young man. You will find before a month is passed that your future will solve itself readily enough.”

A waiter intervened, bringing a carafe of country wine and the trout, and remained at their elbows. The conversation drifted to lighter subjects—the beauty of the view, the strange sight of the char-à-bancs winding their way round the distant hills.

“Over there,” he pointed out, “lies Grasse. We must call and buy you perfume on our way home.”

“You spoil me,” she told him, “with all the things which are beautiful to have and which I love having, but you starve me for the things I want most.”

He laid his hand upon hers—for him a very unusual proceeding.

“My dear,” he said, “I starve you then only in words and deeds. There is no one else of whom I am so fond.”

Her eyes shone almost to mistiness.

“More, more, please,” she begged. “You never talk to me like that and every one else tries to, and when they do it sounds like a discord. And one word from you goes straight to my heart.”

The scene around him seemed to fade away. There came to him a vivid realisation of the whole intensity and purpose of life, here at a wayside restaurant, in this curious atmosphere of flowers and trees and music, half sweet, half banal. After all, it was what he had sought for, to taste all the best of life, this acute and wonderful sense of living as he had never lived before. But that it should come to him in this fashion was incredible.

“Will you please do something for me?” she asked suddenly.

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” he replied, “if I didn’t do nearly anything you could ask me. You are attacking me at a weak moment. I knew that the trout would be good, but I never dreamed of such delicious chicken and white wine.”

“I won’t try you too high,” she promised. “You know, you don’t seem to me to be in the least nervous, and yet I can’t help thinking sometimes that you worry

yourself about something which doesn't, which couldn't possibly exist. I feel sure that doctor, of whom you spoke to me, was wrong. I want you to go and see some one else."

"Where? Here in Monte Carlo?" he asked.

"Why not?" she persisted. "I never saw any one look better than you do. You are just enough sunburnt, your eyes are so clear and bright, you look healthier than any of the men I see about, day by day. The doctor in London who told you that you were threatened with an illness must be a very stupid person."

"He is a very famous man," Hargrave assured her.

"The most famous men make mistakes. Promise?"

She leaned so close to him that their lips almost touched. Her eyes sparkled with mischief. Her lips persisted in their invitation. He leaned forward and touched them lightly.

"Good thing we're in France," he murmured.

"Do you promise?"

"After that, of course I do."

"And in the meanwhile you won't worry?"

"Not a scrap."

"And you won't try to find a husband for me?"

"That is another matter," he replied. "To a certain extent I have drifted into the position of being your guardian. I have to consider my responsibilities seriously."

"I am twenty-four years old," she remarked. "I adore having a guardian, but when I want a husband, I should like to find him for myself."

"What independence!" he murmured. "Tell me—you are really a very practical young woman in some things—what am I going to do about Robert?"

"Let him stay on for a time," she answered promptly. "There is quite a nice little American girl here to whom he seems absolutely devoted. How fickle men are!" she sighed. "I am already forgotten. Mademoiselle Zélie has faded into the background. Just at present there exists in his mind only this rather forward but very charming American girl."

The meal drew towards its close. They lingered over their coffee and cigarettes until the place around them became almost deserted. The last of the visiting char-à-bancs had disappeared in a cloud of dust when Hargrave reluctantly called for his bill. Afterwards they passed through the deserted inner room on their way to the exit. She stopped and held him by the shoulders.

"I *will* be kissed," she insisted. "There is no one else whom I could let kiss me, so it must be you. Don't blame me, please," she murmured, as he stooped towards

her. "It was that music—and after all—this is the country of happiness."

He held her in his arms for a moment, struggling to repress as much as he could the joy of it, the passion against which he fought, whilst her slim body strained against his. A footstep in the passage brought him a sort of aching relief. They walked arm in arm to the car.

"Never," she whispered, "have I been so near happiness."

CHAPTER XXIII

The serenity of Hargrave's cynically devised months of epicurean pleasure was abruptly and completely broken. He was no longer able to indulge in self-deception. He had deliberately undertaken a pilgrimage to the pleasure ground of the world to enjoy with the whole zest of which he was capable months which he was firmly convinced were to be his last, and he was suddenly face to face with an unexpected and unimaginable crisis. It had been, perhaps, he reflected, a coldly conceived plan of his, this deliberate reaching out for every instant gift which the world might have to offer. He would better have remained like the philosopher in his garden to meditate upon the inevitable until its horrors lost all significance. He had chosen the other way and the last thing on earth which he had expected had happened. The pursuit of pleasure had suddenly become an ignominious travesty of life. The great gates at which he had knocked so many times to so little effect had been opened to disclose an undreamed-of heaven. It was the Biblical truths of life after all which prevailed. The pursuit of pleasure was an individual and egoistical search. Happiness—the only happiness which counted—must be a shared gift.—Some of the hours which followed upon his complete realisation of what had happened were hours of torture. He was never once tempted to stoop down from the exaltation of his love, to seek a grosser interpretation of it. More than once he asked himself whether he might not accept the sacrifice which she was only too ready to offer, marry her with the full measure of his secret untold and exist for a few wonderful months in the joy of her close presence. He argued with himself that he could leave her free from all cares for the rest of her life, could leave her indeed wealthy enough to make her own experiments in the science of living. Yet in his inner consciousness he knew very well that nothing he could do would ever atone to her for the shadow thrown across her life in its youth by the tragedy of his coming and going. Day by day she seemed to become more the admired centre of the little group of friends into which he had introduced her. Yet she never gave him one second's real anxiety. Her flirtations were obviously and admittedly insincere. She encouraged not a single one of the young men who always surrounded her. Hargrave's only anxiety was for Philip Gorse whose devotion every day became more and more apparent.

The crisis so far as the latter was concerned came one night in the Sporting Club. Violet, with Robert and Sadie Wegges, had gone to a dance of young people which Hargrave, who had been dining with the Princess Putralka, had promised to join later. Gorse, seizing upon the opportunity, led his friend to a remote corner of

the bar and ordered whiskies and sodas.

“Hargrave, old fellow,” he began, after a few minutes’ obvious hesitation, “I have been trying to get a few words with you for days, but I never seem to see you alone. There’s something I want to say, something I must say.”

Hargrave prepared to face the ordeal which he knew was coming. The lines crept into his face. He established with a definite effort an epoch of self-control.

“I want to talk to you about Miss Martin—Violet—your protégée.”

“And yours,” Hargrave reminded him.

“I wonder if you realise,” Gorse continued, “as we others all do, what a really wonderful young person she is.”

Hargrave made no comment. It was obvious that it was scarcely expected from him.

“We all began by treating her as a child, or, at any rate, as a very young girl,” Gorse proceeded. “She takes one that way at first. She is so full of happiness and sweetness, and the joy of living. But as a matter of fact, you know, Hargrave, she’s nothing of the sort. She is young enough, but after all she is a woman, a woman with one of the most fascinating dispositions the mind of man could conceive.”

“This is a new form of eloquence for you, Philip,” Hargrave remarked quietly.

“Yes, it’s a new form,” Gorse confessed. “I am in the confessional, Hargrave. I have never felt like it before. I never dreamed this would ever come to me, but it has. What should you say if I told you I wanted to marry her?”

Another man marry her! Even Philip Gorse. Hargrave was thankful for those few seconds of preparation which he had been vouchsafed.

“It would surprise me very much, naturally,” was his measured reply. “I have never looked upon you, Philip, as a marrying man. I had some idea, in fact, that you scarcely approved of marriage for one of your vocation.”

“I never went so far as that,” Gorse assured him earnestly. “I have never gone so far as that even when others of my cloth have asked my advice. I have simply thought that if a man were able to keep himself from an affection of that sort he was perhaps better able to carry out his work. But you see I have become one of the weak. Like many others before me I too have fallen.”

The world for a moment seemed tumbling around him. Philip Gorse, the ascetic of Oxford, the saintlike figure of his great church and parish, the advocate of clergy houses, the wan, spiritual priest of many missions! Somehow or other it seemed to Hargrave that there was something incredibly pathetic in his friend’s sudden reversion to warm-blooded humanity.

“You have spoken to her?” he asked.

“Not yet. I wanted to speak to you first.”

“I am not her guardian,” Hargrave pointed out, a little coldly.

“In a sense of course you are not,” Gorse admitted eagerly, “and yet it is through you they are here—Violet and her brother. I want you to help me in this, if you will, Hargrave. You have been amazingly generous to them both. I, better than any man in the world, know how little significance there is in it, but we can’t ignore the fact that in this world there are many people who ought to know better who find fault, who get the wrong idea——”

“Philip,” Hargrave interrupted, “there’s something you want to say, and you’re piling a heap of words around it.”

“You are right,” Gorse admitted, with a little sigh of relief. “I don’t think it is the wisest arrangement in the world, Hargrave, that Violet and her brother should be staying alone at the villa with you.”

Hargrave felt himself upon the earth again. He tapped a cigarette against his case and lit it.

“You must remember, Philip,” he said, “that you yourself are in a measure responsible for their presence there.”

“For their presence in Monte Carlo, perhaps,” Gorse admitted eagerly, “but that these two, quite unknown, not of your world, should be staying at the villa, your protégées, naturally causes comment. I should be proud to let the whole world know, if I am lucky enough, that I am marrying a working woman, but the other matter perplexes me. My mother, even Amy—people here are intrigued, you know.”

“What do you propose that I do?” Hargrave enquired. “Abandon the experiment which you yourself suggested and send them away because you are in love with the girl? You don’t even know the worst,” he went on. “The boy isn’t her brother at all.”

“Not her brother!” Gorse exclaimed, suddenly whitening.

“It was a blow to me at first,” Hargrave confessed. “This is the story. They were engaged to be married. He was in poor health and when I suggested that she should bring a relative with her she passed him off as a brother. I have forgiven her. I can quite understand the temptation. The young man confessed the truth that night at the Carlton when he was drunk.”

“This is awful!” Gorse groaned.

Hargrave felt that for the moment he had lost all power of sympathy. He was sorry for his friend in a far-off sort of way but all the time he was conscious of the pain in his own heart.

“I thought it best not to give the show away,” he explained, “or I should have

had to send them both home, and that would have been the end of our experiment. The young man promised to turn over a new leaf and, so far as I am aware, he has done so. Violet, you know about. She was bitterly ashamed. She tried to rush off to England but I fetched her back. I have forgiven her, and there you are. If she decides to marry you, she'll probably tell you all about it. She certainly won't attempt to deceive you, and as for the young man everything is over between them."

"The deception exists all the same," Gorse observed, with an unaccustomed note of sternness in his tone.

"So far as that is concerned, it is nobody's affair but theirs and mine," Hargrave insisted. "I say so with all respect, Philip, but I do hope that you are not going to preach to Violet. It would only make her unhappy and probably spoil the most wonderful time she has ever had in her life."

Gorse flushed sensitively.

"I am to consider that you have told me this in confidence then?" he observed.

"Entirely. If anything arrives between you and Violet, she will confide in you herself."

There was a brief silence. The bar was becoming crowded. Gorse rose abruptly to his feet.

"Hargrave," he said, "we can't talk here like men. There's something too artificial about the atmosphere. I feel choked. Come outside for a time."

Hargrave rose with some reluctance to his feet. He was not at all sure that he cared to indulge in plainer speech. Nevertheless Gorse was so terribly in earnest that he had no alternative. They procured their hats and coats and made their way on to the Terrace, now almost deserted. Philip took his friend's arm as they neared the gardens.

"Hargrave," he said, "I am troubled because I have lost your sympathy for some reason. Try to be patient with me. You know that I have never philandered with women, never even harboured the idea of marriage. That's what makes this thing so overwhelming. Until just these last few weeks it has seemed to me the most natural thing in the world to live alone and to think of other people. I have been full of sympathy for every one. The greatest maxim of Christianity has been a reality with me, because it was so natural. I have loved my fellow human beings, been interested in them, done what I could for their welfare, always found my happiness in service, and I've suddenly become brutally selfish. The other will all come back but just now every spark of feeling I have is centred on one person. It isn't altogether happiness, you know, Hargrave. I'm afraid of what my life may become if I should fail. I'm afraid of what it may become in relation to others if I should succeed."

They paused for a moment. In the eagerness of his outburst, Gorse's hand had tightened upon his friend's arm and he had brought him to a standstill at the edge of the gardens. Around them was a little oasis of sweet-smelling, violet darkness. They could just hear the music from the orchestra at the Café de Paris; the lights on the hills were like pinpricks of fire. Hargrave felt his wave of selfishness pass, felt the stirring of a deep sympathy for the man who seemed to him to be suddenly aged and into whose clear and fearless eyes had crept the shadow of a new apprehension.

"I should ask her and get it over, Philip," he advised.

"I mean to. I mean to almost at once. And yet, in a way I'm afraid."

"I know that she likes you very much—admires you too. From the pulpit you have been one of the friends of her loneliness."

"It is that liking and admiration I'm afraid of," Gorse confessed. "I'm afraid of her respect. It is the character and not the man for whom she has some feeling."

"You can't be sure," Hargrave observed. "Violet is impulsive but she is quite capable of hiding her feelings at times."

"I have watched her with other men," Gorse admitted, a little diffidently. "You won't mind, Hargrave, but I have sometimes feared—it has been on my mind a great deal lately—that she has some sort of feeling for you. It may, of course, be only gratitude and a sort of hero-worship, but sometimes—well, I would have given anything on earth to have had her look at me as I have seen her look at you when you haven't even noticed it."

"Under the circumstances," Hargrave pointed out, with a resurgent note of bitterness finding an outlet in his tone, "I am scarcely a rival to be feared, am I?"

Gorse was acutely contrite, conscious of tactless egoism inasmuch as his question had brought back to his friend's mind the ever-present tragedy of the passing days. Nevertheless he was unable to abandon the subject.

"All the same," he persisted, "you must tell me something. If you were perfectly well——"

"Don't ask me such damned silly questions," Hargrave interrupted harshly. "One can't tell, and it doesn't matter. The situation so far as I'm concerned is ghastly enough without adding the pinpricks of torture."

Gorse took his friend's arm and held it tightly.

"It may hurt us both, old fellow," he said, "but I must have the truth."

"Then for God's sake, have it," was the impassioned reply. "You know who she is, you know where I found her, you know with what object I brought her out here. You too know—you are one of the few men who do—how small a place actually women have found in my life. I figure to the world as a selfish man because I am rich

and because I have remained a bachelor. I've kept single from necessity. I should have preferred marriage, and children, and all the rest of it. I couldn't do it. I have tried, but I have never been able to feel exactly the right way about any woman—a phase, I suppose, Philip, of that epicureanism with which you taunt me. And now, when it is practically all over with me, to add another torment to the pain I can't help suffering in the quiet times, I have found just that one feeling I have wanted all my life. There! You asked for the truth and you've got it. Here's an amazing truth—in the banal words of the novelists—if there is any such thing as love in the world, I love her.”

Gorse gripped his friend's hand tightly. For a moment they passed into that closer communion only possible with human beings between whom exists perfect faith and perfect understanding. The world fell away from their feet, the gravity of the moment for each was the other's suffering. Presently they passed arm in arm round the winding path and found their faces once more turned towards the lights of the hillside and the glow from the Café.

“I'm glad you've told me yourself, old chap,” Gorse said. “I—do you know, somehow I guessed it. I am not sure that it is not the same way with her.”

There was a shade of bitterness in Hargrave's smile. He was after all very human and the moment of exaltation had passed.

“She would be an *ingrate*” he acknowledged, “if she had no feeling at all, but as a rule there are few people in the world with so little sympathy for disease as the healthy young. They may be brimful of kindness but it is their instinct to avoid suffering. Wait until I begin to go downhill a little. It won't be her fault. She'll be just as kind, but you'll see the difference. She's as sweet and spontaneously generous as a child, although she has the heart of a woman. All the same, nature is an overwhelming mistress.”

They came out into the Place de Casino. Of the two men, Gorse seemed the more disturbed. His thin face showed its lines more clearly than ever. His eyes seemed to be sunken. There was a weary droop to his mouth.

“I am going to commit an extravagance, and take one of these little *voitures* home, old chap,” he announced. “You have given me something to think about.”

Hargrave was himself again. He tapped a cigarette against his case and lit it.

“My dear Philip,” he advised, “don't be a fool about this matter. Take the goods the Gods send you. I can assure you that I am too much of a philosopher to play the dog in the manger.”

Gorse wrung his friend's hand and stepped into the carriage which he had summoned.

CHAPTER XXIV

Hargrave, in no humour for the young people's dance to which he was half committed, returned to the Sporting Club to find the roulette rooms closing, the bar crowded and the serious gambling of the evening about to begin in the *chemin de fer* room. A functionary hurried forward to offer him a seat at the high table. Whilst he was hesitating, he felt a light touch on his shoulder. He turned around to face the Marchesa, paler it seemed to him than usual, a sombre fire of discontented passion in her large eyes. Her dress was a delicate but scanty sheath of turquoise blue, her corn-coloured hair was brushed plainly back from her forehead in a manner which a famous Russian had made fashionable. A single pearl hung from her throat. The fact that she had received many compliments during the evening seemed to have left her unmoved.

"You do not wish to play that silly game," she said. "Let us find a quiet place and talk."

Hargrave himself took a sudden dislike to the gambling table, the strained faces of the women, even the monotonous voices of the croupiers. He shook his head at the man who was holding the chair invitingly.

"But where?" he asked, turning away with her to face the crowded bar.

Her fingers touched his arm compellingly.

"Let us go towards the lounge of the Hotel de Paris and find two seats there," she proposed.

Hargrave hesitated. A *tête-à-tête* with Nina di Bieni attracted him very little. On the other hand the bar seemed crammed with all the bores of his acquaintance.

"At your disposition, Madame," he murmured.

They walked in silence down the long passage, entered the lift and traversed the second covered way. In a deserted corner of the lounge she pointed to two chairs.

"Let us sit there," she whispered.

Hargrave assented without demur. The chairs were comfortable and the quiet restful.

"Marchesa," he began—

"Nina," she insisted. "I hate my Italian title."

"Nina then," he went on, disposing of himself to his satisfaction, and lighting a cigarette, "I shall listen with pleasure to all you have to say because you are looking exceedingly attractive to-night and I have a measure of liking for you, but I must warn you that if you are going to open the old subject you will waste your time. I

shall not change my mind.”

“It is something to the good,” she mused, “that you find me attractive to-night. A good many others have told me the same thing without its affording me the same pleasure. Still, I do not like your obstinate attitude. The strongest man in the world is the stronger for knowing when to yield.”

He flicked the ash from his cigarette.

“Proceed,” he begged.

“For five years,” she confided, “I have been—what shall I say—the friend, the amenable friend, of Andrea Trentino. Five years for any one of my temperament is too long. I have endured a great deal. Now I have finished. Andrea Trentino and I are to part.”

“I think,” he remarked, “that the star of Mr. Andrea Trentino has set.”

“A year ago,” she reflected, “it had never seemed so firmly established. Now one sees easily that it is finished. Andrea has lost his touch upon life. He is becoming like a trapped animal running round his cage. Can you tell me, Sir Hargrave, of all your knowledge, how it is that a woman may pity failure but she worships success?”

“I am no judge of women or their ways,” Hargrave answered.

“A pose,” she rejoined, “which is a little unworthy of you. You have success after success with my sex. It would be impossible unless you understood us. The man who does not understand women gets but little joy out of them. The best of them responds never to the crack of the whip; only to the call of magic pipes. A man may buy a mistress, but he must woo a sweetheart.”

“Yet a moment ago,” Hargrave reminded her, “your statement was pure materialism. According to you, women worship only success.”

“That is not materialism,” she insisted. “Success is the reward of genius. It is not for the sake of sharing the success that women care; it is because of the quality in the man which has been able to produce it.”

“And where do we arrive?” he asked.

“Andrea and I have parted,” she answered.

There was a silence. In the distance an orchestra was playing. From the lounge proper, some distance below them, came a buzz of conversation. In the corner where they sat, everything was dark.

“It seems to me,” he said at last, “that our friend Trentino is to lose a great deal before long.”

“You hate Trentino,” she reflected.

“‘Hate’ is scarcely the word,” he answered. “He broke my friend’s heart and it is my task to see that he suffers for it.”

“You can do more to make him suffer than by merely taking his money,” she said presently.

He turned slowly and looked at her. There was that inscrutable smile upon her lips, the invitation of a woman who desires to yield in her eyes.

“Outside his business,” she went on, “I have been the one thing necessary in life to Andrea Trentino. I have been the one thing which he has worshipped next to his money. He is a jealous man too. He could suffer.”

“Do I understand,” he asked coldly, “that you are paying me the great compliment of suggesting that I should become his successor?”

“There are many,” she rejoined, “to whom the idea would appeal.”

He studied her thoughtfully—a pleasant, uncritical look in his eyes which robbed his regard of any suspicion of offence. She was without a doubt a very beautiful woman with a great deal of that charm without which mere physical good looks so often lose their appeal. She satisfied even Hargrave’s fastidious taste.

“Everything except the reality of your idea appeals to me,” he confessed.

She looked at him with slightly uplifted eyebrows.

“That sounds scarcely flattering,” she observed.

“Believe me,” he assured her, “that it costs me a great deal to say it. It simply happens that conditions——”

“Are you in love with your beautiful ward?” she interrupted.

“The phrase applied to a man of my years is a little absurd,” he rejoined stiffly.

She studied him for a moment.

“I do not know how old you are,” she admitted. “You look no more than thirty-eight or thirty-nine, although you have that air of experience which women so admire. The last man I knew who was really absolutely in love was a little short of sixty.”

“A most undignified proceeding,” he insisted.

“There are times,” she replied, “when one does not think of dignity. If one did, perhaps I should have left you a few minutes ago.”

“I should have been very sorry if you had,” Hargrave assured her. “Believe me, my speech sounded more uncouth than the feeling which prompted it. Besides, you have given me an idea. Trentino numbers jealousy amongst his weaknesses, does he?”

“He has made life very tiresome sometimes,” she admitted. “That we must part, now that he has lost his money, I know, but in our farewells he has offended me. The worst punishment which could be inflicted upon him would be the knowledge that you had become my friend. If this cannot be, the punishment would be almost as real

if he believed that it were so. Dine with me here to-morrow night. Andrea has invited your stockbroker, Mr. Marston, and his lawyer, to indulge in a last discussion.”

Hargrave considered the matter briefly. He was disengaged but there was an element of pettiness in the suggestion which almost induced him to frame a refusal.

“You see,” she went on, “Andrea in some ways has always been very trying. I am one of those women who look upon infidelity as a form of vulgarity, and in his heart he knows it. Yet, for all these years he has absolutely refused to let me lunch or dine alone with any man. He has even stooped so low as to have me watched. He will realise, perhaps, that our rupture is complete if he sees that I have now released myself from my promise. He will also feel it much more keenly if it is with you that I do so.”

“And they call men cruel to women!” Hargrave murmured.

For a moment her eyes flashed. She leaned towards him.

“I will tell you a commonplace but a true thing,” she said. “I think that when I was young my disposition was moderately kindly. My husband would have told you so. I made him perfectly happy whilst he lived. Andrea has changed all that. His affections have been entirely selfish. He has made me suffer as no other man has done. What I propose seems to you petty, but then Andrea himself is petty. I know how to hurt him. And if you feel that it is a small thing to do, let me tell you something. It may not be quite so insignificant an adventure as you imagine. There may be a risk.”

“A risk?”

She nodded.

“Andrea has courage of a sort. Such affection as he is capable of he has for me. There was once a man of whom he was jealous, and he threatened to shoot him. I believe he meant it. Just now he is even more desperate.”

“We will dine at nine o’clock,” Hargrave decided promptly. “The adventure begins to appeal to me.”

She indulged in a little smile of triumph, rising almost immediately to her feet.

“You will permit me to select the table,” she begged. “I have a weakness for one particular corner which Andrea knows of. At nine o’clock I shall meet you in the lounge.”

Hargrave, to his surprise, found Violet seated in an easy-chair in the smaller salon of the villa, gazing thoughtfully into a wood fire. She welcomed him joyously.

“I knew if I willed hard enough you’d come home in reasonable time,” she exclaimed. “Let me mix you a whisky and soda, please, and come and talk to me.”

Tell me what you've done all the evening.”

“The question is what you have been doing,” Hargrave replied, settling himself down opposite to her. “How is it you are home so early?”

“Oh, I don't know,” she answered. “I loved the dance for the first hour. Then you didn't come, and Mr. Gorse didn't come, and every one began to get stupid.”

He looked across at her keenly.

“What has happened?” he enquired.

“My ingenuous countenance again!” she sighed. “How is your whisky and soda?”

“Quite all right, thanks,” he assured her. “Tell me what has disturbed you?”

She fidgeted in her chair. Presently she came over and sat on the arm of his.

“I couldn't help it,” she said. “I know I ought to be very proud—I am really—and yet I hate it!”

“Pellingham?” he queried.

She nodded.

“Wasn't it absurd? As though I could possibly marry any one like that!”

“There is no reason,” he told her, “why you should not marry any one in the world.”

“There is one very great reason,” she rejoined—“a reason that is quite enough for me—a reason that makes me all uncomfortable inside, that makes me feel that there is something terribly wrong about it when any one else even thinks of such a thing.”

“You'll have to get over that, dear,” he said.

“Shall I?” she answered. “I'm not going to begin to try just yet. Will you kiss me, please, Hargrave?”

“Certainly not,” he refused firmly.

“I wish you would,” she begged, “because three other foolish people have tried to to-night, and not one of them did—not even Lord Edward who drove me home.”

“I scarcely see,” he remarked, “how their failure makes it necessary that I should immolate myself.”

“Well, you see,” she pointed out, “I have the idea in my head now, and I don't think I shall go to sleep unless something of the sort happens. Then when you talk about ‘immolating’ yourself, I simply don't believe you. You're terribly hard to work up, but when you're driven to it, I think you rather like it.”

He held her for a moment tenderly in his arms, smoothed her hair and kissed her lightly. She gave a sigh of satisfaction but declined to move.

“We can talk like this,” she insisted. “Tell me what you have been doing.”

“Gambling a little, talking to Philip Gorse, talking to the Marchesa.”

“No supper parties? No Princess Putralka?”

He shook his head.

“The Princess has gone to Rome this morning. She started off in her yacht for Civita Vecchia before we were up. She sent me a rather enigmatic little note. She expects to be back again within a week.”

“I think,” Violet said gravely, “that the Princess is in love with you.”

“And I think,” he rejoined, “that you let your mind run a great deal too much upon that sort of thing.”

“It is in the air here,” she sighed. “Look at Robert. He’s terribly in love with that American girl. You wouldn’t believe that I had ever existed. They’ve danced every dance together to-night. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if they got engaged? Sadie says that her father is worth three millions—dollars, of course—and she’s sure that he’d give half of it to get rid of her.”

Hargrave smiled.

“From the little I have seen of Mr. Wegges,” he observed, “I should say that Sadie was an optimist. However, I should think it would be a jolly good thing for Robert. If he consults you, though, you might let me know. I’ll try to give him a leg up, from the point of view of having a position and that sort of thing, with the old man.”

“You are a dear!” she exclaimed. “Are you going to give me a dowry too?”

“What’s the good of offering it so long as you’re so obstinate?” he grumbled.

They heard the sound of Robert’s key and presently he appeared. Hargrave looked at him approvingly. He was without a doubt vastly improved in appearance during the last week or so.

“You’ve made enemies, Violet,” he warned her. “Men who are perfect strangers came fuming up to me to know where my sister was, and you marched Lord Edward off in the face of all those girls. Amy Gorse was nearly crying.”

“You’re a liar, Robert, but a flattering liar,” Violet remarked. “Lord Edward got tired of dancing with flappers, and when he found a person of mature years who desired an escort home, he offered to bring me. He’s gone back to gamble now, and I’m going to bed.”

She disappeared with a little curtsey from the threshold, a backward wave of the hand, a swift, half-veiled yet wonderful look. The door closed behind her. Hargrave found himself appreciating the artistry of her exit. She had taken her farewell from his lips as Robert’s key had sounded in the lock, and she had disdained any lesser form of parting salutation. Robert broke into his reflections.

“If you’re not in a great hurry, sir,” he said, “might I have a word with you?”

CHAPTER XXV

Robert had started bravely enough, and Hargrave's manner was full of encouragement but when it came to the point he found difficulties.

"I scarcely know how to say what I want to, sir," he admitted, with an apologetic smile.

Hargrave nodded encouragingly.

"Let's see if I can help you," he suggested. "You've fallen in love with an American girl with a rich father and you need a little advice as to what to do about it."

Robert looked across at him in amazement.

"Why, how did you guess that, sir?" he demanded.

"I didn't guess it at all," Hargrave replied. "Violet told me a little. The rest is pretty obvious. What's her father say about it?"

"Well, of course he knows how we've been going on," Robert confided, "but he hasn't said anything so far. To tell you the truth, sir, I think that up till now Sadie has pretty well managed both her father and mother just as she liked. How things are going to turn out now, I haven't any idea. I can honestly say that I never bothered about Sadie's money. I took to her from the first. I didn't even know that her people were anything but moderately well off. I just liked her, and she seemed to like me. Now—well, I suppose so far as we two are concerned, we are practically engaged. She's promised to marry me. She'd marry me next week if she could—and I'm going to see the old man in a day or two. Sadie thought I'd better leave him alone this week. He's over here on a matter of business which isn't going exactly right."

"We'll have this matter out thoroughly," Hargrave said, leaning over to a rack, selecting a pipe and carefully filling it. "A month or so ago you were in love with Violet."

"I suppose I was, sir," Robert admitted, "but it was a different sort of thing. You see, I was born in the same village. My father was a land agent there; hers was the doctor. Naturally we saw a great deal of each other. Then Violet's father died—he was a widower—and there was very little money left. Violet stayed on for a time as governess at a house near. The war broke out and I was all for it. I didn't do so badly. I started in the ranks, and I ended with a commission, and an M. C. Our troubles began afterwards. I had the devil's own job getting anything to do. Violet had given up teaching and had spent the little money she had left on a course of manicuring. We drifted together in London; I wasn't so strong as I had been and she

looked after me. We neither of us had any other friends to speak of. I kept on being ill and she kept on coming to nurse me. In the end we got engaged. I don't think Violet was ever the least bit in love with me. I was a bit of home, I'd had bad luck, I needed looking after. To me, Violet was wonderful because she was so brave and capable. I was proud to be engaged to her. I never loved her as I do Sadie. She was always stronger than I was—always helping me when I ought to have been helping her. I don't think a man ever cares properly for a woman when it's like that. He likes to be the one who protects. He likes to be the stronger, the one who's looked up to. I was proud of Violet; I admired her immensely but she made me feel small. You don't mind all this, sir?"

"Of course I don't," Hargrave assured him, with a kindliness in his tone which surprised even himself. "I am interested. Don't hurry. Just get it all out in your own way."

"Well, London began to eat into both of us," Robert went on. "I worked as hard as I could, but I'd been gassed and those fogs were awful. I couldn't earn more than forty-four shillings a week and it was damned hard to live on it. Violet could have had all the things the other girls had but she meant going straight from the first and things aren't the same for a girl like that. They aren't so easy when she's got her living to make. She was just as hard put to it as I was. And behind us we had the memory of those comfortable days down in the country when I had a horse to ride in the holidays and she drove her father round in his car and had all the tennis and dances and fun that she wanted. We were up against it at our worst when you came along. I've never quite understood even now why Violet took on your offer. I've known her since she was six years old and I've never known her tell a lie. The fact of it was that at that moment we were both at breaking point. Anyway she worked herself up to it; with me it wasn't so difficult. I'd have lied my way down to hell to have got what you've given us. May I finish, sir?"

Hargrave, who had shown signs of interrupting, nodded. He crossed the room and helped himself to a little more whisky and soda. At his gesture of invitation, Robert followed his example.

"We came out here," Robert continued, "and I absolutely and completely lost my head. Every bit of the rotter there was in me came to the surface. If I had really been man enough to care for Violet as I ought to have done that would have steadied me, but as it happens I didn't. I think in my heart, I have always carried a sort of resentment against her because she was stronger and better and more capable and more wonderful in every way than I. Anyway, I had had three years of bloody war, two years of hospitals, and two or three years afterwards of starvation, and I find

myself out here with every luxury, everything that could make a man lose his head. It's a wonder I didn't go straight to the devil. I should have done so but for Sadie. I met her by accident, we took a fancy to each other, and she found me one night when I was with the wrong people and behaving in the wrong way. My God, sir, you should have heard her!"

There was a twinkle in Hargrave's eyes.

"I've seen the young lady," he murmured.

"Anyway," Robert continued, "I had to choose, and I chose quick, and I was right. That's the only girl in the world for me, sir—Sadie—and how the devil to get her, I don't know, except that so far as she's concerned I'm safe. But I can't ask her to starve with me, I can't ask any one for charity. I want to know whether there's a chance of your putting in a word with the old man for me, telling him that you're going to find me a job, or anything of that sort?"

"Finished?" Hargrave asked.

"I'm afraid I've bored you stiff, sir," Robert replied. "However, I've got it off my chest. There's only one thing more I have to confess. I've told Sadie the truth about Violet and myself. She won't tell a soul. I had to tell her. She's the sort of girl one couldn't deceive."

"Look here," Hargrave said, knocking out some ashes from his pipe, "mine's a shorter story but I owe it to you just as you owed me the story you've just told. I'm a very rich man and I'm up against a curious situation. There are no certainties in this life but a few months ago I was told that there was just a chance I might have to hand in my checks in a matter of twelve months."

"Good God, sir!" Robert exclaimed. "It isn't possible."

"Perhaps not," Hargrave went on. "There may have been a mistake. Anyway it made me think, supposing these were my last six months, what should I do? I asked some of my friends as a problem. Gorse—you know him, the clergyman—put an idea into my head. Find some people," he suggested, "who are up against it hard but not objects of ordinary charity, and give them a good time for a few months. The next day I was in Violet's manicure parlour. She was pretty well fed up with everything, as you know—absolutely miserable, as a matter of fact. All the other girls in her place were coming south—you can guess how. She was left out because she is—what you know she is. It seemed to me I didn't need to go any further. 'Find a relative,' I told her—I suggested the relative so that she shouldn't misunderstand me—'and I'll give you the holiday of your life.' She brought you—and that's my story. But wait a bit," he went on, holding out his pipe towards Robert, "I went into this pretty thoughtlessly, but there are several things I've come to realise since. One

is that by bringing you two out here and giving you this holiday, I have assumed certain responsibilities. Those responsibilities I am prepared to take up. Violet, in a way, has gone almost out of my reach. I consider myself her guardian and what she needs in life she shall have. Now tell me what I can do to help your affairs on.”

“You can go to Mr. Wegges, sir,” Robert replied, “and tell him that you don’t think I’m such a terrible rotter, that I did all right in the War—I can show you my papers and medals to prove that—and that you’re going to find me a job when we get back to England.”

“Leave Mr. Wegges to me,” Hargrave said. “If he’s a reasonable man I’ll satisfy him. Anything else?”

“Nothing on God’s earth,” Robert declared emphatically.

Hargrave knocked out the ashes from his pipe. There were symptoms of an outburst of gratitude from the young man—and gratitude was a thing he hated.

“Bed!” he ordered sternly.

CHAPTER XXVI

The habitués of Monte Carlo, and especially of the Hotel de Paris restaurant, had become almost blasé with the sight of beautiful women, yet there was scarcely a person in the room whose attention was not attracted as Nina di Bieni, followed by Hargrave, made her way to the corner table which she had chosen. A woman who makes a great effort rarely succeeds in looking her best. Nina di Bieni that night was an exception. She had made the effort of her life and succeeded. Her gown was of a soft shade of gold, daringly close-fitting, disclosing the strength and grace of her supple figure with complete and audacious success. She carried herself, too, with just the right amount of nervous triumph. She was punishing the man who had flouted her. She was to spend the evening alone with the one man upon whom she had fixed her heart. Her complexion had never seemed so perfect, her eyes so clear and soft, the curve of her lips more attractive. Even Hargrave, as he stood for a moment or two whilst eager *maitres d'hôtel* arranged her chair to her satisfaction, felt an impulse of whole-hearted admiration.

"I have been a blind man, Marchesa," he said, as he handed her the menu, "or is it that this evening you are inspired?"

"Inspired to success, I trust," she murmured.

"If your object is to punish Trentino," he remarked, "I should say that you are succeeding admirably."

Trentino, indeed, only three tables away, was sitting as though he had been turned to stone. Not only the colour—he was always pale—but the life itself seemed to have been drawn from his face. He sat between Marston and Daniel Wegges, and he glared across at the two newcomers with a gleam of venomous hatred in his prominent black eyes. Nina leaned back in her chair and smiled. She did not flinch. Her little gesture of recognition, half mocking, very slightly gracious, was exactly of the nature to further inflame his anger.

"Poor Andrea!" she murmured. "I believe indeed that I succeed. He is certainly very angry."

"I should say that there was no doubt about that," Hargrave assented. "He has the air of one quite capable of a rash act."

Nina laid down the menu which she had been studying.

"At least," she said, "I trust that he will allow us to finish this very perfect dinner. You are an artist at a menu, I find, Sir Hargrave, as in other ways."

"One must spend an hour eating," he answered carelessly. "One may as well try

to find the best.”

The conversation, although quite natural, even easy, was a little disjointed. Both, although neither showed any signs of it, were affected in different ways by Trentino’s unceasing observation. His expression, after that first wicked curl of the lips, was passive enough, but his manner remained all the time menacing.

“Do you know the Comtesse Fayaldi?” Nina asked, a little abruptly.

“I have met her twice, three times perhaps,” Hargrave admitted.

“She says strange things about you,” Nina confided, “and really, when one comes to consider it, I think that she must be a witch.”

“Consider what?”

“You know what they say about you—that you never lose when you gamble, that with every opportunity for success you have no feeling for women, that you live with the air of one who scorns life or who has finished with it. Why are you so inhuman?”

“Well, to begin with, I won’t admit that I am,” he replied. “If I were an inhuman person I should not be dining with the most attractive woman in the room.”

“I like to hear you say that,” she murmured, raising her eyes.

“It is an obvious truth,” he answered. “I do not think that really I am very different from other men. Perhaps this year I am a little tired of things. The more pleasures there are at one’s command the more quickly one learns perhaps the folly of helping oneself too rapaciously.”

“You talk like a philosopher,” she complained, “and I would so much rather you talked like a human—a very human man.”

“I am afraid that I must sound a little prosy,” he admitted, watching the wine flow into his glass.

“You haven’t any secret illness or anything of that sort, have you?” she asked abruptly.

“I was never conscious of feeling better in my life,” he answered. “Why do you ask me such a question?”

“Madame Fayaldi again,” she confessed. “She did not exactly go so far as to say that you were ill or anything of that sort, but——”

“But what?” Hargrave persisted.

“She said that you had the ‘writing’,” Nina concluded reluctantly. “What she means I do not know. They tell me that she comes of a family of Gipsies. They have some gifts and many fancies.”

“More fancies than gifts, I should imagine,” Hargrave observed carelessly. “I am a very ordinary person really. This year I admit that I am in luck. Last year I lost all

the time. It goes in cycles.”

“Shall we play to-night—just for an hour?” she suggested.

“I am at your disposition,” he assented.

“It would amuse me,” she admitted. “I watched you at the *chemin de fer* table the other night. Andrea has the gifts of a gambler, but he has not your courage. Tell me, what will become of him after—Thursday week, isn’t it?”

“He will be broken,” Hargrave replied coldly. “He will climb up again some day, I expect, because he is already probably getting rid of large sums of money, but he will not be able to do business again on the Stock Exchange. He may not have to undergo the same poverty, but he will incur the same disgrace as he brought upon my friend.”

“A man who is a good hater,” she reflected, “is generally a good lover. Would that apply to you, I wonder?”

“One is the poorest judge of one’s own accomplishments in that direction,” Hargrave observed.

“But you are the only judge of your sensations,” she reminded him. “You are the sort of person who lets no one know what he feels.”

“On the contrary,” he replied, “I shall take you at once into my confidence as to my present thoughts. I admire your gown immensely; I have never seen you look better. I offer you my most respectful homage,” he concluded, raising his glass.

“Homage! Respectful homage, too! I would have more than that,” she told him.

“Well, who knows?” he sighed. “It is a desperate world. One does the most surprising things here.”

She indulged in a little grimace.

“Would it be so desperately surprising,” she asked, “if you should avail yourself of your opportunities?”

He was able to escape a direct answer by diverting her attention to a group of newcomers—a large dinner party given by some new arrivals from England. Pellingham, who was in the rear of the procession, detached himself and came over for a moment. He bowed to the Marchesa and, with a word of apology, leaned down to Hargrave.

“Seen Miss Violet since last night?” he enquired.

Hargrave nodded sympathetically.

“You know then?”

“She told me.”

“Forced the running a bit, I expect. She isn’t like these other girls. I’m going to try my luck again, anyhow.”

Hargrave nodded in noncommittal fashion and Pellingham hurried off. Nina looked after him curiously.

“Your friends all seem to make a sort of Father Confessor of you,” she observed.

“It is rather my rôle in life,” Hargrave admitted, with a faint note of bitterness in his tone.

The little party of men close to them had finished their dinner and risen to their feet. Trentino detached himself from them and approached the table where Nina di Bieni and Hargrave were seated. His expression, though apparently composed, was subtly menacing. Nina, on the other hand, upon whom his eyes were fixed, showed more than a trace of some nervous pleasure. Her lips—they were indeed very beautiful lips—were parted in the most gently provocative of smiles. Her eyes at the same time bade the newcomer welcome, assured him of her own complete content with life, and defied him. He stood before their table in the careless attitude of an acquaintance who pauses to exchange amenities. Nevertheless, Hargrave watched his twitching hands closely.

“May I offer congratulations?” he ventured softly.

“I, for my part, accept them gladly, Andrea,” Nina replied.

“A little tableau prepared perhaps for my edification?” he continued, turning towards Hargrave.

Hargrave toyed with his wineglass. It amused him more to listen.

“On the other hand,” Nina confided, “I should have chosen a quieter place for this very wonderful dinner. It is here alone, however, that one can find the *mousse de volaille* prepared by an artist. No, my dear Andrea, you are vain as ever, but indeed we did not think of you. We were materialists enough to seek for the perfect dinner. You, I trust, have also enjoyed yours?”

For a moment Hargrave feared for her. Trentino’s composure momentarily deserted him. His eyes glittered like spots of coal-black fire as he leaned forward. Hargrave, apprehending instinctively the nature of the outburst which was framing upon those quivering lips, also leaned slightly forward, tense, the veins on the back of his right hand standing out. It was as though he heard beforehand words which no man can hear addressed to a woman without retaliation. Trentino grasped the situation and paused. Notwithstanding the storm which raged within him he realised what the words he longed to utter might cost him. He moistened his lips and drew a little breath.

“There is a small place up the hill,” he said, “where they tell me that the chef is even a greater artist.”

He bowed rather like a marionette—a stiff, expressionless gesture—turned away and rejoined his companions who were waiting for him at the door. The little lines about Hargrave’s eyes deepened. He smiled across the table.

“Nina,” he confided, “I am indeed grateful to you. One felt in those few seconds that anything might happen.”

CHAPTER XXVII

Hargrave was conscious of a sensation of immense relief, almost of light-heartedness, as he walked slowly along the corridor from the Hotel de Paris to the Sporting Club. His dinner, although at times it had amused him, had seemed to him on the whole a somewhat unworthy function: He was glad that it was over, prepared if necessary to abandon his dilettante vagueness and as gently but as firmly as he could let Nina di Bieni understand the truth. He felt the impatience of a boy to meet with Violet who had promised to be in the Club. In the meantime he was at peace with all the world. He even returned the pressure of Nina's arm as she leaned against him.

"Please do not hurry," she begged. "In a moment we shall be amongst the crowds. Our dinner has been wonderful but this is our last minute of solitude and you have said nothing—not one of the things which a woman wants to hear from one man."

He slackened his pace obediently.

"A man has, alas, but one heart," he confided.

She laughed a little bitterly.

"I wonder how many of the so-called lovers here realise that such a thing as a heart exists?" she demanded. "They turn to their womenkind as they turn to their golf, their cocktails, or any of the light diversions of life. They never even think of allowing the claims of one woman to interfere with their diversions with another. You used a strange word, dear friend. One loves in Monte Carlo without a heart."

"Aren't you a little cynical?" he ventured.

"Men have done their best to make me so," she replied. "I cared for him, of course, in a way, but how much of heart do you suppose Andrea Trentino ever showed me? He was a man of sentiment when I first knew him, before misfortune made him callous, but of heart, no. And you, my friend, you have a gentle way with women—the way that women love—but how much of heart enters into your dalliance?"

"How many people here ask for the serious things?" he countered a little evasively. "This is a place of light attachments rather than of great passions. I fancy too that the gambling fever which attacks us all more or less weakens one's capacity for the other emotions."

They emerged from the lift and passed along the last few yards of corridor.

"I think," she reflected, "that you are the first man whom I have ever asked for

bread who has not even offered me a stone.”

“Then you should feel more than usually grateful to me,” he answered. “It is the women who are content with the second best things who subconsciously alter men’s standards.”

She held her hand for a moment to her head.

“So our evening’s flirtation,” she mused sadly, “ends in a philosophical diatribe.”

“It ends, dear Nina,” he replied, “with the one compliment which a woman ought to appreciate from a man—I refuse to offer you the lesser things.”

They passed into the crowded Rooms; Hargrave full of anticipation, Nina, her spirit of victory lost, still mechanically gratified by the homage rendered to her beauty and successful toilette, but carrying with her the sense of failure. They lingered together on the outskirts of one of the roulette tables where Robert and Sadie Weggés were playing. The latter’s piquant little face was alight with interest. She was seated in the chef’s chair, holding a handful of plaques which she gave one by one to Robert to place upon the table. Nina looked across at her curiously.

“It is the real spirit of youth, that,” she declared—“the genuine capacity for enthusiasm. I find her charming.”

He smiled.

“I, too,” he admitted. “For once my young protégé has shown good taste.”

They passed on and presently became separated in the crush. Nina paused to talk with a group of acquaintances. Hargrave felt an eager little touch upon his arm.

“At last!” Violet exclaimed, with a sigh of relief. “And alone too! Can’t we sit down somewhere? I must talk to you at once.”

He turned towards the bar and they found two retired chairs in the annex. Violet was looking a little pale. Something of the buoyancy had gone from her movements. She was wearing a black gown, too, individually distinctive, but which seemed to rob her of some of her girlishness. In her new gravity, however, he found an added sweetness, although just then it was apparent that she was nervous and ill at ease.

“Sir Hargrave,” she begged earnestly, “could we go back to the villa now at once, please?”

“But why?” he asked.

She considered for a moment.

“I know that you will laugh at me,” she said. “You don’t believe in presentiments, and you are never afraid of anything, but I am—I am afraid that something is going to happen to-night.”

“You may be right,” he admitted. “I thought of suggesting a little party up at the Carlton later on.”

The usual glow of pleasure was absent from her face.

“Anywhere to get away from here,” she exclaimed.

“Precisely why?”

She looked all around. There was no one within hearing distance.

“A short time before you arrived,” she confided, “Mr. Trentino came in alone from the Hotel. I think he’s a horrid-looking man anyhow, but when he came in he looked simply ghastly. His eyes were red and his mouth was cruel. He looked just like the picture of that murderer in this morning’s ‘Eclairer’.”

Hargrave smiled.

“As a matter of fact,” he observed, “I don’t think that Mr. Trentino had enjoyed his dinner.”

“Oh, it was something worse than that,” she went on, almost impatiently. “Several people spoke to him but he took no notice. He was looking for some one. He didn’t see me, but I was there when he found him. He was looking for that man with the horn-rimmed spectacles who was standing behind him this afternoon.”

“I know,” Hargrave muttered, “Sam Hobson. I have my own suspicions of that man.”

“Well, they sat down together on that settee over there, and Trentino talked to him. The man with the spectacles didn’t seem to like what Mr. Trentino was saying. Mr. Trentino was very much in earnest. Then I heard your name.”

Hargrave nodded.

“It wouldn’t surprise me in the least,” he confessed, “to know that they were talking about me.”

“Directly I heard that,” she continued, “I tried to listen. I couldn’t hear anything though. They spoke almost in whispers. After a time they got up and left the roulette room by the lower door. I left it by the top one and walked towards the stairs. They were standing in the corner there, and I saw Mr. Trentino give the other man a great roll of notes—*mille* notes I think they were—and something which he covered over with his handkerchief. I just caught a glitter. I believe it was one of those horrible automatic pistols.”

“This gets interesting,” Hargrave admitted.

“What could he want it for—here?” she demanded. “And I heard your name—I heard it distinctly. They both looked horrid. The man with the glasses pretends to be so good-humoured, and is always smiling at every one. To me he looked almost as repulsive as Mr. Trentino.”

“What happened then?” Hargrave asked.

“The man with the glasses—Mr. Hobson, you say his name is—went back to

the Rooms. I saw him sit down at the top roulette table and begin to play. He is playing there now. There was almost a crowd around him a few minutes ago.”

“Winning?”

“He was winning at first,” she replied. “Afterwards I think he began to lose. But—please don’t think me silly—they frighten me. We couldn’t go now, could we?”

“If you would feel happier,” Hargrave assented. “We must wait a moment though. Here come Robert and his young American innamorata. I rather promised that I’d make her acquaintance.”

Violet resumed her seat and smiled a greeting at the girl. With some diffidence Robert came forward.

“May I introduce you to Miss Wegges, sir?” he asked. “You know her father.”

Hargrave rose to his feet and offered his place; Robert, however, had procured chairs.

“Your father came over with Mr. Trentino, didn’t he?” Hargrave enquired.

“Why, yes, we came over on that tourist steamer that was here last week,” she replied. “Dad seems kind of disappointed with his trip so far.”

“I hope that you are not?” Hargrave asked politely.

“I think that Monte Carlo is just fine,” she pronounced, accepting a cigarette and leaning back in her chair with the air of one who has joined a party to which she is naturally a welcome addition. “I like most everything about it—even the gambling, though I don’t seem to quite get the hang of that.”

“It’s Miss Sadie’s first trip abroad,” Robert put in.

“Yes, sir,” was her prompt confirmation. “I’ve scarcely ever left the State of New York before, except to go to boarding school in Boston. Kind of hot in here, isn’t it? Mr. Martin, didn’t you say something about a champagne cocktail?”

Violet sighed with impatience, but the delay was unavoidable. Refreshments were promptly ordered. Sadie twisted her childish body into an attitude of ease, displaying a length of limb and immaculately silk-clad leg which rivalled anything the professional beauties of the place could attempt.

“Dad’s sorry he ever came,” she confided. “He hates being parted from his business, and he says there’s nothing doing over here. I guess he and Mr. Trentino aren’t getting on any too well just now.”

“Mr. Trentino is a somewhat difficult person,” Hargrave remarked.

“He surely is,” the girl admitted. “He’s one I’d leave in the basket every time. Not that he’s not polite enough,” she went on. “He’s good for all the flowers and chocolates you want, but he has a way of looking at you which makes me shiver. You’re no great shakes on him, are you, Sir Hargrave?”

“How do you know that?” the latter asked good-humouredly.

“Oh, I hear him talking with Dad,” she explained. “They think I don’t understand, but business seems to me dead easy.—Robert, give me another cigarette, there’s a dear boy.”

“Would one be committing an indiscretion,” Hargrave enquired, with an assumption of diffidence, “if one were to ask your age?”

She looked around before she answered.

“I’m eighteen,” she confided, lowering her voice. “We had to put twenty on my passport or I shouldn’t have got into the Rooms, and I told Dad before we started that I wasn’t standing for that. We start life like that over on the other side, even we buds. We like to look into anything that’s going.”

She leaned back in her chair, smoking her cigarette and sipping her champagne cocktail with immense satisfaction. Her impudent little face was wreathed in smiles. She had the air of a *gamin* of the underworld suddenly transported into unfamiliar scenes and finding them hugely to her liking.

“Sir Hargrave,” she said, “I don’t want to butt in on a matter of business but may I ask you a question?”

“You may ask me whatever you like, you most amazing child,” he replied.

“This morning I heard Dad say to Mr. Trentino that if you’re going to stay obstinate he might just as well pull up stakes and get over to London. I’m set on staying here, and so is Ma. Seems to kind of rest with you. You’re not going to drive us away, are you?”

“I should regret your departure immensely,” Hargrave assured her gravely; “so, I feel certain, would Robert. Your father is Mr. Trentino’s legal adviser, isn’t he?”

“He’s his attorney, if that’s what you mean,” Sadie assented. “I guess they want something out of you you’re not willing to part with and that’s why Dad doesn’t think it worth while staying on. Be a sport and come over, can’t you, Sir Hargrave? I’d just hate to quit this.”

She looked up at him, her elf-like little face full of provocative appeal. He laughed softly.

“You’re a better advocate than your father, anyhow, Miss Sadie,” he said.

Then for a moment their conversation was abandoned and they all turned their heads. Outside in the main bar the buzz of voices had suddenly ceased. There was an ominous silence, a shout of warning, the sound of a table on which were many glasses crashing to the ground. A *valet de pied* was sent hurtling into another. Both lost their balance and fell, one on the carpet, the other amidst a little group of astonished people. Through the opening to the annex, Hobson forced his way, his

hair dishevelled, spectacles gone, his tie hanging down, his coat half off his back where some one had attempted to seize him. He looked for a moment at the window which was fast closed, and then glared around with the fury of an animal at bay. In his left hand he was clutching a huge sheaf of *mille* notes on to which the blood from a wound in his face was dripping. Even as he hesitated for that second as though in despair at finding himself in a *cul de sac*, doubtful as to his next movement, two of the liveried servitors of the place were upon him. He swung around, his left hand outstretched to keep them for a moment away, his right hand diving into his pocket. He threw one swift glance around. Violet gave a shriek of horror, dragging Hargrave closer to her, for in that glance she seemed to read premeditation. The foremost of the pursuers had seized the man's left hand and closed upon the great pile of notes. Suddenly the right hand flashed out of his pocket, something gleamed in the light, was pressed for a moment to his forehead. He spun around and swayed as though about to fall. There was the click of a pistol, the hiss of a bullet crashing into the soft wall. In another second Hobson was on his back with half a dozen men around him.

CHAPTER XXVIII

In a matter of seconds, there was no trace of the marauder, no sign of his captors. The *valets de pied* were calmly executing their orders. The overturned tables had been restored to their places and the broken glasses removed. A chef strolling around, volunteered a casual explanation.

“The young man had become suddenly mad without a doubt. He had lost a little perhaps—who knows? Such things might happen! The sight of a great pile of *mille* notes being counted by the croupier had inspired him with an idiotic temptation. He had snatched at them, probably hoping to escape by the staircase, found his way blocked and had turned into the bar. A stupid young man to attempt anything so foolish! But a moment’s madness sometimes had arrived.—A pistol shot?—Perhaps. The man, however, was unhurt. It was doubtful whether he seriously intended to take his life. He had been escorted to his hotel; the authorities might take action or might not. It was in any case a foolish business. He would probably be sent back the next day to wherever he came from.”

Hargrave called the chef over. The man repeated his explanation with unction to a renowned patron of the place. Hargrave waited until he had finished, then he tapped lightly with his forefinger the splintered wood an inch or two from where he was seated. The chef’s hands were extended in polite deprecation.

“It was a merciful escape,” he admitted. “It was the opinion of those who had seized him that the man had temporarily lost possession of his senses, but a serious attempt at suicide—that was scarcely to be expected. Such things were gossiped about but happened very seldom.”

Hargrave listened with a faint, enigmatic smile.

“I agree with you,” he said, when the man had finished. “Suicide was never intended; murder was.”

The man, for all his veneer of polite speech and urbane manner, was for a moment horrified.

“Such a thing was out of the question. Monsieur had seen what had happened _____”

He recommenced his explanations. Hargrave shook his head.

“The matter is of no great importance,” he said, “because no harm has been done. It may interest you, however, to know that the whole affair was a ‘fake’.”

Hargrave used the English word. The man shook his head—apparently, perhaps actually, bewildered.

“Possibly Monsieur would like an interview——”

“Not at all,” Hargrave interrupted, waving him on one side. “There is nothing that can be proved. The affair was in its way ingenious, but, as you see, I am unhurt, thanks chiefly to the fortune of Mademoiselle here having drawn me a little on one side.”

The man departed with a low bow. It was not in his interest to continue the conversation. He vouchsafed a few more platitudes to enquirers, and presently the thrill had passed. Violet, however, was still clinging to Hargrave’s arm.

“I told you!” she gasped. “I felt it coming. He meant to kill you.”

Hargrave smiled at her reassuringly.

“It looked like it,” he admitted. “In any case, what does it matter? They will never succeed. There is nothing more to be feared for this evening, at any rate. Let us go and watch the play.”

She felt the appeal to her courage and rose at once to her feet. They strolled into the roulette room and then into the Salle de Baccarat. At the table behind the railing Trentino was playing. It was obvious that here too was excitement of a sort. A little crowd was collected round him. On the table in front of the croupier was stacked an enormous pile of counters and plaques. An eager acquaintance leaned over to Hargrave.

“That Argentine fellow,” he confided, “bought the bank at twenty-five *milles* and has run it five times—biggest bank I’ve seen this season.”

Hargrave stood for a moment behind the croupier. Trentino, who had not noticed his entrance, was watching his stakes with immovable face. Hargrave leaned forward.

“*Banquo*,” he announced.

There was a little thrill round the table—an audible murmur of voices. The croupier, glancing up, and recognising Hargrave, looked across at Trentino, who made no immediate response. There was something more than ordinarily grim about the figure opposite—the figure of the man whom he had been silently praying might by this time be lying with a sheet over his face in that mysterious room of secrets. There was scarcely a person at the table who expected to see him accept the challenge. The throaty murmur of voices was followed by an intense silence as Trentino nodded almost imperceptibly. He dealt two cards to Hargrave and laid two in front of himself.

“*Carte*,” Hargrave demanded.

Trentino disclosed his own—a ten and a seven. He threw an eight across the table. Hargrave threw down two kings.

“Huit,” the croupier announced.

This time there was no question of a throaty murmur; there was a babel of voices. Trentino sat quite still for a moment and Hargrave leaned across towards him.

“Your luck this evening is not quite as usual,” he remarked.

Trentino inclined his head politely. If ever murder lurked in a man’s eyes it looked out from his.

“That may yet change,” he said.

Hargrave strolled away with Violet by his side. They passed the *trente et quarante* table, and in the roulette room Violet peered through a chink in the blind and looked downwards. She motioned to her companion with a gesture of ecstasy. A full, yellow moon was making fairyland of the little scene below; the harbour with its select company of lantern-hung yachts, the rock of Monaco opposite, the two lighthouses, fantastic, like toys from a child’s playbox, the glittering expanse of sea beyond.

“I wish,” she suggested wistfully, “that we might take the car and drive somewhere. Fancy what it would look like up at La Turbie.”

It was absurd, Hargrave reflected for a minute, that he should even call himself a middle-aged man. The thrill of youth was in his veins as he thought of the possibilities of her suggestion, the certainty that she would be close to him, her arm through his, those lips whose fire he had denied himself, so eager to give, so impatient of his self-control. He dropped the blind with a little sigh.

“An enchanting idea,” he admitted, “but I think it would scarcely afford an occasion for serious conversation.”

“Why should we talk seriously?” she demanded. “No one else does here. Why—why?”

He looked down at her a little sadly.

“You’re treating me like a child,” she exclaimed resentfully. “You always do. I am old enough to know what I want in life. I am tired of being treated like a sacred trust.”

He led her away, his arm passed affectionately through hers. Even the sense of his touch soothed her, and her anger died away. Passing the middle roulette table, Hargrave came suddenly to a standstill, looking intently at the man who was playing for high stakes opposite. He was strong-jawed, with thick, black hair, keen eyes and a firm mouth. He sat with a pile of plaques before him and a somewhat obvious companion by his side.

“There sits my executioner,” Hargrave confided in a whisper.

“What do you say?” Violet asked curiously. “Who is the man opposite? You look as though you recognised him.”

“The physician I went to in London,” Hargrave replied. “Horridge, his name is— Sir James Horridge. I am rather surprised to see him in this *galère* though.”

“So should I be if that were he,” Gorse remarked from behind. “Quite a remarkable likeness, I admit, but that is no more Horridge than I am.”

Hargrave glanced across the table once more as though to make sure.

“Are you willing to bet upon it, Philip?” he asked.

“Anything you like,” was the prompt reply. “I’ve been a patient of Horridge’s—he knocked me off smoking for a month once. I’ve never quite forgiven him.”

The man seemed to be suddenly conscious of their regard. He stared across at them with a frown. Then he gathered up his plaques and counters, stuffed them into his pocket, motioned to his companion and left the place. Violet tugged at Hargrave’s arm.

“Go after him,” she begged. “You must have him come and see you. You must. Come along.”

She dragged him off, but the room was crowded and before they could reach the other side the man and his companion had disappeared. They searched the three rooms and the bar in vain. Hargrave even descended the stairs and looked in the restaurant. When he returned there was a puzzled frown upon his forehead.

“This becomes mysterious,” he declared. “Horridge evidently knew that we were talking about him and he had absolutely disappeared. Why he should want to avoid me I can’t imagine. I paid him the largest fee I have ever been asked for by a physician in my life.”

“Wait a moment,” Gorse begged. “They seemed to know him over there.”

He made his way to the chef who was seated behind the croupier close to where the man and the woman had been playing. He came back looking more puzzled than ever.

“The chef knows nothing about him, except that he plays high,” he reported, “but he believes that his name is Horridge.”

Hargrave nodded indifferently.

“There was never any doubt about that,” he declared. “I don’t often make that sort of mistake.”

CHAPTER XXIX

Returning from Mont Agel after a round of golf with Philip Gorse a day or two later, Hargrave, as he gazed idly down on to the panorama below, was more than ever impressed by the fantastic unreality of the whole place. The Casino with its grotesque lines, its florid ornamentation, its almost flaunting appeal to a certain tawdriness in life, seemed suddenly an impossible place; the life which centred around it artificial; the people, crawling about like ants below, not humans at all, creatures of travesty, puppets whose sense of the real things in life had departed. Philip Gorse found himself studying his friend's expression with some apprehension. He himself, a born optimist, had never wholly accepted Hargrave's grim premonitions as to his own fate. To-day for the first time there seemed to be indications of it in his appearance. His lean face with its coating of sunburn was still the face of a strong and healthy man, but there were tired lines about the mouth which were new; the weariness in his bearing and in his eyes seemed to speak of lessening strength.

"You've had all that's good for you of this place, old chap," he remarked, a little abruptly.

Hargrave withdrew his eyes from their downward gaze.

"Where could you find a better," he asked, "when one's life's work is finished? It rests with ourselves whether we make use of our opportunities for enjoyment or not. I expect I have tried to squeeze a little too much out of the hours. We all do that when our time is limited."

"If I hear another word like that," Philip Gorse said firmly, "I'm going to march you off to the local vet. He's an excellent chap—can't do you any harm—and you're under a promise, you know."

Hargrave nodded.

"I've been rather hoping I'd come across Horridge again," he remarked.

"The Horridge who isn't Horridge," Gorse said stubbornly.

"So far as the Monte Carlo hotels are concerned," Hargrave admitted, "he certainly hasn't materialized. I've had the *concierge* at the Hotel de Paris enquire at all of them. I can't see his name either as staying at Cannes or Nice. Yet I don't make mistakes of that sort, you know, Gorse. That was the man who pocketed my notes and signed my death warrant."

"Not a word that you have told me sounds in the least like him," Gorse persisted obstinately. "Why, he wouldn't charge me a fee at all—laughed at me and shook

hands when I offered it to him.”

Hargrave abandoned the conversation. For the moment it had ceased to interest him.

“I couldn’t persuade Violet to come up this morning,” he remarked.

“I hope it wasn’t because you were playing with me.”

“Rubbish!” Hargrave exclaimed. “I don’t believe there are two people in the world she’d rather be with than you and me. As a matter of fact, she’s gone to see about her frock for the ball.”

Gorse smiled indulgently.

“It’s queer,” he reflected, “how often I find myself drifting into your attitude as regards Violet. She is a child in her tremendous capacity for enjoyment. But you must never forget, Hargrave, I am perfectly certain of one thing, she has an equal capacity for the serious things.”

“Some day,” Hargrave ventured, “you may put that to the proof, Philip.”

Gorse shook his head.

“I think not,” he said. “I think she knows, and to tell you the truth I fancy that’s why she keeps away from me a little nowadays. She needn’t. I have seen the truth about you and her. You’ve told me, like a pal. I’ve watched her—and I know. A sympathetic outlook on life, you know, Hargrave, helps one to understand. She is one of those rare women who could only care for one man. If even the worst were true about you, which I don’t believe, she’d never feel anything for anybody else but the second best.”

Hargrave’s expression was troubled. His friend checked the words which were framing upon his lips.

“That’s all right, old chap,” he continued affectionately. “Those things are written. You couldn’t have made it any different. It’s been rather a knock for me—I could never pretend otherwise—but already I begin to see glimmerings of relief. If she had cared, or if I believed that she could care, I should probably have been the happiest man in the world, but I wonder sometimes whether it would have been good for me, whether I shouldn’t sometimes have realised the selfishness of it. You see, a man in my position, Hargrave, presents himself a little differently to all these suffering people in the world if he has a beautiful wife and a comfortable establishment and is obviously radiantly happy. I don’t think—no, I’m sure,” he went on—“that I couldn’t have kept my hold upon my people. The man who is suffering himself finds it hard to accept consolation from a too prosperous, too happy fellow creature. They’ll believe in me more now that I’ve had my knock.”

Hargrave’s face softened as he looked at his friend.

“You’d make one believe in the hereafter if any one could,” he said gently.

“I don’t know much about it myself,” Gorse replied. “I simply believe in following the best of what is in you, and hoping that it may lead us somewhere.”

They finished their drive in an understanding silence. When they reached the villa they found Marston, more pink and white than ever, attired in spotless flannels with a flower in his buttonhole, waiting for a cocktail.

“Come to make a last appeal?” Hargrave asked, as he sank into a chair.

Marston shook his head.

“I’ve given you up, Hargrave,” he declared. “You’re too tough. I looked in to know about our plans for the ball to-night.”

“Dinner at the Hotel de Paris,” Hargrave announced, “at nine o’clock. We want to get over to our box about half-past ten, and then let ourselves go.”

“I’m for it,” Marston assented. “I shall have to quit in a day or two, so I want to make the most of my time.”

“It’s rather a pity,” Hargrave observed lightly, as he leaned back and sipped his cocktail, “that you did not choose this morning to present some new and pleasing argument on behalf of your scoundrel of a friend. I have been with Gorse here, and he is the most weakening influence I know for a strong man.”

“Trentino’s no more my friend than he is yours,” Marston replied, “but I don’t see any sense in bleeding a human being to death, especially when it costs a quarter of a million to do it. You’ve given him the worst time of his life as it is.”

“Yet one doesn’t let vermin escape from their trap when you’ve caught them,” Hargrave mused.

“They tell me you’ve annexed his lady friend as well,” Marston observed, a little diffidently.

“That was a paltry affair,” Hargrave confessed, “of which I really am rather ashamed. I gave her dinner the night she broke with him at the Hotel de Paris. I haven’t seen her since, nor am I likely to any more, but on the other hand, my friend,” Hargrave went on, considering the matter of a second cocktail and deciding in the affirmative, “what about Trentino’s employing a clumsy gang of assassins to get rid of me.”

“You haven’t any proof of that,” Marston argued.

“I’ve all the proof a sensible person needs,” Hargrave insisted. “This fellow Hobson was his advance agent and in his confidence. What about the other night at the Sporting Club when I had that bullet within an inch of my head? Hobson never had the least idea of committing suicide. It was a put-up job and a pretty clever one too.”

Marston looked troubled.

“Trentino had dismissed the fellow before that,” he protested. “They had had a row that evening. One reason why Hobson had gone up the pole.”

“Sheer bluff,” Hargrave retorted. “I’m not a sensationalist, you know, Johnnie, and I saw the fellow when he was playing at being the demented ass deliberately swing away from the pistol himself and turn it towards me.”

“Then it’s a damned rotten business,” Marston confessed. “I don’t know why you’ve kept it so quiet.”

“What’s the use of saying anything about it?” Hargrave pointed out. “The authorities have dealt with him. He pleaded poverty and went off with a *viatique*. The Chief of the Police came round to see me—heard rumours, I suppose, but I didn’t worry about it. It may be an Argentine’s way of trying to get a man, or rather his executors, to sell shares, but it doesn’t quite commend itself to the disciples of Throgmorton Street.”

“It seems incredible!” Marston admitted. “Anyhow, you know what the man is. He’d kill you if he could, of course—probably nine men out of ten would in his place.”

“We’re all uncivilised brutes, Johnnie,” Hargrave mused—“the best of us as well as the worst of us. I rather hate a man who employs agents though. Prejudice perhaps. Tell me, supposing I were to relent at the last moment, by what time must I sell him the shares?”

“By to-morrow morning, to be on the safe side,” Marston replied. “We should have to cable to Buenos Ayres. Some of them are wanted here.”

Hargrave lit a cigarette and rested his hand for a moment on Gorse’s shoulder.

“You’re a terrible fellow, Philip,” he said. “One of your secrets is that you never preach. You just act. Still, I haven’t made up my mind yet.”

Violet drove up the avenue in a little *voiture*, with a box on the seat in front of her. She waved her hand and came swiftly up the steps towards them, leaving the grave-faced Andrews who had assisted her to alight to pay the *voiture* and collect her parcel.

“I have the most wonderful frock,” she announced with enthusiasm. “I really believe when you see it you won’t want to dance with any one else all the evening.”

“I can quite believe it,” Hargrave answered. “But dare I risk making so many enemies?”

“The third dance,” Marston insisted solemnly, “is mine.”

“And the fourth mine,” Gorse added.

“Agreed. But where have you been?” she asked the latter. “We’ve had no tennis

for days.”

“My mother hasn’t been quite so well,” Gorse explained, “and I’ve had a friend I had to go and see over at Bordighera. I’m coming to the dance though. One of my last efforts, alas! It isn’t a very good time of the year for me to be out long.”

Violet sighed.

“Don’t talk about going back,” she begged. “Fancy this coming to an end!”

“Stop and lunch, you fellows,” Hargrave invited.

Both had engagements. They presently took their leave. Violet passed her arm through Hargrave’s as they turned the corner of the drive.

“Let’s spend to-night pretending,” she begged.

He held her hand affectionately. The depression which he had felt coming down the hill had vanished.

“Why not?” he agreed.

“Really pretending,” she insisted. “If the Marchesa is there, looking the most wonderful thing on earth, you won’t even see her. If the Princess comes to claim you, it will be too late. If Mademoiselle Diane sends you one of those hateful little notes, you must be firm.”

“The fates are with us,” he confided. “I saw Nina di Bieni talking with Trentino last night, and I believe they’re going to make it up. Mademoiselle Diane has gone over to Cannes with the Duke, and the Princess—she invites herself to dine, by the bye—is going to the ball with the potentates of the place.”

Luncheon was announced.

“Is Robert coming?” Hargrave asked as they rose.

“He has gone to Beaulieu with Sadie,” she replied—“and those dear men wouldn’t stop. A *tête-à-tête* luncheon! What fun!”

She broke off suddenly. A familiar automobile with two men on the front, wearing the Putralka livery, had turned in at the gate. The Princess leaned a little forward to wave her hand.

CHAPTER XXX

With the unexpected arrival of the Princess, Hargrave's genius in all matters of social import asserted itself. He welcomed her, bareheaded, at the foot of the steps.

"You do me great honour, Princess," he said, as he assisted her to alight, and raised her fingers to his lips. "You are from Rome?"

"And starving," she answered. "We should have reached here last night, but for some slight mishaps. As it was, we only entered the harbour half an hour ago. I had wireless for the car and I was torn between two decisions. You see which way I leaned."

"Lunch is already served," he told her.

"And I have come straight from my cabin," she confided. "The night was fairly pleasant. All that I need to restore me though is a glass of your wonderful white wine, and I hope one of your omelettes. The child is still with you, I see," she went on in an undertone.

"Miss Martin remains, also her brother," he said. "For luncheon we have only Miss Violet."

She sighed.

"A *tête-à-tête* would have been wonderful," she murmured—"but afterwards!"

The Princess greeted Violet pleasantly and sank into her place at Hargrave's right hand with a little gesture of relief.

"I am a good sailor," she said, "but a stable room, and such a room as this, gives me pleasure. Do not think me greedy, please," she added, as she picked up the menu and studied it with the aid of a pendant eyeglass. "My chef on the yacht must leave. His cooking gives me no pleasure. Did I know, I wonder, when I made my decision, Hargrave, that your chef had decided upon *omelette aux points d'asperge* this morning—absolutely my favourite. I regret no longer leaving Fedora to await my return in vain."

Luncheon proceeded pleasantly. The Princess, with swift tact, had changed from French to English for Violet's sake.

"Fedora," she declared, "is at her best when she discusses you, Hargrave. You are apparently the most hopeful study in her peculiar branch of psychics she has met with for ages. She declares that it is worth while to have travelled from Hungary to have met you. There is a word in your language, isn't there—fey?"

"It exists without a doubt," Hargrave confessed.

"Then you, dear man," the Princess continued, "are 'fey.' As to what it means I

am a little doubtful but there is a link between you and another stage of existence to be apprehended by such people as Fedora, not by the world. Does it terrify you?"

"Not greatly."

"Nevertheless, it is rather alarming. Are you superstitious, Miss Martin?"

"Not about Sir Hargrave," Violet replied firmly.

"Fedora is so mysterious," the Princess sighed. "I really cannot quite make out what this intimacy between Sir Hargrave and a future state means. At first I believe she found it sinister. Since then she herself seems doubtful. On one point she is decided: no outside agency can harm you. To hear her rhapsodize sometimes one would think that assassins had been on your track. You need not be disturbed, Miss Martin," the Princess added, noticing Violet's startled expression. "These assassins, according to Fedora, have not been able to and will not be able to do any harm. Not until some crisis happens in your life, which at the present moment Fedora is probably worrying about with two or three Rosicrucian books, a crystal and a few other impedimenta, will you be able to lose at cards, with my sex, or in any other enterprise. But I am afraid this bores you, Hargrave."

"I find it immensely interesting," he assured her.

"Then it bores me," she declared. "Tell me what has happened in Monte Carlo whilst I have been away."

"Naturally nothing," he answered.

"You ought certainly to have been a diplomat," she told him. "You would have made a successful ambassador to one of those countries where the Prime Minister's mistress rules and the Queen is complaisant."

"Those countries do not exist any longer," Hargrave complained.

"Their time will come again," the Princess predicted.

"But mine will not," she sighed. "There's very little use starting a new career on the wrong side of forty."

"On the contrary," she rejoined, "I have a theory that at forty the really adventurous stage of a man's life begins. He has lost the callowness of youth, he has the experience which attracts. He has made up his mind what it is he wants. He is still young enough to appreciate it. It interests me, Hargrave, to know that forty is your age, especially when I consider how Fedora is worrying about you."

She regarded him for a moment or two almost affectionately.

"Yes," she repeated, half to herself, "forty for a man is the age of crises. Do you feel that?"

"I have felt it coming on for weeks," he replied. "My birthday will be the first of next month."

“We must celebrate,” she said.

“In the meanwhile,” he ventured, “what about Rome?”

Her face was for a moment clouded.

“There were complications,” she admitted. “Rome we must discuss a little later. I came here, in fact, to ask your advice.”

With the coffee, Violet passed silently from the room. The Princess watched her departure approvingly.

“She is well-bred and *comme il faut*, your protégée,” she remarked, “although if you were a different sort of man I should say that she were far too attractive to be your guest here. I have not, however, the foolish jealousies of other women. You have appreciated that, I trust, my friend.”

“I have never discovered anything small about you, Stéphanie,” he told her, “but with reference to my guest—my ward, I might call her——”

“We talk of lesser things later,” she interrupted. “I come direct to you from Rome, Hargrave, and I bring tidings which are not good.”

Hargrave looked up quickly. She leaned across the table and laid her hand upon his arm, a touch that was almost a caress. Her eyes looked into his sorrowfully,—such beautiful eyes they were, of the deeper shade of violet with a little fleck almost of purple in their inner depths.

“I cannot blame the Prince,” she continued. “He is a proud man and the Putralkas have never tolerated divorce. He lives according to his lights. Heaven knows that in any ordinary world I need only point to a year of his life and the civil courts would give me such liberty as I chose, but amongst us other ideas prevail. He has forestalled me in Rome. I did my best, but in vain. I may live the life, it seems, of those others—the life of a wanton, if I will—but I may not choose a man I care for and take his name.”

Hargrave was silent. It all seemed so much like an echo of an existence that had passed. For years, society in Paris and the Riviera and Italy had taken it for granted that he and Stéphanie Putralka were in love with each other, that at some day or other must come a crisis in their affairs. And until this year, Hargrave wondered, startled to find how familiar the idea was, whether he too had not taken it for granted, whether if it were not for the coming of Violet he would not have listened to the Princess’ story with different feelings. He remembered the time, as he sat there, when he had pleaded with her earnestly enough for a little more kindness, and all that she had asked for was time. He found himself speculating as to what he would have done if she had come back to him radiant and offered him her future.

“We go to your little salon,” she suggested, rising. “Your servants will be here.”

They passed into the smaller apartment. Hargrave attended her with cushions, placed a small table with cigarettes near her, and generally devoted himself to her comfort. She drew him down by her side and kept his hand in hers.

“So, my friend, you see,” she said, “there comes now a crisis in our affairs. I have not spared words with my husband. He came on board the yacht the morning I left Civita Vecchia, and I spoke to him plainly. ‘You have the power it appears,’ I told him, ‘to keep me bearing your name, to prevent my seeking that freedom to which my eight years of lonely life would seem to entitle me, but you cannot control my fidelity’.”

“And what did he say to that?” Hargrave asked.

“He only smiled—that quiet, maddening smile of his. ‘Stéphanie,’ he said, ‘I do not need to control that. Your pride is my surest ally.’”

“His point of view,” Hargrave remarked, “seems ingenious but a little selfish.”

“Not only that,” she said, “but it forces me into a position where I too must be selfish, or I must make a sacrifice. Last night the wind fell and I sat on deck in a sheltered corner, alone with myself and the stars, and I faced this matter out. I asked myself where really lay my obligations and I came to a certain decision. It was a cowardly one, perhaps, but it has logic, it has a certain amount of justice. Can you divine it, I wonder?”

“How should I?” he answered gravely.

“I decided,” she went on, “to tell you everything and to let you choose. Do not speak in a hurry, please,” she begged. “Do not answer me to-day or to-morrow. I have never, it is true, dreamed of taking a lover, and yet I always knew that if ever I did it would be you. Now I am forced into this position. If there is to be anything of happiness in my life, of companionship, of love, it must come with sacrifice, and it must come through you. Do not for a moment think that it is not in my mind that I owe you much. You have given me many years of devotion and asked very little in return. The time has come when if you ask for more it is yours.”

“At a price,” he murmured.

“It is a side of the question,” she admitted gravely, “which cannot be ignored. At the price of many things which I have held dear in life—the price of my pride, of that inner consciousness with oneself—would one call it ‘self-respect’?—The price of much which has seemed precious to me. I think you, dear Hargrave, know whether you can make these things seem like trifles. I, perhaps, can only wonder and hope.”

A servant raised the curtains and ventured upon an announcement.

“Her Highness is being enquired for on the telephone from the villa. Her Highness’ automobile has returned.”

Hargrave waved the man away. The Princess rose to her feet.

“So I leave you, my friend,” she said, as she walked by his side out on to the terrace, “to the consideration of a new problem. I have never at any moment pictured myself in the position to which your answer may bring me, but in this problem some one must suffer. I have a feeling that it ought not to be you, dear Hargrave. I have a feeling that I have done well in leaving it for you to decide.”

They came upon Violet on the terrace and the Princess spoke a few charming words to her. Then she raised her fingers to Hargrave’s lips and departed with a wave of the hand. He looked after her thoughtfully; Violet, a little jealously.

“I am becoming a seer,” she sighed—“a prophetess, like those women in the Bible. I believe that she too cares.”

CHAPTER XXXI

Hargrave took a step forward to meet the Comtesse Fayaldi as she swept up the lounge of the Hotel de Paris that evening and joined the little group who were assembled for dinner.

“And Stéphanie?” he asked, as he bent over her fingers.

“Presents her excuses,” the Comtesse answered. “She is fatigued with her journey. It is necessary that she visits the ball but she prefers until then to rest.”

Hargrave had an inspiration.

“At your advice, Comtesse?”

She looked up at him with interest.

“How clever of you,” she admitted; “at my advice.”

They trooped in to dinner presently; a very juvenile party, as it happened, and a light-hearted one. The Comtesse Fayaldi, who sat on Hargrave’s right, was unusually animated. She devoted the greater part of her conversation, however, to Pellingham who sat on her other side. It was only towards the close of dinner that she attempted anything of serious conversation with her host.

“Do you not think,” she asked him, under her breath, “that I did well to advise Stéphanie to remain at home to-night?”

Hargrave was a little startled; involuntarily he glanced towards Violet, met her watching eyes and returned her smile. The Comtesse tapped him lightly on the knuckles with her fan.

“Alas,” she confided, “it is the hard task of those who see more than others in this world sometimes to preach wisdom and give sorrow to their dearest friends. I tried to persuade Stéphanie to come to Egypt with me on Thursday.”

“To Egypt?” he repeated. “Isn’t this rather sudden?”

“A decision of that sort must be taken suddenly,” the Comtesse declared. “It was arranged between us that whilst she made up her mind I should say nothing of this to you. You observe I break my word. I break it deliberately because even those who see most clearly in life may sometimes make mistakes. I would not have the ruin of her happiness upon my shoulders even though I saved her pride.”

“You are a very wonderful woman,” Hargrave said with conviction.

“I have a gift,” she admitted—“a gift which brings me as much sorrow as happiness. There are not many people in life upon whom one can exercise it. The occasion arises but seldom. When it does, however, it is to be made use of. Stéphanie is my dearest friend, and next to her sense of honour I think her pride is

the most precious thing in life to her. Such a blow to that as she might receive under certain circumstances from your hands would be a blow from which she would not easily recover. I want to save her that, if I can.”

“Are you in her confidence?” Hargrave asked.

“I do not need to be,” the Comtesse answered. “I know.”

The room was crowded and with the ball before them no one cared to dance. After dinner they made their way up to the Sporting Club for half an hour. Hargrave, with Violet, Philip and Amy Gorse, Pellingham and the Comtesse, and a little crowd of other guests stood round the tables.

“How are finances?” Hargrave asked the girls between whom he was standing. “Do you want me to win some money for you?”

“I feel really,” Violet acknowledged, “that I haven’t a want in the world. I think I’d rather you didn’t play to-night. There’s something,” she went on, “about your always winning which almost frightens me.”

Amy Gorse laughed.

“Violet, how stupid you are!” she protested. “If a man can win here, why not? They take enough out of us. Please play a little for both of us, Sir Hargrave. I shall give you ten louis—all I can afford.”

Hargrave accepted the money gravely.

“I shall take the liberty,” he said, “of adding a trifle to it and also something for you, Violet. As you say it is monotonous but the bank’s money is always worth having.”

With a *mille’s* worth of plaques, he commenced to play. One or two of the spectators watched him enviously.

“It is the monsieur who never loses,” one woman whispered.

“Follow his game,” another one advised her friend. “Wherever he puts his stake it will win.”

Hargrave backed a number and two transversals. The ball spun. He lost. He only smiled. It had happened before the first time. He staked again and lost. Again, with the same result. Amy Gorse sighed.

“Our money seems to be going,” she remarked.

Hargrave was watching the ball with the somewhat puzzled air of the habitual winner who strikes a streak of ill fortune. He doubled his stakes, and lost again. A fit of uncertainty seized him. He handled his plaques without confidence. Suddenly he looked up at the Comtesse Fayaldi, who had slipped into the vacant place by his side. She was watching him with a curious expression in her face. As his last stake was swept away she took him by the arm and led him into the background.

“Well, Comtesse,” he said, “you will no longer accuse me of being ‘fey.’ You see what has arrived. My luck has gone.”

She looked at him intently. He had never before realised the smallness and delicacy of her features compared with the size of her eyes. She seemed to be searching his face for something she failed to find and her interest seemed altogether disproportionate with the occasion.

“Something has gone from you,” she confided. “I don’t know what it is but you have lost something. It comes with that of which I spoke to Stéphanie. I advise you not to play.”

“But, Comtesse,” he protested, “I am entrusted with the task of winning a little money for two impecunious young women. I cannot disappoint them.”

“You had better give them what you can afford,” she advised. “You will not win it by any game of chance.”

“Why do you say that?” Hargrave demanded. “Only a little time ago you assured me that I could not lose.”

He suddenly felt her fingers upon his wrist. They were as cold as ice. For an appreciable period of time she said nothing. Then she turned away.

“Something has gone,” she insisted. “You will not win again. You have lost something, and perhaps gained something. I was right about Stéphanie. I shall see that she comes to Egypt.”

She made her way back to rejoin a group of acquaintances with whom she had been speaking. Hargrave returned to the others of his party. Curiously enough, he was rather nettled.

“Madame, the soothsayer,” he observed, “thinks that I have lost the power of winning. We shall see.”

He changed a packet of *mille* notes. In a quarter of an hour not a louis remained. The two girls watched him, dismayed.

“Come along to the *chemin de fer* table,” he invited them. “Your capital is still intact. I have been playing with my own to test my luck. At *chemin de fer* I must win.”

“Why do you go on playing?” Violet protested. “We were only joking, Amy and I.”

“Please don’t try any more,” Amy Gorse begged. “Your luck has gone, somehow or other. You will only lose a lot of money, and it doesn’t matter a bit about us.”

“I am curious,” Hargrave admitted. “I want to try this thing out.”

They made their way to the *chemin de fer* room. The big table, however, was

so crowded that even Hargrave found it impossible to get near. They wandered down the room and a watchful attendant offered a place at one of the smaller tables. Hargrave seated himself and the two girls stood behind. It was not until his left-hand neighbour had thrown in the money for his bank that Hargrave recognised Trentino.

“*Une banque de vingt-cinq louis,*” the croupier announced.

Hargrave tapped the table and Trentino with impassive face dealt the cards. He looked enquiringly at Hargrave, who shook his head and threw a natural eight upon the table. Trentino turned up his cards slowly. The first was a ten, the second a nine. Hargrave counted out the money and again the croupier made his monotonous announcement.

“*Suivi,*” Hargrave responded.

He found himself with two tens, demanded a card and was given another ten. Trentino threw down a six. The faintest of smiles was parting his lips. Again the cards were dealt. Hargrave drew one and found himself with a seven. Trentino hesitated. He held a five and his draw was *à volonté*. He elected to draw and turned up a three.—Hargrave paid, and rose to his feet.

“Once more?” Trentino invited.

Hargrave shook his head.

“Congratulations,” he said. “I fancy that your luck may have changed.”

Violet was alone with him for a moment whilst they waited for the cars. She suddenly grasped his hand.

“Do you know, I think it’s wonderful!” she exclaimed. “I like it. I think it’s amazing. I hated that luck of yours. There was something wrong about it.”

“As a matter of fact,” he confided, taking her arm as the car drew up, “Madame la Comtesse has lost all interest in me. She declared that I was no longer ‘fey’.”

CHAPTER XXXII

Hargrave, as he took his place in the box with the rest of his guests, leaned back in his chair and looked out upon the indubitably brilliant scene, felt some faint return of the morning's depression. The dancing had already begun but it was impeded by the large number of people crowding the place for seats to view the *spectacles*. It seemed to him that there were others there, tired even as he was, that the whole much-advertised phantasmagoria of hilarity was struggling against a surfeit of pleasure, that the real light-heartedness of expectancy, savouring life and finding it good, was absent. Violet alone was one of the noticeable exceptions. She rose to her feet with joy when Hargrave invited her to dance, and moved as though her feet scarcely touched the ground.

"I am so happy to-night," she declared. "I have the feeling that something has happened, that all this is going to turn into something real."

"I wonder why to-night, of all nights," he reflected.

"I don't know what started it," she answered. "The Princess not coming to dinner, perhaps, and then I was glad you lost at roulette."

"It was your loss too," he reminded her.

"I don't mind about that," she said. "I can't help it, but there does seem to have been something uncanny about the way you gambled and always won."

"You're not suggesting any unpleasant associations in connection with me, I trust?"

"Of course not. Only they say that so many unhappy or unfortunate people, the people upon whose lives some curse lies, are always lucky at games of chance."

"You've been talking to Fedora Fayaldi, or else you've been imbibing some of the superstitions of the place," he told her.

"Perhaps so," she confessed. "I suppose we all do get a little fanciful here."

"Even in this, your paradise?"

"Even in paradise, I suppose there are by-ways if one chooses to look for them."

Dancing became a farce and they returned presently to the box, thronged now with visitors. There was a ballet to watch upon the stage, champagne being served at every possible corner, dancing *en masse* to the strains of music almost drowned by the clamour of voices. As a spectacle it became more and more marvellous every moment.

"Come and jog around," Pellingham invited Violet.

She shook her head.

“A little later, please.”

“The crowd will only get worse,” he protested.

“To tell you the truth,” she confided, “I want to keep my frock all right until after supper time. Then I sha’n’t mind so much what happens to it.”

“You’re always avoiding me,” he grumbled. “I couldn’t propose to you in that seething mob.”

“I should almost have to accept you for your courage, if you did,” she laughed. —“What is it, Robert?” she added, leaning towards him as he struggled into the box.

“Can you come out for a moment?” he begged. “I want you to meet Sadie’s father—Mr. Wegges, you know. I haven’t been able to tell him yet,” he explained, dropping his voice, “that you’re not my sister, and they think it queer that they’ve seen nothing of you.”

Violet resigned herself. She stepped out of the box and laid her hand upon Robert’s arm.

“I hope you’re going to be sensible about Sadie,” she said.

“Oh, I’m sensible enough,” he interrupted, a little ruefully. “I think Sadie’s the most attractive thing I know. Old man Wegges is the difficulty. He can’t forget that he’s worth a few million dollars. However, he seems a decent old chap, and Sir Hargrave has promised to help.”

They found Mr. Wegges and Sadie at a spot which had been indicated. The former shook hands with Violet impressively.

“I told this young man here, Miss Martin,” he announced, “and Sadie too, that I had to shake hands with you before the evening was finished.”

“I’m very glad to meet you,” Violet assured him. “You’ve all been very kind to Robert.”

“Let’s get out of this and have a bottle,” Mr. Wegges proposed. “Have you had supper yet, Miss Martin?”

“Not yet. We’re going to wait until two o’clock, I think.”

“Well, we might have just a bite first,” Mr. Wegges suggested. “There isn’t a table to be had here for love or money, but I know a place only a few yards off.”

“If it’s outside I don’t think I can go, thanks,” Violet demurred. “The others will be wondering what’s become of me.”

“I guess you’ll be all right with Sadie and me, not to mention your brother,” Mr. Wegges insisted cheerfully. “We won’t keep you a quarter of an hour. I want us all to have a little talk together.”

There was no resisting Robert’s imploring glance, so they made their way to the

entrance. Mr. Wegges handed Violet into a waiting automobile and seemed to be on the point of following her himself when he changed his mind.

“You’d better get in with your sister, young man. The chauffeur knows where to go to.”

“Can’t we have Sadie with us?” Robert ventured.

“I guess her mother wants her for a moment,” Mr. Wegges replied. “We shall all meet in two minutes.”

The door was banged to and closed with a little click. The car rolled off. Violet leaned back in her place.

“I don’t really like leaving,” she confessed. “You must promise not to stay more than half an hour, Robert.”

“Word of honour,” he answered cheerfully.

“You’re really in earnest, then, about Sadie?” she asked. “Isn’t she just a little young?”

“She doesn’t think so,” he replied, “and that sort are better married young, anyway. Yes, I’m gone on her all right, Violet. She isn’t so serious as you but she understands me all right. The old man’s been rather sniffy up till now, but it seems to me to-night that he’s coming round.”

Violet leaned forward.

“Aren’t we going rather a long way?” she observed.

“I don’t know where we’re going,” Robert admitted. “The old man was rather mysterious about it. I think he’s got some sort of a surprise for us.”

“Why, we’re right up in Beau Soleil!” Violet exclaimed. “And the man’s driving much too fast. We’re past all the restaurants. Do ask him where we’re going.”

There was no speaking tube and when Robert tried to open the window he found it impossible. He tapped at the glass in front. The chauffeur, by whose side another man was seated, took no notice. A vague uneasiness seized Violet. She tried her own window in vain, knocked frantically upon the glass without attracting the slightest attention. Then she looked at Robert with an air of sudden terror.

“What does this mean?” she demanded. “You must have known, Robert. Where are we going?”

“I swear to God that I haven’t the slightest idea,” he declared with obvious sincerity. “I can’t make out what the man’s up to.”

He banged at the window and shouted, in vain. They were mounting the hill now to the Upper Corniche and travelling at a furious rate.

“Robert, you must have some idea what this means,” Violet persisted passionately.

"I swear to God I haven't," he protested. "Old man Wegges was just a little more civil to me than usual this evening. I dined with them before we came on to the ball, and when he saw you in the box he suddenly insisted upon knowing you. It must be a joke on us, Violet. It couldn't be anything else but a joke."

She made no reply. She had been tugging at the door again, but finally abandoned the effort. She leaned back in her corner. Her brain was working.

"Tell me, Robert, isn't Mr. Wegges Mr. Trentino's attorney?"

"Yes," Robert assented. "They came over from New York together. Why?"

"I don't know," she replied. "I can't make it out, of course, but this man Trentino and Sir Hargrave are enemies."

"I don't see what that's got to do with it," Robert declared, mystified. "I know that they're enemies in business, but where do we come in?"

"I might," she reflected, shivering a little.

They were nearing Eze and the car suddenly turned off the main road and climbed a steep, rough avenue. They passed through a plantation of pine trees, emerged again, and drew up before a large villa. The chauffeur descended and unlocked the door of the car. His companion, a tall, powerful-looking man, stood by his side. The front door had been opened and Nina di Bieni, with a mantilla thrown over her head, came down the steps.

"How nice of you both to come to my supper party," she said. "Please hurry inside. It is cold here."

"Thank you," Violet replied. "I do not wish to come inside. I had no idea that we were coming here. I ought not to have left the ball at all and I wish to return at once."

"I hope," Nina begged, "that you are going to be sensible. You can do no earthly good by making trouble. Will you please come in for a little time? If you don't you will be carried."

Violet hesitated with her foot upon the step. For one moment she thought of a wild rush down the avenue. Then she recognised the hopelessness of any such idea. Robert, however, suddenly struck the nearest man and tried to dart past him. In a moment he was on his back. The chauffeur stooped down and picked him up as though he had been a baby.

"Quite useless, that sort of thing," the Marchesa observed. "Nothing is going to happen to you so long as you behave nicely. Please enter."

Reluctantly Violet followed her hostess. Robert was deposited breathless in the hall. The Marchesa gave some brief instructions and he was presently ushered upstairs.

"We will go into my little sitting room," she added, turning to Violet. "There we

can talk for a time—until things happen.”

“What things are going to happen?” Violet demanded.

“Ah, my dear,” Nina di Bieni replied, “that depends upon how reasonable our friend—alas, our very hard-hearted, obstinate friend—Sir Hargrave—may be.”

CHAPTER XXXIII

It was some time before Hargrave felt any real alarm at Violet's absence from the box. When, however, he gathered from various sources that Philip Gorse, Pellingham and Marston had spent some time searching for her in vain, that she was nowhere on the floor amongst the dancers, he was instantly aware of a thrill of acute though undefined apprehension. He left the box and was starting to search on his own account when he felt a touch upon his arm. He turned sharply round and looked into the heavy-jowled but not ill-natured countenance of Mr. Daniel Wegges.

"I'd like a word with you, Sir Hargrave," the latter announced.

"Later on," was the curt reply. "I'm looking for some one."

"Maybe I could help in that search," Mr. Wegges confided.

Hargrave, who had half turned away, swung around. For a moment Mr. Wegges flinched. There was something very menacing in Hargrave's manner.

"Is this another of Trentino's damned games?" he demanded.

Mr. Wegges, with professional caution, admitted nothing.

"Maybe I have an idea where the young lady could be found," was as far as he cared to commit himself.

"Get on with it," Hargrave enjoined impatiently. "What's the next move?"

"I have an automobile right outside," the attorney indicated, pointing to the entrance. "If you like to come along with me now without a word to any of your friends, I guess we can fix things up all right."

Hargrave reflected swiftly.

"The cards are in your hands for the moment," he admitted. "I'm ready."

Mr. Wegges piloted him towards the waiting automobile and they commenced to climb out of Monte Carlo.

"Where are we going to?" Hargrave demanded.

Mr. Wegges produced a cigar and lit it. His fingers which held the match were not quite steady.

"Excuse my smoking," he begged. "This sort of business is rather out of my line."

"You keep within the law as a rule," Hargrave suggested drily.

"I haven't stepped outside it yet, in the present instance," was the earnest retort. "My client is all for a friendly settlement. If that can't be arrived at—well, so far as I'm concerned, I step right out. When it comes to law-breaking, I'm through. That's clearly understood between Trentino and myself."

"Abduction is generally considered to be an offence against the law," Hargrave

observed.

“There has been no abduction,” Mr. Wegges announced emphatically. “The young lady accepted with pleasure my invitation to a supper party. She went of her own free will, and I guess she’ll come away all right when we’re through.”

“I think I can imagine where we’re going to,” Hargrave remarked, glancing through the window.

He leaned a little forward, his long frame tense. Wegges divined his half-formed intention and laid his hand upon his arm soothingly.

“I wouldn’t do anything rash, if I were you,” he begged earnestly. “Andrea Trentino’s a dangerous man at all times but he’s a tiger to-night. You don’t want to bring any trouble upon the young lady.”

“Got a daughter of your own, haven’t you, Mr. Wegges?” Hargrave enquired.

“I have, sir, and don’t you think I’m in any plot to bring harm upon your ward,” was the earnest reply. “My job is to smooth things over so that no trouble comes to any one. That’s why I’m in this business.”

They turned off the main road up the avenue.

“I thought so,” Hargrave muttered to himself. “These damned women never forgive.”

The door of the villa was opened almost as the car came to a standstill. A man who might have been a servant but who wore no livery ushered them in. Hargrave caught a glimpse of two more men in the background.

“Will you step right in here,” Mr. Wegges invited, opening the door. “I guess we’ll find Trentino waiting.”

The room was one used by Nina di Bieni as a boudoir, fantastic in its decorations and filled with feminine trifles. Trentino was seated at a table upon which were writing materials and several documents. He looked up as Hargrave entered, but neither rose to his feet nor offered any form of salutation. Nothing but a flash in his black eyes betrayed his satisfaction.

“You are just in time, Sir Hargrave,” he said, “to sign your name to this document.”

Hargrave selected a comfortable chair, took the document into his hand and read it through.

“I see,” he murmured. “I am to consent to sell you sixty thousand shares in the O. P. Trust at today’s market price. A little severe, that, isn’t it? I gave a great deal more for them.”

Trentino smiled coldly.

“You could have had better terms yesterday,” he said. “I offered you far better

terms last week. Conditions now are a little changed.”

“In what respect?” Hargrave demanded.

Trentino’s hand toyed with the drawer of the writing table.

“We have a hostage.”

“Do I understand your threat to be that if I decide not to let you have the shares, you intend to inflict some personal harm upon Miss Martin?” Hargrave enquired.

The attorney rose to his feet, but Trentino waved him back to silence.

“Mr. Wegges,” he explained, “is not in this particular business. Between you and me there need be nothing but plain words. If I can’t get those shares from you, I am broke. And if I go broke, I shall qualify for the little cemetery you know of down below. That being so, what does it matter what I do before I depart? I should take good care not to leave the whole game in your hands.”

“In plain words,” Hargrave insisted, “harm would come to the young lady.”

“Yes.”

The monosyllable was full of menace. Hargrave considered the situation. Trentino’s hand resting inside the drawer, was probably grasping the butt of an unseen weapon, and Trentino in wilder days had possessed the reputation of being a quick man with a gun. Hargrave himself was naturally unarmed. Standing on duty by the door was the very muscular servant who had let them in, and outside were at least two men. Actual resistance was out of the question.

“Where is the young lady?” Hargrave demanded.

“In the next room,” Trentino replied. “You can see her if you wish to.”

“I do wish to.”

At a sign from Trentino the manservant drew aside a curtain and threw back the communicating door, disclosing the interior of a small salon. There was a table laid for supper at which the Marchesa and Violet were seated, with a maid in attendance. Violet waved her hand as she recognised Hargrave.

“Isn’t it too absurd?” she exclaimed. “All the same, I’m glad to see you. Do let’s get back as soon as we can.”

“We’ll be off in a few minutes,” Hargrave promised. “You’re all right, are you?”

“Of course I am,” she replied. “The Marchesa is too good a hostess, though. I am afraid I shall have no appetite for our supper when we get back. By the bye, where’s Robert?”

“Your brother,” the Marchesa explained, turning half around in her chair, “was a little unruly. We had to ask him to wait upstairs. Presently we will send and have him down.”

“And is that Mr. Wegges I see in there?” Violet went on. “Mr. Wegges, I am

ashamed of you. The father of a nice girl like Sadie shouldn't tell lies."

Mr. Wegges wiped his forehead. Before he could reply, however, the doors were rolled back. Hargrave returned to his chair.

"Well," he said deliberately, "up till now I think that I have been holding the cards against you, Trentino. At the present moment I must admit that you are one up. What guarantee have I, supposing I sign this order to sell, that we shall be allowed to depart without molestation?"

"That's where I come in," Mr. Wegges affirmed eagerly. "I will guarantee that you go right out of here the moment that paper's signed—you and the young lady and the young man upstairs."

Hargrave took up the pen. Then he turned his head towards the window. Trentino too was listening. There was a startled look upon his face.

"You didn't let him speak to any one?" he demanded of Wegges.

"Not a soul," was the emphatic reply. "My God, what's that outside?—It's a car!"

Trentino leaned forward, his hand once more in the drawer.

"Sign!" he shouted to Hargrave. "Or, by God, we'll both go out!"

Hargrave remained without moving. He looked steadily across the table.

"On the whole," he said quietly, "I think that I will wait for a moment. I dislike being hurried in this manner."

Trentino remained motionless. His right hand came out from the drawer, empty. Voices could be distinctly heard now in the hall. The door was thrown unwillingly open, and Gorse and Pellingham entered together. They looked round the room in astonishment.

"What's it all mean?" Gorse asked quickly. "Are you all right, Hargrave? Where's Violet?"

"In the next room," Hargrave replied. "We're all right. It's just a new-fashioned sort of supper party of the Marchesa's, only we don't seem to have quite tumbled to the spirit of the thing. How did you get here?"

"Young Martin came rushing into the ball like a madman about twenty minutes ago," Philip replied. "Seems he was in the game here, but cut up rough and was locked into a room. He scrambled down from the window, ran to La Turbie and hired a car. I've sent him back to the villa with a sprained wrist."

"Good for Robert!" Hargrave murmured. "That lets him out."

"Is it a hold-up?" Pellingham demanded.

"Something of the sort," Hargrave acquiesced. "It nearly came off too."

"We've got a couple of gendarmes outside," Gorse announced. "Do we want

them in?"

Hargrave shook his head. Mr. Wegges suddenly intervened.

"You gentlemen who perhaps don't know the rights of this matter between my client, Andrea Trentino, and Sir Hargrave Wendever, will you give me your attention for a moment. Sir Hargrave, to revenge himself for a fancied wrong to an old friend, has driven my client, Mr. Trentino here, who is a man of wealth and good repute, into such a position that he can ruin him. It hasn't been a fair fight. I say to Sir Hargrave's face that it's been an unfair and disreputable piece of business. You gentlemen call this a hold-up. Perhaps it is. The young lady was invited up here to a quiet supper party. She came willingly. It is true she didn't know why, but she came. Sir Hargrave was brought up here, offered his choice of selling the shares he ought to have parted with long ago, or of running the risk of what might happen to the girl. This is just where I've got something to say, though. I'm too well-known in New York to run any risks, and I want you to see this."

He first of all drew out the drawer into which Trentino's hand had strayed, and disclosed the fact that it was empty.

"There isn't a gun in the place," he declared. "I saw to that. Furthermore, listen to this document which Trentino signed before I joined in the business."

He produced a paper from his pocket and read:

"On my word of honour, I promise Daniel Wegges, my attorney, that under no possible circumstances shall harm come to the young woman, Violet Martin, or to Sir Hargrave Wendever if they can be persuaded to visit the villa of the Marchesa di Bieni.

“(Signed) ANDREA TRENTINO.”

"It's a piece of dangerous bluff we've been trying, I admit," the attorney confessed, laying down the paper upon the table, "but I'm willing to run my risks sometimes in life and it is worth something to save a man like my client who is a straightforward man of business, from being broke just because of a personal grudge."

There was a moment's silence. Every one was looking at Hargrave. He rose, threw open the communicating doors and called for Violet. She came forward at once. This time she made no attempt at any form of forced gaiety. She caught Hargrave's arm and held it tightly, holding out her other hand towards Gorse.

"You two dear people!" she exclaimed.

"Violet, I want to ask you something," Hargrave said. "Has any one said or done

anything to offend you since you arrived here?"

"Why, of course not," she replied. "The Marchesa has been very kind. All the same, I think I'll stay with you now, if I may."

"We shall be starting back in five minutes," Hargrave told her.

With Violet's hand still in his, he resumed his seat.

"On reconsideration," he announced, seating himself at the table—"at cost price, mind you—a trifling alteration to which I presume you will not object—I have decided to sell the shares."

CHAPTER XXXIV

It was barely eleven o'clock on the following morning when Hargrave, with the *empressement* due to a privileged visitor, was ushered by the grave-faced majordomo of the household on to the front terrace which was one of the chief glories of the Villa Miramar.

"Her Highness shall be told of your arrival, Monsieur," the man announced.

"I am a little early," Hargrave remarked, glancing at his watch.

"Her Highness has been up since eight o'clock," was the reassuring response.

The man disappeared. Hargrave was at once aware of Stéphanie's voice floating out to him through the winter garden, with its banks of exotics, its myriads of creeping roses, lemon trees and verbena. She was singing in the music room beyond, singing softly as though to herself, an Italian song which had been one of their favourites, a fragment from one of the lesser known operas to which they had listened together many a time. She was singing as though to herself, without effort, with exquisite, almost mournful cadence:

*"Se un tuo pietoso accento
dovrò per sempre
desiare in van,
Se m'è negato imprimerti
ardente un bacio
sulla bianca man,
Deh non fuggir
Deh non fuggirmi almeno
E dei tuoi sguardi
Al magico poter.
Sorrisi, amplessi, ed estasi,
Sorrisi, amplessi, ed estasi,
Mi fingha inebbriato
Il mio pensier."*

The song ceased abruptly, as Hargrave surmised, with the announcement of his arrival. A moment or two later he heard the sound of her light footsteps crossing the winter garden. She paused to break off a rose, and came to him with it in her hand. She raised her fingers to his lips, motioned him back to his place and seated herself by his side. There was the old fascinating note of familiarity in her greeting, the old

smile upon her unclouded face, yet he noticed that she arranged her chair so that the shadows underneath her beautiful eyes were less apparent.

“I am forgiven?” she said lightly. “I think that my journey to Rome fatigued me more than I thought. I felt in no humour for a dinner party last night, and I used my privilege, the privilege of our friendship to excuse myself.”

“It is a privilege which you are always welcome to use,” Hargrave assured her. “Naturally, however, your absence was a disappointment.”

“I was half an hour only at the ball,” she continued. “I ventured there, too, to excuse myself early. The heat was terrible and the crowd, even to look at, bewildering.”

“I caught only one glimpse of you,” Hargrave remarked.

“I saw you several times,” she answered. “I saw you even striving gallantly to dance.”

“An impossibility,” he murmured.

“I spoke just now,” the Princess continued, “of the privileges which belong to friendship. Dear Hargrave, I am going to use a greater one still. I am going to test your friendship for me to the greatest possible extent.”

“You have something new to say to me?” he asked.

“Naturally,” she acquiesced. “Otherwise, I should not have sent for you. I will not confess that I have changed my mind—I am not of the order of people who do that—but the situation between us has regrouped itself in my fancy. I see things a little differently. I see them this time with the eyes of truth.”

He remained silent. It was so obviously her wish, however slowly the words might come, to say all that was in her mind.

“Our friendship has been a very beautiful thing, Hargrave,” she went on. “We have contrived to live very closely and very beautifully together in an atmosphere which is not conducive to the sort of life we have led. We have found a kindred inspiration in the music which has charmed us, the poetry which we have loved together, the thoughts which have been born between us. We have passed through this rather meretricious world with affection I believe in our hearts, without a single divergence from the beautiful ways, without a *gaucherie* to regret. It is very wonderful to have done this, Hargrave. You are, I think, the only man I have ever met with whom it would have been possible, and it has been chiefly through your great unselfishness.”

Still he said nothing, but there was in his face all the understanding, all the sympathy she desired.

“Last year perhaps there was a slight cloud,” she went on. “I remember the night

after the opera in Paris and the Princess' supper party, we drove home together through the Bois. From that moment I have known that for all my pride, I remain human. I realised too that I was playing a selfish part. Since then it has seemed to me that there has always been a faint restlessness between us. Dear man, I have felt it as you have. This year it was there from the moment your lips touched my fingers, so I wrote to Paris, so I followed my husband to Rome, to meet, as you know, with failure. And now, shall I finish in a single sentence?"

"If you will," he answered.

"Hargrave, I cannot give you in any lesser way what it would have made me proud and happy to have given you if I could have gained my freedom."

She leaned back, as though tired. The words were spoken, immutably, as he knew. Hargrave, looking past her, through the drooping gold of a great mimosa tree, across the tops of the pink almond blossom, to the sea and the spaces beyond, was conscious of a momentary sense of great humiliation. This friendship with its beautiful ornamentation of delicate, shadowy love-making, had been a prized thing in his life. He was suddenly filled with a sense of guilt. She had divined the truth. She was choosing this way to save her pride, to save him. He was powerless to argue with her. It was too late to tell her even the truth, the ghastly secret he carried always with him. He felt all that hovering, impotent sense of humiliation, the scourge of involuntary infidelity. At least, he decided, he would tell her how little it all mattered. She saw the words framing upon his lips, however, and checked him.

"Hargrave," she continued, "for my pride's sake, I like to think that my words have given you pain. Pain, however, is a common gift to all of us who understand sacrifice. Tell yourself if you please that in dragging down our beautiful friendship on to the planes where all these others walk, we should have lost something which we could never regain. Will you please walk away with that thought in your heart, and leave me just the touch of your lips upon these fingers, the unsullied thoughts which I shall put away with the most precious things of my life. If you please."

She watched him go, thankful for the inimitable tact, his complete understanding of her, which sent him away with bowed shoulders and speechless. Without turning her head she heard the purr of his car as he drove down the avenue. When she looked up, Fedora Fayaldi was standing by her side. For the first time a trace of passion lit up her face. She gripped the Comtesse by the wrist.

"Fedora," she said, "if you have lied to me, if you have been mistaken——"

The smile of Fedora Fayaldi said more than words. The Princess gave a little gasp.

"It is well then," she went on. "I have saved my self-respect. He believes that I

have sent him away because I am one of those whose pride is too great for complete love. A human doll! That is what he thinks me after all these years.”

Fedora’s arm went around her friend’s shoulders.

“Dear Stéphanie,” she said, “my gifts were never given to me for deceit. It is a very sad truth, but the best of men—the best, the kindest, the noblest of men—fail us in this one thing. I sometimes think that this gift of fidelity, vouchsafed to us alone, is the curse handed down to us through the ages, to atone for the tragedy in the Garden of Eden.—You must really come and tell Hortense about your white frocks. The luggage has to leave to-night.”

CHAPTER XXXV

“I sometimes think,” Hargrave reflected, as he sat up in his chair after a long silence, “that if one had to fix upon one particular spot as typical of the spirit of Monte Carlo, one would choose the Café de Paris between twelve and one o’clock.”

“What gets me,” Pellingham, who was suffering from a remarkably bad headache, expounded, “is that the people all seem so amazingly fit every morning. Look at them all round us now. There isn’t one of them who looks as though he had been out of bed after midnight, and as for having ever lost a packet, as some of them must have done, well, all I can say is, you can’t spot the losers.”

Violet glanced around in mute appreciation. The hum of conversation and the laughter almost drowned the throbbing melodies of the Gipsy band. Waiters were hurrying about on every side. Scraps of conversation floated here and there, invitations, gossip, a tender word or two. The sun was streaming down from a flawless sky, its heat pleasantly tempered by the faintest of sea breezes. The very air seemed full of sweet and expectant life. Hargrave, notwithstanding a certain gravity which had remained with him since his visit to the Villa Miramar, was filled once more as acutely as ever with the intense desire of living. Violet—in a wonderful gown of rose-coloured *crêpe de chine* and the smartest of hats—was seated by his side, blissfully and confidently happy. In half an hour’s time Hargrave was to see the local physician. She was full of boundless optimism.

“There’s only one person here who looks in the least unhappy,” she declared, pointing to a man who was seated on the outskirts of the little crowd. “He hasn’t anything to drink. He simply sits and stares ahead of him. I am not at all sure that it isn’t the man you tried to speak to in the Sporting Club, Sir Hargrave, and who disappeared.”

Pellingham, whose glance had been one of the idlest curiosity, suddenly sprang to his feet.

“My God, look out!” he exclaimed. “He’s going to shoot himself.”

The man whom Violet had indicated seemed to have emerged abruptly from a trance. He sat up and looked stealthily around. His hand had crept into his right-hand pocket. There was a flash of metal in the sunlight, a smothered report, scarcely heard in the hubbub of music and voices, and the man half slipped from his chair. He hung there limply for a moment, a pathetic-looking object, one leg upon the ground, his arms over the sides of his chair, his head drooping sideways. Then he slowly

collapsed as the crowd closed about him. Hargrave was just in time to keep Violet from turning round.

“What was it?” she demanded, seeing the people rush to the spot.

“A man shot himself,” Hargrave told her gravely. “Curiously enough, you were right. It was Horridge. But I don’t understand.”

It was as though a miracle were being performed on the spot where the tragedy had occurred. In a matter of a few seconds the empty chair was back in its place, the little crowd of people were dispersing, and returning to their places, and even the ever watchful guardians of the scene with their ghastly burden had disappeared. The music had never once faltered, the laughter and gay babel of voices recommenced almost immediately. Pellingham, who had been one of the first to reach the spot, returned presently to his chair.

“Well,” he remarked, “so long as some one had to commit suicide, I should say the right man had done it. He ought to have been in prison long ago.”

“Horridge, in prison!” Hargrave exclaimed.

“I should say so,” Pellingham replied. “I should think he must have cost his brother twenty thousand pounds in his time.”

Hargrave sat up in his chair.

“Tell me exactly who you suppose that man was?” he demanded.

“Why, I can tell you, of course,” was the surprised rejoinder. “That was Stephen Horridge, brother of Sir James Horridge, the great physician—been a bad lot all his days. There was a frightful scandal only this winter. His brother, who had been awfully good to him, was trying him as a secretary, and what do you think the blackguard did? Sir James went off to Rye for two days’ golf. He put on a suit of his brother’s clothes—they were as like as twins—sorted out and discarded the regular patients with the help of the butler, who was in league with him, and prescribed all sorts of rubbish for the people who came to see Sir James and didn’t know the difference, and pinched the fees.”

Hargrave was a strong man and a man of nerve, but for a moment there was a buzzing in his ears, a catch in his throat. He felt Violet’s fingers gripping his arm. With an effort he steadied himself.

“Look here, Eddie,” he said, “this is a big thing for me. I went and saw a man who I supposed was Sir James Horridge on the third of January this year. He looked me over, charged me rather an unusual fee, and gave me the shock of my life.”

“The third of January was the precise date!” Philip exclaimed. “Good God, Hargrave! Surely you weren’t one of those new patients? Why, he told them all pretty well that they were going to die.”

“He told me that too,” Hargrave confided, his voice trembling a little, “and charged me twenty guineas for it.”

“You didn’t believe him?”

“Of course I did,” was the emphatic reply.

“God bless my soul!” Pellingham gasped. “Surely you saw the notices in the *Times* the following week from Sir James?”

“I came abroad the following week,” Hargrave explained. “I never read a newspaper when I’m out here.”

“You mean that you’ve been thinking all the time that you were ill just because that fellow told you so?”

“Why on earth shouldn’t I believe it?” Hargrave pointed out. “How was I to know that it wasn’t Sir James? I’d never seen him before.”

“Well, you’re a good plucked ’un!” Pellingham exclaimed wonderingly. “It’s—I say—what about a drink?”

The situation seemed beyond them. Wave after wave of joy came sweeping up from Violet’s heart. Her throat was choked, her eyes misty. Speech was impossible. She could only grip Hargrave’s arm frantically. He sat and struggled for realisation. Suddenly it came to him. It was the music of life that was being played, the joy of actual life was rushing through his veins at the clutch of Violet’s fingers. These were his friends around him, not shadows. He, too, was of the world that they, and he, and all, found so beautiful. He was back again in the full tumult of it. He wanted life desperately, passionately, and it was his. He turned at last to Violet, and Pellingham, who saw the look, rose to his feet understandingly.

“Here come Philip Gorse and Johnnie,” he exclaimed. “I’m going to tell them.”

There was scarcely a connected word, but the wonder of it all repeated itself every moment in fresh impulses of joy. Gorse and Marston came hurrying up. There was gripping of hands, the drinking of something which the waiter called champagne cocktails, and at last comparative coherency.

“I’ll keep my appointment with the local doctor,” Hargrave announced, rising to his feet. “We’ll make a certainty of this, and then we’ll all meet later in the day.”

The colour streamed into Violet’s cheeks as he took her arm. They stepped into the waiting car and drove off. In the Avenue des Fleurs, Hargrave descended and entered the doctor’s house. In ten minutes he was back again.

“It’s all right, of course?” she asked breathlessly.

“Sound as a bell,” Hargrave told her; “best heart he’d listened to for a man over thirty years.”

They drove back to the villa.

“Miss Martin and I will be lunching in, Andrews,” Hargrave told the man who admitted them. “We shall be ready in a quarter of an hour.”

They passed across the white stone hall on to the balcony, down the steps, across the lawn and into the little grove beyond, to the flower-draped wall which hung over the sea. It was a fragment of garden which lacked the splendour of the more artificially laid out grounds, but the warm air was pleasantly scented with the last of the mimosa blossom, and a great cluster of roses hung over the grey stones, mingled with the Bougainvillæa and wistaria. To Hargrave, the anticipation was the supreme moment of his life, and for a few seconds he lingered over it, holding her in his arms, bringing her closer to him by degrees, reading all the indescribably wonderful things in her misty, starlike eyes.

Luncheon, to which they returned unwillingly after a footman had discreetly ventured to announce the third sounding of the gong, was a sacramental and yet a gay feast. There were little half-finished sentences, an amazing difficulty in continuing a connected conversation in the presence of François and his subordinate, a remarkable conflict between appetite and emotion. They took their coffee in a remote corner of the balcony, happily isolated.

“This afternoon,” he announced, “I shall go to see the English clergyman.”

“Do you really mean it, Hargrave?” she asked, in an awed tone. “Do you mean _____”

“I mean that notwithstanding my advanced years and your tender ones, we are going to be married just as quickly as possible,” he declared. “If there’s any delay, we’ll go to Paris. I know them all at the Embassy there. Then we’ll come back for a month here, and Italy afterwards. I have a fancy,” he confided, with a moment’s palpitating memory of the old horror, “that to be here with you, Violet, with life instead of death to look forward to, will be paradise.”

She laughed happily.

“I wonder what the Comtesse Fayaldi will say now,” she remarked. “Last night she declared that there was a change, that you were no longer ‘fey,’ that something mysterious—I think she meant, although she never said it, ‘the shadow of death’—had passed.”

“Fedora Fayaldi,” he murmured, “is a very wonderful woman.”

Robert came diffidently round the corner of the terrace. His arm was in a sling, and he limped slightly. Otherwise he was well on the way to recovery from his escapade of the night before.

“I wanted to know, sir,” he asked, “whether you would mind meeting Mr.

Wegges and talking to him. He is very ashamed of last night, but after all, he was there to see things didn't go too far."

"I haven't the least objection," Hargrave declared. "His part in the show struck me as being rather humorous. I'll see him any time."

"Is it all right about Sadie?" Violet asked.

Robert nodded a little self-consciously.

"We're engaged," he announced. "Mr. Wegges says if I can prove that I have any sort of prospects, he supposes she'll have to have her own way."

"I'll see him sometime to-day," Hargrave promised. "I shall need a secretary for the next year or so, at any rate, and if we can't find anything else, that might suit you. You see, as a married man, I sha'n't have so much time to look after my own correspondence."

"You're too good to me, sir," Robert declared, with a little break in his voice. "And about Violet—I can scarcely believe it. It all seems too wonderful!"

The telephone rang and Hargrave was absent for a few minutes.

"They're going to give us a dinner to-night," he announced when he returned—"Edward Pellingham, Johnnie Marston and Philip Gorse. The same little party," he added, with a sudden wave of reminiscence. "Hotel de Paris at half-past eight. I think they're going to ask you, Robert, and Miss Wegges. Now, what about this afternoon, Violet? You shall choose."

Her hesitation was only momentary. Yet whilst it lasted a vivid stream of reminiscences flashed through her mind. She remembered the chill discomfort of that second-class carriage, the "*commis voyageur*" with the garlic-smelling breath, the jolting of the train, the terrible pain at her heart as she sat with her back to paradise. Then the pause at Beaulieu, the miracle! Hargrave upon the platform, the light in his face, her own willing and joyful surrender! The drive into the clouds—and his wonderful words—his self-revelation.

"I should like," she decided, "to drive up to the pink hotel at the top of the hill."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Inconsistency in accents has been fixed.

[The end of *Prodigals of Monte Carlo* by E. Phillips Oppenheim]