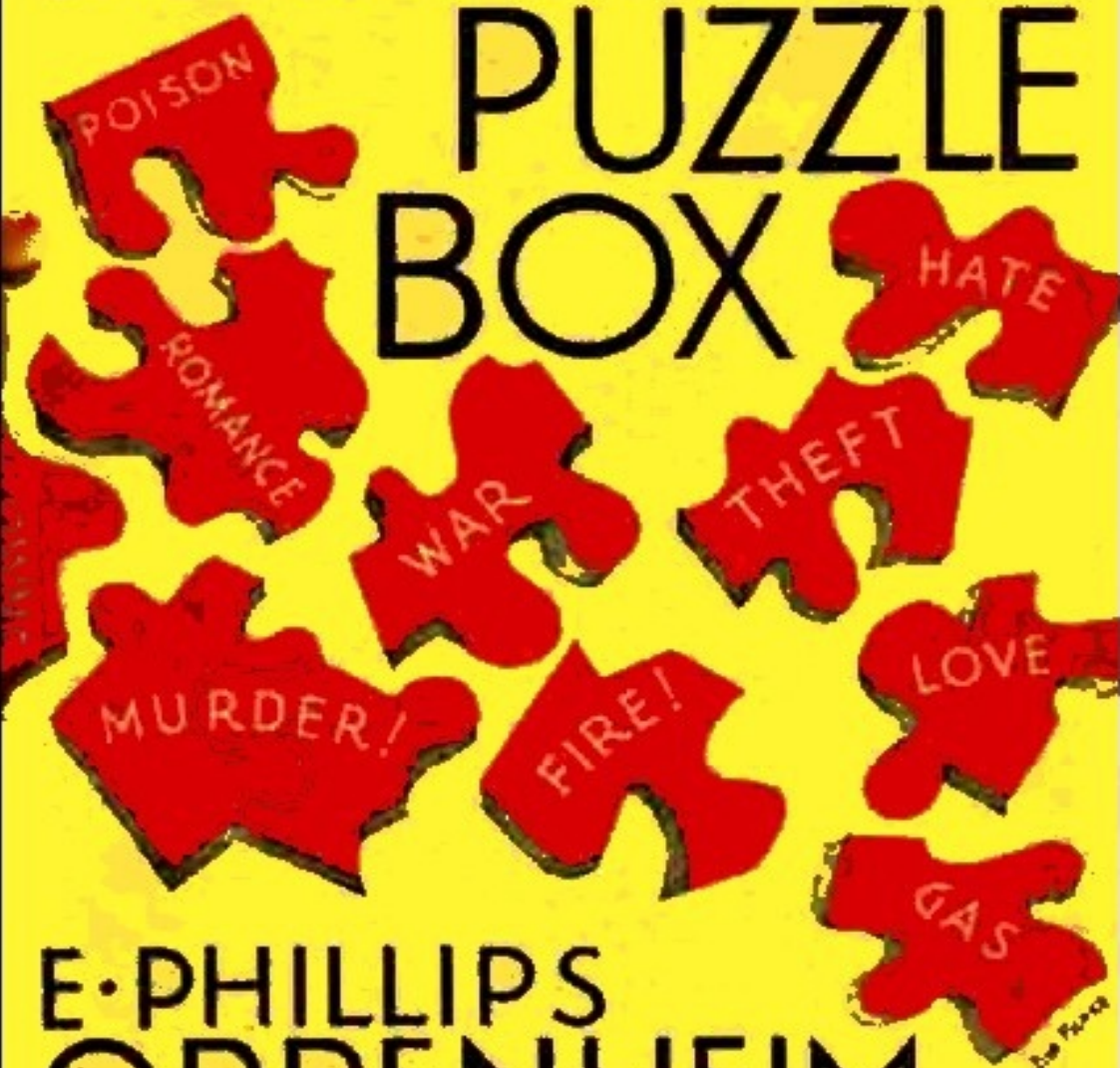


GENERAL BESSERLEY'S PUZZLE BOX



E·PHILLIPS
OPPENHEIM

The Puzzle

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GENERAL BESSERLEY'S PUZZLE BOX

By
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General Besserley's Puzzle Box

I

THE MAN WHO THOUGHT HE WAS A PAUPER

“General,” his companion pronounced, “you are getting fat. Too many cocktails.”

General Besserley, late of the Secret Service at Washington and now a very popular member of Monaco society, glanced downwards at his slightly increasing outline. He was rather a fine figure of a man and his carriage was beyond reproach, but it was certainly true that there was sometimes a little difficulty about the two bottom buttons of his waistcoat.

“Gas, Nicolas,” he confided. “I have spoken to the doctor once or twice about it lately. Not an ounce of fat anywhere. Gas—that’s what it is. Purely a temporary affair.”

The General proved that there was truth in his universal reputation as an

obstinate man by summoning a waiter and pointing to his empty glass. The two men were seated at the most desirable corner table of the Royalty Bar at Monte Carlo. They were sheltered from the full glare of the sun by the trees which overhung the picturesque little place, amongst whose broad tropical leaves a pleasant breeze from the Mediterranean was rustling. It was a very attractive spot in which to spend an idle hour and habitués were arriving every few moments.

“As for you, Nicolas,” he went on deliberately, “I would sooner burst my clothes every time I put them on than go about the world with a lank body and a dyspeptic, hangdog expression like yours. If you were not by way of being a pal, I would not even allow you to watch me drink a cocktail! I would make you take your lemon juice elsewhere. By-the-by, that reminds me—why have you come hunting me up this morning? Francis told me that you had telephoned.”

Mr. Nicolas Fox, Nickey to his very few cronies, coughed slightly.

“Yes, I did just want a word with you, General,” he acknowledged. “Any fresh taps upon the puzzle box?”

“Not a sign of one.”

Mr. Fox pulled out his underlip.

“Well,” he continued, “I am told you may have one before long. There is a young fellow here—been playing pretty high at *trente et quarante* and roulette the last few days. Last night in the Sporting Club he was playing maximums at *trente et quarante* and maximums at roulette at the same time.”

“Bad sign,” General Besserley agreed gloomily. “Shows the thing has got hold of him. I think I know the young fellow you mean, but I don’t seem to have heard his name.”

“Lavarie he calls himself. Guy Lavarie. I see he’s got ‘Bart.’ after his name in the visitors’ book in the Hôtel de Paris.”

Mr. Nicolas Fox’s narrow eyes seemed to have drawn a trifle nearer to each other. It was obvious that he was watching his companion intently. The latter, however, evinced no evidence of familiarity with the name.

“What makes you imagine,” he inquired, “that this young fellow might be bringing his troubles to me?”

“Two things,” was the cautious reply. “First, I saw him talking pretty fiercely to Sichel—he’s the head of the credit department at the Sporting Club, as I expect you know. He didn’t seem to be getting on with him at all. Secondly, he is rather the type of young fellow you take an interest in.”

The General frowned.

“You are suggesting, I suppose, that I might help him financially,” he exclaimed

indignantly.

“Well, you have the reputation here of putting your hand in your pocket pretty freely,” his friend rejoined.

“They will call me a moneylender next,” was the irate protest.

“They do now! I have heard more than one person wondering why the Establishment doesn’t give you a hint to leave Monte Carlo. If there’s any money-lending to be done that’s safe, they like to do it themselves.”

General Besserley chuckled. He knew his own business very well indeed, as also did the august members of the Société, and he knew that no one was less likely to receive that polite little suggestion that other pleasure resorts might be the gainers by his presence. He was no gambler but he was a rich man and he never hesitated to pay for his amusements.

“It’s this dyspepsia of yours that makes you take an embittered outlook on life, Nickey,” he sympathised. “You don’t realise the privilege you possess in being entitled to call yourself my friend. I am an honoured citizen of this Principality and *persona grata* with the authorities.”

“No doubt the Prince will be inviting you to high tea at the Palace before the season’s over!” Nicolas Fox suggested.

“If an invitation should come from the Palace, as is by no means unlikely,” the General declared, his fingers caressing his perfectly tied cravat, “it will be an affair of dinner at nine o’clock, orders worn. Chaffing apart, though, my sick friend, what is it that you want this morning? You have paid for a drink for me and you yourself have drunk two of those foul lemon juices. You must be expecting to get something out of it.”

“Because I don’t throw my money away in reckless fashion and because I happen to have been a member of the legal profession, I believe you think that I am a miser,” his companion grumbled.

“No more asides. Get along with it, Nicolas. I guess by the clumsy way you led up to it that you have something to say about this young fellow Lavarie.”

“Singularly enough,” Nicolas Fox admitted, with a great show of candour, “I have. It’s just this, General. You know I always take an interest in you. I wouldn’t see you get a raw deal. I’ve got it sort of settled in my mind that he will be looking you up before the day’s over. They cleaned him up last night and he’s not said a word about giving up his room. I found that out at the reception bureau at the hotel this morning. It’s not likely he would stay here without gambling and I’m pretty sure that he’s come to the end of the ready. The Casino have done their little bit. They have nothing more to say to him in the way of cheques or loans. That’s why he will

be coming to you.”

“I don’t dislike the look of the fellow,” Besserley remarked thoughtfully.

“You would dislike the look of his bank book if he showed it to you,” Nicolas Fox grunted.

“A man does not always keep his money in the bank,” was the General’s sententious comment. “To tell you the truth, I am not worrying so much about the young man just now. I am wondering why you thought it worth your while to track me down here to stop my lending him any money.”

It was obvious that Mr. Nicolas Fox was hurt. He called a waiter and demanded his bill.

“For everything except that last cocktail,” he directed.

He slowly picked up his gloves and Homburg hat.

“You think that you are very clever, Besserley,” he observed with dignity. “You can never give a friend credit for being disinterested.”

General Besserley, notwithstanding the strength of his face, was a man of jovial and kindly appearance and people sometimes forgot or overlooked his firm mouth and the shrewd though kindly light in his eyes. Mr. Nicolas Fox, on the other hand, “Foxy” as he had been called in his younger days, when he occupied a position in a well-known firm of Lincoln’s Inn lawyers, had little in his personality that was attractive. He suffered from an undue propinquity of his eyes. His complexion was certainly grey and unwholesome. Well tailored though he was, he had not his friend’s appearance—the appearance of a healthy man looking out upon a world which he liked and which liked him.

“Nicolas,” the latter said, “you are a cute fellow in your way, and honour bright, I do not dislike you or I would not be drinking with you. I would sooner keep friendly with you than have to make faces at you from the other side of the street. What you need is a little more candour. Why don’t you want me to lend this young man money?”

“He will only lose it.”

“Philanthropy, eh? That doesn’t go with me, Nickey. Try again.”

Mr. Fox shook his head.

“You are in one of your bright moods,” he said, as he rose to his feet. “Your brain is overactive. Suspicions stand out of you like feelers on a hypersensitive insect. I shall leave you alone.”

“It is the first time in my life,” Samuel Besserley, who was six feet two and broad in proportion, declared, “that I have been likened to an insect!”

Mr. Nicolas Fox stuck on his hat at what he considered a jaunty angle.

“We shall probably meet later on in the day,” was his valedictory remark. “If we do, be so good as not to refer to this morning’s conversation. I have changed my mind. I have no desire to save you pecuniary loss. A little bleeding will do you no harm. However, you can remember this. If you want to take an extremely wise precautionary step and incidentally to gratify the curiosity of a friend, let me know, if this man should come to you, the nature of the security he offers, if he should, by chance, plead for a loan. So long, General. You understand—the nature of the security he offers.”

He sauntered off. General Besserley leaned farther back in his chair, exchanged amenities with a neighbour and decided that life was good. At the farther end of the place a swarthy Neapolitan, with a tuneful guitar, was making pleasant and romantic music. Young women in pretty frocks bowed and smiled at the popular and generous American as they passed. Men in all conditions of life nodded to him knowingly, respectfully or in friendly fashion. He received many invitations to join other tables, to all of which he replied with the same excuse—“Waiting for a friend.” As a matter of fact, he was doing nothing of the sort. He was still pondering about the indefinite conversation with his friend. Why should Nicolas Fox be interested in the nature of the security which Sir Guy Lavarie might have to offer for a loan?

His reflections were presently disturbed very much in the manner he had hoped for. A smart two-seater automobile, built so low that its chassis seemed almost to touch the ground, swung round the open space in front of the bar and was cleverly piloted to a narrow vacancy. A girl, so pretty that, although she was a familiar figure, there was a little buzz of admiration from the different tables in the place, sprang to the ground, followed by a young man who would himself have been good-looking enough if his face had possessed some of the healthy tan of his companion’s. Both were in tennis kit and had evidently come straight from the courts. The girl laid her hand upon his arm.

“Behold,” she pointed out, “there’s Uncle Sam—the large, good-natured-looking person with the carnation in his buttonhole, at the corner table.”

The young man glanced with covert curiosity in the direction indicated.

“Why, he looks more like an English country gentleman than a millionaire likely to help a fellow out of a hole,” he declared.

“The General is not a moneylender,” the girl assured him, a little indignantly. “He is a very dear friend of mine. Everyone in Monte Carlo loves him. He gives good advice sometimes to young idiots like you, who gamble more than they can afford to, and he may offer them a loan now and then, but moneylenders are not allowed in the Principality. You ought to know that.”

"I thought he did it on the quiet, perhaps," the young man confessed. "You must introduce me, if you will, after we have had our cocktail."

They turned into the flower-hung enclosure.

"He will have gone away if we wait till then," the girl declared. "We will take our cocktails with him. Come along."

Her companion, a trifle unwillingly, was led to the table where Besserley was seated in solitary dignity. The latter's smile was almost cherubic as he greeted the girl.

"My dear Grace," he exclaimed, "you are late this morning. I was beginning to think that I should have to trudge down to my lunch without a sight of you."

"Tennis, my dear," she told him. "Such good tennis. This was my partner. General Besserley—Sir Guy Lavarie. The General is one of our Monte Carlo institutions."

"So I understand," the young man remarked, shaking hands.

"Sit down and have a cocktail," the General invited. "Lady Grace, you won't desert us?"

"For a moment or two only," she promised. "Order me a 'sidecar', please. There are one or two people I must speak to."

She passed on to an adjacent table, waving her hand and exchanging greetings with many friends. Besserley smiled as he summoned the waiter and gave his order.

"Lady Grace calls me an institution," he remarked. "She is a great deal more in the running than I am, though. The most popular young woman we have, I think."

"She is very charming," was the somewhat absent reply. "Plays a good game of tennis too. I used to know her when she was a schoolgirl, but upon my word I had forgotten her until Mendel, the secretary, introduced me the other day."

The General was not at all sure that he was going to like this young man.

"People do not, as a rule, forget Lady Grace," he observed stiffly.

Sir Guy drained off his cocktail at a gulp. There was a flash of something more pleasant in his tone and expression as he turned to his companion.

"Forgive my apparent greed," he begged. "I am ordering another for both of us. You don't mind? I had a late night. . . . Of course, Grace Shardlow is perfectly charming but she was quite a revelation to me. She was actually at boarding school when I saw her last."

Besserley was mollified.

"I hear that you have been taking them on at the tables. Done any good?"

The young man indulged in a significant grimace.

"I have lost a great deal more money than I can afford," he confessed. "The fact

of it is, General, when I asked to be introduced to you—I hope you won't be offended—it was with a definite object.”

“You were told that I was a moneylender, eh?”

“Of course not,” was the emphatic reply. “On the other hand, I did hear that you were the likeliest person about here to give anyone a leg up, provided he was a decent sort of a chap: the kind of fellow, for instance, who would pay back a loan.”

The General's smile was not discouraging.

“I lend money sometimes when it pleases me,” he admitted. “It has to be, however, to a friend or to a friend's friend. I am not by any means a professional at the game, though.”

“May I look you up and see if I can touch you for a spot of the ready?” Sir Guy asked diffidently.

“Come and have an early cocktail with me—say, seven o'clock at my rooms in the Paris,” the other invited.

Lady Grace, breaking off her conversation abruptly at an adjoining table, bore down upon them.

“Save me, Uncle Sam, please,” she implored. “All that mouldy crowd of Uncle Antony's are bothering me to come to a luncheon. I swore I was lunching with you but would try to get you to excuse me. Don't dare to let me down!”

He shook his head with well-assumed reluctance.

“You can't be excused, my dear. Ré's in half an hour. Go back and tell your friends that elderly gentlemen are very sensitive and cannot be thrown over in that fashion.”

She lingered for a moment, then did as she was bidden. Perhaps the slight cloud on her face was due to the fact that her prospective host did not include Sir Guy in his invitation.

Ré's is one of those old-fashioned, dignified restaurants which owes its success to the excellence of its cooking and to the exclusive nature of its clients. A new patron is looked upon with suspicion and strangers meet with a very cold reception indeed. On the other hand the cooking, personally supervised by the proprietor, is above criticism, and the bills for the same, personally supervised by his better half, account in some measure for its obvious lack of appeal to the general public. General Besserley and his guest, at a corner table in the window, talked of many things. Lady Grace, who had changed her tennis things for a cool, white linen frock and a fascinating béret, took her companion seriously to task on gastronomic matters.

“Uncle Sam,” she said firmly, “your penchant for all these rich meals, especially

in the middle of the day, will get you into trouble. Mayonnaise is a very good thing on a lobster salad, but mayonnaise such as you have ordered, delicious though it may be, is a sin! Some day you will fall in love and then the trouble will begin!"

"You mean that I shall have to bant," he observed. "I am not so sure. The days when nobody loved a fat man have passed."

"Seriously, my dear, you should be careful," she advised him. "But begin being careful when I am not lunching with you! How did you like my new young man?"

"He is personable," was the blunt admission, "but they say that he has been gambling very heavily and has no money. A young man like that is not much good to anybody, my dear."

She was silent for a few minutes.

"I'm afraid he is rather reckless," she acknowledged. "What are you going to do about him?"

"That depends upon whether I take a fancy to him or not. Do you want me to take a fancy to him for your sake?"

She felt his keen eyes fixed upon her. His question was almost a demand.

"No," she answered, after a moment's hesitation. "I am not so far gone as that."

A transfiguring smile changed his whole expression. She drew a sigh of relief.

"How handsome you can be when you are really agreeable, Uncle Sam," she murmured.

The luncheon, of course, with the Ré cuisine and its donor's gift of selection, was a marvellous meal. Nevertheless, about half-way through its service, Besserley glanced down the room and temporarily lost his appetite. Making his way towards the opposite corner table, with a somewhat sheepish grin upon his sallow face, was his friend Nicolas Fox and, accompanying him, lounged the young man whose losses the night before had become the subject of gossip!

"You see that?" the General pointed out.

His guest nodded and waved her hand.

"He told me he was probably lunching with a man who was a partner in the firm of lawyers his father used to employ," she confided.

"Nickey must have left the firm soon after your friend was born," her vis-à-vis acquiesced. "All the same, once a lawyer, always a rascal! I'll bet Nickey is not spending money on a lunch for nothing."

Mr. Nicolas Fox's hospitality had, at any rate, definite limits. He ordered the *table d'hôte* luncheon and, meeting with a somewhat indifferent response from his guest as to wine, chose a *vin rosé*.

"Is Mr. Fox a very rich man?" Lady Grace inquired.

"In wits, perhaps," was the somewhat sardonic reply. "I'm afraid that's mostly where his wealth lies. If he has a fortune tucked away, I fancy his bank doesn't know about it."

"Then I don't see what use he is to Guy," the girl meditated.

"Nobody could be of any use," her host said firmly, "to a young man who has no money, no prospects and wants to borrow with a view of going on gambling."

"It doesn't sound," she laughed, "as though you were going to be much use, either."

"I don't think I am," he agreed.

For some reason—perhaps the *table d'hôte* luncheon failed to please or the *vin rosé* was sour—the opposition luncheon party was brought to an end whilst the General and his guest were still meditating about their final *crêpes Suzette*. Adieux were exchanged and the two men left the restaurant. A few minutes later, during the temporary absence from the small room of the *maître d'hôtel* and the waiter, Besserley rose lightly to his feet, made his way to the table which the two men had occupied and, stooping down, picked up a slip of paper which lay upon the floor. He glanced at it and placed it carefully in his pocketbook. His companion watched him with a significant smile.

"Is that something which Sir Guy or Mr. Fox dropped?" she asked.

"Evidently."

"Hadn't you better put it in an envelope and give it to me to give to Sir Guy? I shall be seeing him this evening."

"So shall I—probably before you."

After that a different atmosphere seemed to reign. With the coffee he leaned over and laid his fingers upon his companion's wrist.

"Lady Grace," he said severely, "you are not behaving well."

"In what respect?"

"You have it in your mind that I have picked up something which belongs to someone else and have no intention of returning it."

"Well," she admitted, "doesn't it rather look like it?"

"To a superficial intelligence, perhaps," he acknowledged gravely. "I have known you since you were a child, though. Have I ever done anything that you would consider dishonourable?"

"Never."

"In this hotbed of gossip, as often as not malicious," he went on, "have you ever heard anyone suggest that I have been guilty of a dishonourable action?"

"Never."

“Very well, then,” he insisted, “don’t let a momentary prejudice or a fancy that just flits through your brain carry any weight. If I do not at once return this paper to whom it belongs, it is for the sake of your friend, Sir Guy Lavarie.”

She leaned over and kissed him in brazen fashion on the cheek.

“I am a silly idiot, my dear man,” she confessed. “I would trust you whatever you do.”

Sir Guy Lavarie presented himself at General Besserley’s apartment at precisely the hour arranged. He was received in the usual Anglo-Saxon fashion.

“Cocktail or whisky and soda?”

“Dry Martini, please,” the visitor begged.

The General, with meticulous care but disdain for a measure, mixed two cocktails at the sideboard and poured them out with a professional air. His guest was impressed.

“You seem to have got that exactly right, sir,” he commented, setting down his glass.

“Took me years,” was the gratified admission. “I think I could do it now blindfold. It’s just the fraction more gin than vermouth that’s difficult. . . . So you lunched with my friend Nickey Fox this morning?”

The young man nodded.

“He doesn’t seem to have lost interest in the family affairs, either. He was asking questions from the moment we sat down until we had finished our coffee.”

“What about?”

“Chiefly about some wretched gold mine in which my father lost all his money.”

“What did he want to know about it?”

Sir Guy raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t see that that has anything to do with our business,” he said. “As a matter of fact, he was wondering why my father took over all the shares which he had sold to his friends and why he sold them back to Lord Wendover, the chairman of another mine, at about sixpence each.”

“And why did he?”

“Not for any reason you could hope to make a man like Mr. Fox understand,” was the caustic reply. “He took the shares back because he had advised his friends to buy them. He sold them for nothing because they were worth nothing.”

“Did Fox offer to lend you any money?”

The young man smiled.

“I didn’t ask him. As a matter of fact, we didn’t get on together particularly well.

Mr. Fox was not a very agreeable host and I am sure I was a very unappreciative guest. All the time he gave me the idea that he was trying to worm something out of me, and all the time I knew that I had nothing to tell.”

Besserley motioned his guest to a chair and handed over a box of cigarettes.

“Let’s get down to business,” he suggested. “You have been gambling out here, you have lost your money and you want to borrow some more.”

“Quite true,” the other assented, “if I can find anyone idiot enough to lend it to me.”

“We’ll see later on. What do you want to do with it? Do you want to replace what you have lost in England, or do you want to have another shy at the gambling?”

“I want to go on gambling. A few months ago, just as I realised that I was absolutely penniless, an old aunt left me seven thousand pounds. Seven thousand pounds didn’t seem the faintest use to me. I could not live in my own house upon the interest of it, I couldn’t shoot, ride or even pay my servants’ wages. Of course, I didn’t expect to come out here and pick up money easily, but I did think that it was about time that my luck turned, and if I could even have doubled that seven thousand of mine I might have got along somehow.”

“And instead you lost it?”

“I not only lost it,” the young man admitted frankly, “but the cashier at the Sporting is expecting me to give him a cheque for five hundred when I come in this evening, and that happens to be considerably more than I have in the bank.”

The General’s smile was both agreeable and sympathetic.

“Not by any means an unheard-of situation,” he observed. “What are you going to do about it? Cheques that are not met lead to all sorts of unpleasantness in this part of the world.”

Sir Guy flushed.

“I have just sufficient personal belongings to raise enough money to honour that cheque when I give it,” he confided. “The point is, however, that I am not satisfied. I don’t feel knocked out yet. I want to borrow a few thousand pounds and have another go.”

“You are very frank,” his host remarked, lighting a cigarette and pushing the box once more across the table.

“I always try to be.”

“What security have you?”

“Not a single scrap.”

“What about the house? Lavarie Court used to be rather a famous place, I was told.”

“Two mortgages. If it had to go up for sale, the second mortgagee would lose money.”

“Any furniture?”

“Also mortgaged. There’s some Queen Anne and Chippendale stuff which might pull the thing straight, but not a penny over.”

The General reflected.

“Horses, guns, furniture in town flat?” he suggested. “Jewellery?”

“Nothing worth a bean. The pearl studs I wear in the evening are the only jewellery I ever possessed. Might be worth eighty pounds at a pinch.”

“Well, that doesn’t make things very easy, does it? Didn’t your father leave any shares or life insurance?”

“He left nothing.”

Besserley reflected for several moments upon that slip of paper which he had picked up in Ré’s restaurant.

“He had interests once in South African gold mines, didn’t he? The East Ungwar, I think, was the name of the mine.”

“He had very large interests in that particular one, unfortunately,” the young man acknowledged. “It helped to ruin him. He believed in it. He even went so far as to go out to South Africa to inspect it. The mine went ‘phut’ and the little he had left he spent taking the shares back from the people he had advised to buy them.”

The General’s thoughts were still upon that scrap of paper.

“And where are the shares now?” he asked.

The young man sighed.

“I have already told you that they were worthless,” he said, “but as a matter of fact, my father sold them before he died.”

“Privately or upon the market?”

Sir Guy laughed scornfully.

“There was no quotation whatever upon the market,” he confided. “They were taken over by the West Ungwar, which seems to be a very prosperous concern. They only wanted them to secure their right of water which passes near. They gave about sixpence a share, which was supposed to be a great deal more than they were worth. It was before your friend Mr. Fox’s time, but he seemed to know something about it. . . . Damn good cocktail that was.”

The General took the hint. He rather liked the laugh in the young man’s eyes when he made the suggestion.

“No, sir,” the latter continued, as he accepted the glass. “I am not worth a bob in the world. I have tried to earn money for the last five years and failed. I can quite

understand that no sane person would be willing to lend me any. Let's forget it. One doesn't starve nowadays, anyway."

"Do you feel lucky this evening?"

"What's the good?" the young man demanded, with a new note of sullenness in his tone. "I went into the 'kitchen' this afternoon for half an hour until it was time for my tennis match. My numbers were turning up at every table I went to and at the *trente et quarante* table there was run of sixteen upon red—the only colour I back!"

"Too bad," his host sympathised, unlocking a despatch box. "Give me an I.O.U. for a hundred *mille*, young fellow. That will enable you to pay back the Sporting Club people and amuse you for the evening. I will see you again to-morrow."

Sir Guy accepted the notes without hesitation and signed the I.O.U.

"You will have to wait the devil of a time for your money if I lose," he warned his benefactor.

"If you lose, you may have to wait the devil of a time before you get any more," the General assured him.

The young man pocketed the notes.

"Why are you lending me this money?" he asked curiously.

"That is a very intelligent question to which I have no reply," was the smiling rejoinder. "I am going to turn you out now. I have a telephone call coming through from London."

"Shall I see you later?"

"Sporting Club for dinner, a couple of hours' roulette afterwards and a look at this new dancer in the Night Club—that's my programme for the evening."

"Then we shall certainly come across one another," was the young man's valedictory remark.

As a quarter to twelve on the following morning, General Besserley descended from a very handsome automobile and was bowed to his accustomed table by one of the urbane proprietors of the Royalty Bar. He was becomingly attired in grey flannels and panama hat, he wore the tie of a famous club, his pleasant rubicund face was fresh from the ministrations of the coiffeur and his hands showed signs of the manicurist's care. Altogether he was a remarkably good-looking and well-turned-out specimen of the early middle-aged cosmopolitan just a trifle short of exercise. He ordered the customary Americano, which was the usual prelude to his two cocktails before luncheon, and, opening a tin of fragrant cigarettes, lit one with a sigh of pleasure. He had already exchanged a good many salutations but he had a peculiar

way of giving his friends to understand when he wished for their company and when he preferred to remain for the time alone. To-day it was evidently solitude for the moment that appealed to him, and no one was tactless enough to encroach upon it. At twelve o'clock he took out his watch and frowned. He was a punctual man himself and he liked punctuality in others. At five minutes past twelve he summoned one of the white-coated waiters.

"Henri," he directed, "ring up Mr. Fox at the Imperial Flats and say that General Besserley is waiting for him at the Royalty."

The waiter hurried away. He returned very shortly.

"Mr. Fox was called unexpectedly to Paris yesterday evening, sir," he announced.

The General's lips were pursed in an imaginary whistle.

"Ah, indeed," he murmured, half to himself.

The waiter drew a little nearer.

"The concierge said Paris, sir," he went on, "but I happened to be in the agency of the C.A.F. last evening and I heard Mr. Fox asking if he could catch a plane from Le Bourget early this morning. It looked as though he were going to London."

Besserley appeared grave but there was nevertheless a twinkle in his eye. This was indeed pleasant confirmation of his suspicions.

"Then I won't wait any longer for my cocktail," he observed. "The usual, Henri, if you please. . . ."

Lady Grace came in a few minutes later with a large party. She detached herself at once and came over to where her friend was seated. He looked at her critically as he held her chair.

"Up late, my dear?" he asked.

"Latish," she admitted. "That poor boy was so depressed that I had to take him on and dance."

"Lost all his money, I suppose?"

She nodded.

"He had just kept enough for the supper. I'm afraid he is not lucky, Uncle Sam. What a pity it is that none of the nice people seem to be."

Her companion watched the arrival of the cocktails and lit a cigarette.

"My dear," he confided, "I am not so sure about that. I am inclined to think that Guy Lavarie is a very lucky young man indeed."

"A pauper," she exclaimed, "and with no idea how to earn money—only a singular capacity for losing it! You must have been digging very deep in your puzzle box, Uncle Sam!"

The General avoided the argument.

“Supposing he were rich,” he asked, looking at her steadily, “how should you feel about him, Grace?”

“Very much as I do now,” she answered. “I like him. I think that he is nice and there are so few nice men nowadays. Of course, there’s you, my dear,” she went on, letting her hand fall upon his. “But as every young woman in Monte Carlo has had a try for you and given it up, not to speak of dozens of grass widows, I expect I shall have to fall in line with them.”

“I have never noticed any particular effort on your part to win my young affections,” he reflected.

“Well, I can’t wear my heart upon my sleeve in Monte Carlo, of all places, can I?” she laughed.

“Supposing you tried to be serious for one moment,” he begged. “If this young man had money, would you marry him?”

“Would he ask me?” she fenced.

“If he did ask you,” Besserley persisted patiently.

She considered the matter.

“It is a very difficult question,” she confessed. “The only thing I can say is that I could not marry him unless he had money.”

“I suppose that is as near a definite reply as I am going to get, is it?” he asked bluntly.

A cryptic smile played about her lips.

“No girl really knows beforehand whether she is going to accept a man or not until he actually asks her,” she pronounced. “Then it depends very often upon a trifle—upon what sort of tie he is wearing, his use of pronouns, or whether he gets just the right amount of timbre in his voice. . . . Don’t let’s discuss such profitless questions. Is there any chance of the poor boy coming into money? I’m sure there’s not or he would have told me so.”

“He may not know himself,” the General meditated. “One cannot tell. Mr. Nicolas Fox has gone to London to find out. If Mr. Nicolas Fox returns to-morrow or the next day and offers him a loan on very liberal terms—”

“We were not speaking of miracles,” Grace interrupted with a laugh.

“Where is the lad this morning?”

“I really do not know,” she admitted. “He was not in our tennis four so he said he should stay at home and write letters.”

There was an uneasy look in her questioner’s face.

“I never,” he acknowledged, “feel entirely comfortable about the man who has

been losing a great deal more money than he can afford to lose at Monte Carlo and who stays in on a fine morning to write letters.”

“You are lunching with us,” she reminded him, as she turned away.

“My dear, I am going to ask you to excuse me,” he begged. “It is only your young tennis crowd, I know, and I am not quite in the party humour.”

“You are not ill?” she asked anxiously.

“Liver,” he confided. “I shall lunch off a dry biscuit and a glass of soda water.”

She turned and laughed back at him as she answered a signal from her friends.

“You are not getting one scrap of sympathy from me,” she called out, “because I don’t believe a word of it.”

Nevertheless, General Besserley was not wholly at ease. The shadow of anxiety which had disturbed him at the Royalty Bar was increased when, upon asking for Sir Guy Lavarie at the Hôtel de Paris, he was civilly told that Sir Guy had left word that he was particularly engaged for the next two hours and did not wish to be disturbed.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the reception clerk apologetically. “I am sure if he had known that you were going to call, it would have been a different affair but, as it is, perhaps it would be as well if you asked again or rang him up later in the day.”

“I will look Sir Guy up before dinner time,” his caller promised with well-assumed carelessness. “Number 279, isn’t it?”

“Quite so, sir.”

The General, however, had no intention of postponing his visit a second longer than was necessary. He ascended in the lift as though to go to his own rooms but he descended again almost at once to the floor below, paid a brief visit to the service room, where he helped himself to a master key from a drawer, went out on to the corridor and, boldly opening the door of Number 279, entered. The young man, who was seated at a writing table, turned his head impatiently. He recognised his visitor with surprise.

“How the devil did you get in?” he demanded. “I thought that I’d locked the door.”

Besserley was apologetic but firm.

“I have had some experience of young men going through a rough time in Monte Carlo who lock themselves up in their salons,” he explained. “I stole the passkey from the service room.”

“I don’t see what the devil right you have to do anything of the sort,” Lavarie exclaimed angrily. “How dare you force your way into my apartment?”

The General’s expression was entirely disarming.

“My young friend,” he said, “I am not quite so old as I look, perhaps, but I am still your senior by a great many years. I know the shape of a gun when a newspaper has been thrown hurriedly over it, and I know what the first impulse of a young man generally is after the excitement of gambling and the depression of losing, if he has nothing particular to look forward to in life.”

There was a glint of red in the young man’s eyes. His hand stole underneath the newspaper. The situation had suddenly become tense.

“Look here,” he rejoined, “there is no need for any beating about the bush. I have no particular grudge against you, sir, but if you don’t clear out right away, there’s going to be a double tragedy instead of a single one. I’m sorry about your hundred *mille*, if that’s what you’ve come for. You may get it or you may not. It was your own risk. I didn’t worry you for your money.”

“Of course you didn’t,” his unwelcome visitor admitted. “As a matter of fact, I’ve brought you another fifty *mille* to try your luck again to-night.”

Sir Guy stared in astonishment. A new emotion—surprise—found its way into his brain. From that moment Besserley knew that the situation was saved.

“A few minutes ago,” the former said deliberately, “I was quite convinced that I was temporarily insane and that a verdict to that effect would be entirely in order. Just now I am inclined to think that it is you who have gone off the deep end. Is this a new cure you are trying on me, like the half bottle of whisky a day for drunkards?”

The General, his hands in his pockets, lounged lazily across the room towards the window. With a sudden swift, but seemingly unhurried movement, the newspaper was swept away and the weapon underneath transferred to his own pocket. The young man watched him without apparent interest.

“You will make me a present of this as a memento in a few weeks’ time, young fellow,” he assured him. “Believe me, meanwhile, if I am an intruder, I have not come here to preach. I am rather a believer in suicide under certain circumstances. The trouble about you, though, is that you are a trifle hasty. I have a sort of fancy that your luck’s going to change.”

“You wouldn’t say so if you had seen my last few stakes at the tables,” was the bitter reply.

“I’m not talking of gambling. That’s a very small thing in life. I shouldn’t have said a word about this just yet if you had not hurried things to a crisis, but I hold a divining rod in such matters and I have a sort of fancy that you are coming into money.”

“It’s not possible,” was the fervent denial.

“Well, there’s one man who thinks it is,” the General declared. “That’s Nicolas

Fox. He's gone off to London to see about it—taken a plane so as to get there before I could interfere. I wouldn't mind laying five to one that before twenty-four hours are past, you have either a very pleasant visit or a civil request from that gentleman to be allowed to lend you just as much money as you want."

Sir Guy leaned back in his chair and laughed.

"Tragedies are off for the day, anyway," he said. "Ring the bell, there's a good fellow. It's close to your finger. We'll have a cocktail."

"Nothing," his self-invited guest pronounced heartily, "would give me greater pleasure."

Refreshments were brought in by a rather relieved floor waiter, who stared in surprise at seeing a third person in the room.

"You may be nothing but an interfering old busybody, sir," Lavarie continued, as soon as they were alone again. "There's something about you I rather like, though. Here's the best of health! Now, listen to me. You say that I am coming into money. I have not one single living relative who owns as much as a thousand pounds. I don't possess a square yard of land unmortgaged standing in my own name. I don't own a single share in any mine, land scheme, industrial concern or any of those Arabian Nights sort of things from which fortunes spring up in the night. I own nothing. Now, from whom and from where can a fortune come to me?"

His visitor chuckled.

"It is a problem, isn't it? You sit tight, though, take another fifty *mille* from me to-night and by to-morrow something may have happened. I have been doing a little telephoning to London myself and I am getting a line on Mr. Fox."

The young man smiled. He was really very good-looking at times.

"Of course, it's all rubbish, but I shall do just what you say," he conceded.

"Then get your hat," the other enjoined, "and I will take you over to the Réserve at Beaulieu. You shall taste there the *Jeunes Desmoiselles* of the sea as no one else in the world except the Beaulieu chef can prepare them."

Sir Guy took up his hat in meek obedience.

Mr. Nicolas Fox, through the accident of having taken a *voiture* from the station instead of waiting for the rather heavily laden bus, very nearly achieved the most successful escapade of his career as a schemer on the right side of the law. The paper was drawn up and a very dazed young man was already taking the fountain pen into his hand. The latter ventured upon one final protest.

"Look here, Mr. Fox," he said, "before I sign, or rather before you hand me over that cheque you have been brandishing about, I want you clearly to understand

this. I don't own a single share in the West Ungwar Gold Mine. The East Ungwar Gold Mine, which practically broke my father, does not exist any longer, and if it did my father sold every share he possessed before his death. I shall borrow this money from you if you insist upon it, but I can see no earthly means of paying it back."

Mr. Nicolas Fox wiped the perspiration from his forehead. Considering that he had ridden up from the station, his condition of fatigue certainly denoted a low state of vitality.

"You have some very valuable old furniture," he declared impressively, "and as I told you before, Sir Guy, I think I could disentangle your estates more profitably than anyone else. I have plenty of money and it gives me pleasure to be a lender. Personally, I don't mind if you gamble. The money is yours, or will be, when you have signed that paper, and I should not be surprised if you succeed in making a fortune. There was a Dutchman here last week who went away with a hundred thousand pounds."

"Yes, that's all very well," Lavarie commented, in a rather worried tone, "but I see that this paper you want me to sign cedes to you any rights I might have remaining in the East or West Ungwar mines. Well, if I sign it, anyone would think that I had told you I had such rights, whereas I have told you quite frankly that I have not. The East Ungwar Gold Mine was wiped right out of existence, and in the West Ungwar even my father never owned a single share."

"You don't need to worry about that," Mr. Fox urged feverishly. "I only want this note as a matter of form. The thing must be done in a legal fashion and I have to prove that certain considerations have been given me for the loan. I agree with you that the consideration shewn is not worth a snap of the fingers but it makes the whole business right from a legal point of view."

Sir Guy took up the pen and searched for the place where his signature was pencilled in. Just at that moment there was a knock at the door and General Besserley entered. The young man stared at him in amazement. There was something a good deal more malevolent in Mr. Nicolas Fox's expression.

"Sorry if I am intruding," the newcomer apologised. "They did tell me that you were engaged, Sir Guy, but I thought I'd better come right up. Hello, Nickey! What's London like?"

"How did you know that I'd been to London?" the lawyer asked with a sickly smile.

"Nicolas Fox," was the impressive reply, "you are one of those men whom I made a point of watching since we first met down here. A man who has an engagement to drink a cocktail with a friend and who slips away to London without

saying a word—hiring a plane for half the journey, mind—is a man of suspicious habits. Why did you go to London, Nickey?”

“What the hell has that to do with you?” was the angry retort. “If it comes to that, what are you butting in here for, anyway? I am engaged in a business talk with the son of a client of my old firm.”

“I really think, sir—” Lavarie began, glancing at the cheque which Nicolas was still holding.

“Don’t,” the General interrupted. “Let me do the thinking. It will probably be more profitable for you. In the first place, are you borrowing money from our friend, Mr. Nicolas Fox?”

“That’s rather the idea,” Lavarie acknowledged. “He seems very anxious to lend it.”

“There’s not the slightest need for you to borrow,” the newcomer told him emphatically. “You are a comparatively wealthy man, Sir Guy.”

The latter was thunderstruck. He stared at his visitors, who remained speechless. Nicolas Fox’s upper lip was slightly raised, showing his unpleasant teeth. His eyes seemed to have come closer than ever together.

“Rubbish!” he exclaimed. “Sir Guy is practically penniless. My old firm wound up his father’s affairs when Sir Guy here was at a preparatory school, so we ought to know.”

“*You* were invited to leave the firm,” the General said, “too early to know anything about a certain incident, or you would have been hunting for Sir Guy long ago!”

“What incident?” Nicolas Fox demanded.

“The sale by Sir Guy’s father, under certain conditions, of the whole of the remaining shares in the East Ungwar Gold Mine to the present Lord Wendover’s father, who was chairman of the company.”

“There’s nothing to come to me out of that,” the young man lamented. “The shares were extinguished.”

“The East Ungwar Gold Mine,” Nicolas Fox declared, “was dismantled and abandoned many years ago.”

“That’s quite true, so far as it goes,” General Besserley agreed. “The late Lord Wendover and Mr. Philpotts, I think his name was, the then secretary of the company, were perfectly honest in what they did. They bought up the old shares in the East Ungwar Gold Mine at a ridiculous price, but still more than they were worth in those days, simply and solely to secure the water rights necessary to their own mine. I repeat that there was no idea in the mind of anyone that these shares were

worth anything at all, except as giving the water rights.”

“No more they were,” Nicolas Fox burst in. “What’s all this about?”

“But,” the General continued, gently but firmly, “by some miraculous instinct of self-preservation on the part of Sir Guy’s father, or I am inclined to think that it may have been a quixotic idea on the part of the late Lord Wendover, an agreement was signed at the time of the sale that if, at any later date, the West Ungwar Gold Mine should sink fresh shafts on the property they were acquiring from their neighbours, or should work the mine for gold in any way, they should hand over to the representatives of the Lavarie family, at the market price of the day, shares in the West Ungwar Gold Mine equal in number to those they were purchasing and extinguishing from the East Ungwar. The miracle has happened! The most valuable lode of the West Ungwar properties has been discovered to turn almost at right angles into the property which formerly belonged to the East Ungwar! Shafts have been sunk and to-day gold is being mined in large quantities. The market price of the shares, I see, is forty-seven shillings. The debt due to Sir Guy upon the hundred thousand shares is something like two hundred and thirty thousand pounds.”

“This is rubbish,” Nicolas Fox exclaimed angrily. “There is no such agreement in force.”

“The original agreement,” General Besserley continued, with a cheerful smile, “could only have been in the one remaining box labelled ‘The Lavarie Estates’ which the present members of the firm to which our friend here belonged had consigned to an attic many years ago. From inquiries I have made, Mr. Nicolas Fox paid a visit to his late firm on Wednesday, I think it was, and he could probably—if he cared to—give us more precise information.”

“It’s a lie,” Nicolas Fox shouted. “I have never seen or heard of such an agreement. I don’t believe that it exists. My business in London was of a different nature altogether.”

“The matter is of no importance,” the General declared suavely.

“Of no importance!” the bewildered young man repeated.

“Simply because,” the other went on, “fortunately for you, people in those days were meticulously careful when anything connected with gold mines was doing and an exact copy of the agreement, signed by the late Lord Wendover and Stephen Philpotts, the late secretary of the West Ungwar Gold Mine, was filed at the time at Somerset House, where it now exists. For a small fee I procured a copy of it. The present Lord Wendover knew nothing of his father’s action but he is staying at this hotel at the present moment and he has assured me that on production of the necessary papers, the claimant of the Lavarie interests, who is our young friend Sir

Guy here, will be paid in cash or in shares from the reserves held by the company.”

“Do you mean to say,” Guy Lavarie gasped, “that the money is coming to me?”

“Every penny of it,” the General assured him. “There will be the question of interest too, unless you like to waive it. The copy of the agreement is in my pocket and you shall read it the moment we are alone.”

Nicolas Fox took the hint. He snatched up the document which the young man had been in the act of signing, replaced his fountain pen in his pocket, took up his hat and left the room.

A few mornings later General Besserley, seated in his usual place at the Royalty Bar, gravely folded up the financial paper which he had been studying and, leaning a little farther back in his chair, gazed upwards through the rustling green leaves to the blue sky. For several moments he remained wrapped in silent reflection and it would have taken a very clever physiognomist to have divined the nature of his thoughts. Suddenly he was conscious of a very slight but delicately familiar perfume. He opened his eyes. Someone was leaning over him. He looked into Grace’s laughing face.

“And that glove shop so conveniently near!” she sighed.

“I can relapse again,” he assured her.

She glanced at the newspaper and laughed outright.

“Don’t tell me that the *Financial Times* can send you off into a world of fancies like that,” she exclaimed.

“I won’t quote Shakespeare to you,” he replied, “but I am not at all sure that there is not as much romance in Throgmorton Street sometimes as in this perfervid atmosphere. As a matter of fact, I have just been reading an account of the extraordinary meeting convoked by young Lord Wendover, chairman of the West Ungwar Gold Mines.”

“What happened?”

“The Lavarie claim was recognised and the meeting decided that it should be paid for in cash out of the reserve.”

“How much did it amount to?”

“Nearly a quarter of a million.”

“Well, I hope that young man won’t gamble it all away,” she said fervently.

“I suppose to-morrow or the next day we shall see something of him?”

She shook her head.

“I don’t think so.”

He straightened himself in his chair.

“What do you mean? Of course, he has written you.”

“I did have a letter,” she admitted. “As a matter of fact, he suggested coming down.”

“And you?”

She, too, looked up for a moment at the patches of brilliantly blue sky between the leaves.

“I told him that it was a little too late in the season,” she answered.

II

THE LADY IN THE GREY WIG

There was no doubt whatever that General Besserley was a very brave man for, although he believed himself, with perfectly good reason, to be in imminent danger of his life, he betrayed no signs whatever of disquietude. At the extreme end of the seat in the gardens, between the side entrance to the Salle Privée of the Casino and the steep narrow road which runs down to the Mirabeau, was the curiously hunched-up figure of a man—black-browed, sullen, menacing. Worse a great deal than his disagreeable appearance was the fact that he was holding with a grip of iron, almost concealed by the black overcoat he had been carrying and had thrown carelessly across his knees, the ugliest little pug-nosed revolver the General had ever seen.

“It’s a pity,” the latter regretted, striving to keep all signs of uneasiness from his tone, “that you seem to have taken a dislike to me; otherwise I might have been inclined to help you.”

“Who told you that I needed help?” was the sullen rejoinder.

“Your demeanour suggests it,” the General pointed out. “Men don’t kill themselves for nothing.”

“It’s not myself I’m going to kill,” the other replied. “It’s you.”

“That makes the matter still more difficult,” Besserley persisted. “I’m quite a well-known person here—even the custodian in the garden knows me and has seen us here together. So has also the croupier, who has just passed and said good night to me. You will without doubt be committing suicide as well as murder—only suicide in a very unpleasant way.”

“What do you mean?”

“You will either have your head chopped off or be hung.”

“You think of everything, don’t you?” the other observed.

“My brain is usually active at this time of night,” Besserley admitted.

“You imagine yourself very clever,” was the jeering comment. “You probably think that I am not up to your game. Well, I’ll let you know. You’re wondering how to get away from this little hole in the middle of my six-shooter. You’re praying that something may turn up. You’re talking to gain time, that’s what you’re doing.”

“Well, that’s true in a sense,” the threatened man conceded. “As a matter of fact, I am thirsty. I should hate to die thirsty. Can you hear that sound of tinkling music from the restaurant below? They have excellent whisky there and a very reputable brand of champagne.”

“Well?”

“If you felt inclined to postpone this act of homicide,” his companion continued, “we might at any rate have a drink together before we proceeded to extremities. I am rather an adventurer in life myself and one of the experiences which has never come my way is to have taken a drink with my prospective slayer.”

“The ‘Knickerbocker’,” the man muttered.

“Well, why not?”

“Merely a ruse on your part, I suspect, sir, but on the whole your suggestion appeals to me. You will kindly keep your distance if we are to walk together.”

The General, scenting a reprieve, rose gladly to his feet. He lit a cigarette as they strolled towards the garden gate and sighed when he reflected upon a certain period of his life when that cigarette case might have been a weapon quite as effectual as that with which he was now threatened. But he took no liberties. He watched the stranger closely and with ever-increasing astonishment. The latter, drawn to his full height, was as tall as Besserley himself. His expression was sullen and almost fierce but his features were good and the cast of his face patrician. He carried himself with a not ungraceful lounge and the way in which he handled his little plaything showed that it was not the first time he had trifled with life and death. But there were more surprises in store for Besserley. The commissionaire, who greeted him with his usual consideration, was even more flamboyantly obsequious to his companion. Frederick, the proprietor of the place, who met them on the threshold, offered a greeting which seemed almost cursory to the General, a well-known client, but bowed servilely to his companion. The same thing happened with the *maître d’hôtel*, who ushered them to a vacant table and, to complete the General’s bewilderment, the one remaining Grand Duke on the Riviera, a handsome, debonair young man who might have belonged to the Stuart period, almost ignored Besserley’s presence in favour of the other man. The latter selected a table at which he seated himself but at right angles to the General. He smiled unpleasantly enough but with a gleam of humour, as he noticed his host’s attempts to avoid such dangerous proximity.

“You seem to be well known here,” the latter remarked.

“Moderately. Don’t ask any questions just yet, please. You are not very popular with me as it is. Too pronounced curiosity would only hasten matters.”

Besserley drew away his knees gingerly.

“Keep that damned thing in your pocket,” he enjoined irritably. “If I have to sit next to a man who has made up his mind, for some unknown reason, to shoot me, I don’t want to be reminded of it all the time. For God’s sake, put down that wine list too. You can’t want to drink champagne at this time of night. You can have it if you wish, but I should recommend you to follow my example and have a whisky and

soda.”

“What business is it of yours what I drink?” the stranger demanded.

“No particular business of mine, perhaps,” was the curt reply—“except that as I am going to pay for it, I might claim the right to make a suggestion.”

“And who,” the other asked scornfully, “gave you the idea that you were going to be permitted the honour of paying for my drink?”

“Have you got any money?” Besserley retorted bluntly.

The stranger produced a very beautiful Morocco wallet from his breast coat pocket, carefully manipulating it with one hand only. He allowed it to fall open. There were more *mille* notes there than his neighbour had ever carried with him in his life.

“Are you satisfied that I am in a position to pay my own way?” the owner of the pocketbook inquired sarcastically.

“Absolutely. What I don’t understand is, if you have plenty of money, why were you sitting on a seat in the gardens, with the air of a would-be suicide, and why did you aggravate the whole affair by having an idea of adding murder to your peccadilloes?”

“Ah, that’s another story,” the stranger replied, fixing himself a whisky and soda and pushing the bottle across the table.

The Grand Duke, who was in a genial, not to say hilarious mood, paused in the middle of a dance and let his hand fall lightly on the shoulder of Besserley’s companion.

“My friend,” he remonstrated, “no one has a right to come to a gay resort like this with such clouds upon his face. If you are depressed, drink more rapidly. If you are still depressed, dance with one of these little *filles de joie*—there are three of them in that corner, terribly neglected. Life, if it ends to-night, is not worth that frown.”

The man addressed seemed curiously lacking in respect towards a person of high social rank. He remained seated and that left hand of his, which Besserley had grown to hate, was still in the pocket of his dinner jacket.

“I have not the good fortune to possess your disposition, sir,” he rejoined drily.

Alexander shrugged his shoulders. He was still handsome but the lines of dissipation might almost be said to have scarred his face. His eyes were deeply sunken. There was about his manner something of that nervousness which denotes high pressure.

“Do you really believe, you or any of those others,” he asked cynically, “that you can judge a man’s deportment towards the world by his appearance? Was it not

Voltaire who said, ‘A monarch who plays the jester must have the heart of a hero’?”

Alexander, whose partner was getting a little impatient, passed on. Besserley toyed with the whisky bottle.

“I should like to know your name,” he said. “I also think that you might abandon your rather silly pose as a would-be assassin.”

There was a flash in the other’s eyes.

“Pose, you call it,” he remarked. “Well, have it your own way. Nevertheless, there was a time when I had firmly determined to shoot you.”

“But why?” Besserley persisted. “What harm have I done you?”

“No personal harm,” the other admitted. “You represent a type with whom I have no sympathy. You are so full of poise, so admirably sure of yourself. Then, you are enjoying life far too much. I myself am a failure. I hate people who are successes. I had no personal grudge against you. If I had pulled that trigger, it would simply have been to have gratified my sense of humour.”

“Then, for God’s sake, get rid of your sense of humour!” the General enjoined a little irritably. “I am beginning to think I was right the first time. No one but a *poseur* would talk such rubbish.”

“I only seem to you a *poseur*,” his companion complained, “because I have abandoned restraint. I am speaking the truth the whole time and saying just what I feel. However, we will let that go. The moment has passed. You are safe.”

Besserley was somewhat ashamed of it afterwards but he certainly turned towards his whisky and soda with an immense sense of relief.

“I think you have chosen wisely,” he declared. “I was going to offer you my assistance out there in the gardens but you seem scarcely to need it.”

One of the Grand Duke’s party, on his way to the door, nodded a pleasant greeting to Besserley as he passed and addressed him by name. The latter’s mysterious companion laughed to himself softly—not malevolently, but certainly without humour.

“So you are General Besserley,” he remarked. “You are the man who always gets himself mixed up in any trouble that goes on here.”

“I don’t make any special efforts in that direction,” his neighbour assured him.

“You had an idea of advancing me money, perhaps?”

“To save my life I might have been inclined to, or if you had been possessed of a more ingratiating manner and asked me for a reasonable loan. Feeling fairly safe now and not being conscious of any sense of friendliness towards you, I have no desire to do anything of the sort.”

The stranger was certainly improving. He chuckled.

“So I have met the great and popular General Besserley, late of the American Secret Service, I believe,” he reflected. “Lucky I didn’t know that a few minutes before, on that garden seat. Anyhow, let that pass. You cannot lend me money—you might render me service of another sort, perhaps, if you are really of a philanthropic turn of mind.”

Besserley lit a cigarette.

“Well?”

“My name is Crantz. My Christian name is Michael.”

“I might have guessed,” the other murmured.

There was a brief silence. Michael of Crantz helped himself deliberately to another whisky and Perrier. When he spoke, there was a touch of the former bitterness in his tone.

“Well, what do you think of me as the hero of a world’s romance?” he asked sardonically.

“You do not,” the General assured him, “inspire me with the aversion which some of the newspaper accounts of your adventures have done.”

“I shall end by liking you,” Michael declared. “I can see that it is inevitable. I shall come and sit at your favourite table at the Royalty and eat out of your hand—I mean, accept the advice of your lips.”

“And as regards that service?”

This time there was a long and breathless pause, a pause not only between the two men, but a silence which crept through the whole of the noisy crowded restaurant. The dancing suddenly ceased, the music died away. Everyone was looking towards the entrance, looking at the woman who was standing there by herself, her fingers holding together at the throat her chinchilla-lined travelling coat, her eyes—deep-set, inquiring, luminous with expectation—searching the room. She was very beautiful, but she had the air of one wearied with travelling. Little wisps of chestnut-coloured hair, which had escaped the close confinement of her small black travelling hat, suggested a long journey. Her expression was that of a tired woman suddenly galvanised into life through a great expectation. Alexander sprang lightly to his feet and threaded his way with almost miraculous precision through the tense company of dancers. The woman, who watched his approach, smiled faintly. She held out her hand—held it rather high with a slight graceful droop. Alexander paused a yard away and bowed, then he approached and raised her fingers to his lips. What he said to her no one heard, but a moment later, with her fingers resting upon his arm, they crossed the room. People fell back, impelled as much by their own sense of what was seemly as by Alexander’s whispered word of excuse. Besserley heard

something that was half a groan, half a sob, as the two men rose to their feet. Alexander's tone was graver than anyone in that gathering had ever heard him use.

"Whether this is for good or ill, I do not know," he said, "but Madame is here."

The bow of General Besserley's companion seemed modelled upon that of Alexander. Both betrayed familiarity with Courts, but the lips of Michael rested longer upon those delicate fingers.

"Madame," he said, as he proffered his chair, "this is not possible!"

The laugh whose magic the journalists of Europe have so far tried in vain to describe rippled from her lips as she sat down.

"Meanwhile," she confided, "I have flown a thousand miles. I must drink a glass of champagne. Your companion, perhaps?" she added hesitatingly.

Michael laid his hand upon Besserley's shoulder.

"My new friend," he said, "you perceive that another day will dawn for me."

But the General needed no hint. He was already on his way to the door. Swiftly though he moved, it seemed to him that the echoes of those, her first words lingered in his ears.

"My darling! I could not bear the risk of leaving you alone for another twenty-four hours. I am here!"

Back at the Hôtel de Paris there was mystery in the air, mystery in the darkened lounge, the nervous manner of the doorkeeper, as he swung open the door inattentively for General Besserley, the late-returning guest, mystery in the great patches of gloom which seemed to hang about the veiled spaces. There was something even more than mysterious in the sight of the usually cheerful little manager of the great hotel walking up and down in the semi-darkness, with his hands behind his back. He started at the sound of the swing doors but when he recognised the arrival his interest appeared to fade away. His good night lacked its usual note of respectful cordiality. He seemed anxious not to detain for a single second the returning reveller. The General, puzzled, was wise enough to ask no questions. He rang the bell for the lift, ascended to his apartment, turned on the lights and lit a final cigarette. The instinct for silence and caution seemed to have become a catching thing. He drew back his French windows stealthily—careful to make no sound—and stood on the balcony listening. Even Monte Carlo was sleeping in that hour before the dawn. There was no sound in the streets below but a curious muffled turmoil of footsteps and voices closer at hand. Besserley became conscious that the next suite to his—a large residential one—which had been unoccupied for some time, was being prepared to receive guests. Almost at the same time he became also conscious

that from somewhere up in the hills came the throbbing of a powerful engine. He crossed the floor of the salon and turned out the lights: then he returned to the window. The throbbing of the engine was more clearly audible now. The car was approaching, probably by the Moyenne Corniche.

Besserley lingered on the threshold of his balcony. He was a little ashamed of himself, but the curious events of the evening had left him with an excited sense of coming adventure. On the other hand the evidences were all slight—an hotel disturbed at an unusual hour for some reason or other; preparations in the most important suite; distinguished visitors arriving in the middle of the night or early in the morning. Interesting, but certainly not sufficient to account for his profound distaste for bed at five o'clock in the morning. The car came nearer and nearer. Soon, still travelling at a great pace, it came down the steep incline in front of the hotel—a huge two-seater with a racing engine but a heavy cabriolet body, open and containing two shrouded figures only. With a grinding of brakes, it passed the front of the hotel and swung in at the side entrance. Besserley leaned a little forward. The electric light was still burning over the door and three or four servants had crowded around the vehicle. A man and a woman descended—the man apparently young and of medium height but his features completely obscured by heavy spectacles and closely drawn motoring cap. The woman, even more invisible, save that she too stepped youthfully and with a musical laugh escaping from her lips, as she accepted her companion's help in alighting from the car. The servants welcomed them bareheaded, but in that there was nothing unusual. What did seem quaint to the General was that after some suitcases had been dragged from the back of the car, it was covered over with a large dust sheet and one of the porters, seated on a campstool, was left in charge—apparently to avoid sending it to a garage. . . .

Commotion anew! This time nearer at hand, in the shape of muffled voices and the footsteps of porters. Evidently it was for these late arrivals that the adjoining suite had been prepared. The hotel, modern enough in all possible respects, had been built before the days of padded doors, and one word in the tone of the obsequious manager was quite sufficient to stop Besserley's preparations for bed. He stood again on the threshold of the balcony, listening intently. This time fortune favoured him. The adjoining French windows were thrown open and two figures stepped out. Besserley remained in the shadows. There were times when he had no compunction in playing the eavesdropper. He heard the woman's voice, sweet and melodious, and she spoke in a language which he understood.

“But this is Paradise, Maurice!”

“With you,” came the passionate answer.

“You are not sorry,” he heard the woman say, “that you have run this so great risk?”

“The time for regrets may come,” the man’s voice replied, “but that is not yet.”

The listener moved a few inches forward. He himself, as he well knew, was in the shadows. The electric light from the standard opposite missed him and he was shielded too from the wan moonlight. He leaned cautiously forward and stole one swift look. It was enough. He reentered his bedroom and prepared himself for a few hours’ sleep.

General Besserley was a man of early habits but the appearance of a visiting card before he had left his bath on the following morning was rather a shock. He glanced at it with uneasy premonition. Upon it was engraved the single name “Alexander.”

“I’ll see the gentleman in the salon in ten minutes,” he told the valet.

In even less than that time the General, showing scant signs of his disturbed night, entered his salon. Alexander’s toilet was as meticulous as ever and the evidences of his coiffeur’s ministrations as apparent, but his eyes were more sunken than usual and even his voice was tired. He had thrown himself into an easy-chair and when he rose wearily to his feet, the man whom he had come to visit waved him back.

“Don’t disturb yourself, please,” he begged. “Can I offer you anything? Coffee perhaps?”

“For the love of heaven, give me a brandy and soda,” was the eager reply. “These domestic shocks are too much for me.”

Besserley rang the bell and gave the order.

“Last night,” he remarked, “was filled with unusual episodes.”

“Nothing to this morning,” was the gloomy reply. “I imagine you realise the situation.”

“I have some idea of it.”

“For some good reason or other,” Alexander went on, “Michael, who tells me that you are only a chance acquaintance, has great faith in you. You helped a young friend of his once and we all know down here, of course, if you will allow me to say so, that you are one of the best-natured men in the world. I have come on Michael’s behalf to ask for your help.”

Besserley nodded.

“What has happened this morning?” he inquired.

“A telephone message from Nice,” the other confided. “The aeroplane in which my cousin came down, which is the only one in this part of the world capable of

making such a flight, and upon which she was relying to take her home to-day, has been burnt.”

“Burnt!”

“Burnt in the hangar at Nice. The authorities try to assure us that it was an accident. It may have been. Of course, my cousin thinks not. She thinks if she was not actually followed, that the thing was arranged by telephone. You have heard of Doctor Brüden, of course, the Chancellor? He is an unscrupulous scoundrel. Nothing would please him better than trouble of this sort.”

“How can I help you?” Besserley asked.

“Tell us how to get Madame back to the capital before her husband returns from his shooting expedition.”

The General, who had been sipping the coffee which he had ordered, lit a cigarette. His visitor, who had gulped down the brandy and soda, refused another and lit a cigar.

“I can do better than that for you,” the former said, after a slight pause.

“Then I shall join with all the rest of the world here and hail you as a magician,” Alexander announced.

“Chance and magic are very closely allied,” Besserley meditated. “In the present instance, without the simplest of all explanations, which for the moment I am compelled to withhold, I could probably pose as being a magician. I think I can promise, however, to be useful to you. With that promise you will not mind answering a few questions.”

“Reel them out,” Alexander invited.

“Michael?”

Alexander coughed. He looked up towards the ceiling.

“Michael at the present moment is occupying the villa which was lent him by the Duchess de Suelles.”

“Beginning at the beginning, then,” Besserley went on, “can you undertake to keep him within the walls of that villa for twenty-four hours?”

His visitor hesitated.

“Why, of course,” he said, “it could be done.”

“Furthermore, will your household promise—you and your wife and your cousin—to remain wherever they may be until this evening, when I will submit my plans?”

“Easy enough,” Alexander assented. “But I don’t understand. How is all this to help us to get—we keep to Christian names—Katherine back by nightfall?”

“I shall do better than that for you,” Besserley promised. “I shall make it unnecessary.”

Alexander was very nearly angry.

“Are you trying to be funny, sir?” he asked.

The General shook his head.

“Not an idea of it,” he assured his visitor. “There is no necessity for your cousin to be at the Palace tonight, because her husband will not be there.”

“And how, in God’s name, do you know that he won’t be there?” the other demanded. “We have certain information—”

“I know that he will not be there,” Besserley interrupted, “because he never went to the forests. He is in this hotel at the present moment. I saw him arrive last night with a companion. You see, I am not attempting to be a magician. This has been an affair of chance.”

Alexander talked, or rather gasped, in Russian for several moments, so Besserley never really understood what he said.

On the whole, that was an uneventful day in Monte Carlo. Neither the Grand Duke nor any of his brilliant household were to be met with at any of the fashionable lunching or dining places. A dinner which they had been giving for twenty people at the Sporting Club was cancelled at the last moment. Nor were any newcomers of distinction to be seen anywhere. The Hôtel de Paris restaurant bore its usual sedate air and was entirely without unfamiliar visitors. In that zealously guarded suite on the second floor, however, a very wonderful dinner was served which called for the best efforts of the chef, and even the grave-faced and trustworthy *maitre d’hôtel*, who superintended the service, gasped when he ordered the removal of the empty champagne bottles.

There came a time when General Besserley, in the next apartment, heard the sound for which he had waited—the opening of the French windows. Stealthily he extinguished all his lights and laid down his cigar. He stepped out once more on to the threshold. It was the woman who was speaking. She was pleading, begging for something which her companion was loath to grant.

“It is impossible that I should be recognised. Yes, you give me beautiful jewels, it is true, but with nowhere to wear them; with no chance of displaying their beauty, what are they? One hour, dearest, that is all that I ask. Sit by my side for one hour. I want to see the women’s eyes. I want to hear them gasp when they look at that last wonderful row of pearls.”

The man’s tone was a little weary.

“You ask me to risk a great deal,” he sighed.

“I give a great deal,” she broke in passionately.

And it seemed to Besserley, standing there amongst the shadows, that he could almost catch her hot breath as she pressed her lips against the man's. Then there was silence. The window was closed.

The General took down the receiver from the telephone instrument.

The brilliancy of the Sporting Club that night was an affair long unforgotten. The Grand Duke's dinner party was apparently taken over by someone else, for every familiar figure in the Principality seemed to be there. One roulette table, however, was the centre of attraction. Seated by the side of the croupier was a woman wearing a grey wig, a beautiful woman with flashing eyes and finely shaped but rather sensual features. It was not at the woman however, that people gazed. It was at her jewels. She wore ropes of pearls of fantastic value, a tiara with ancient settings; one huge pearl rested upon her bosom—delicate and rosily pink, a jewel of amazing beauty. Half-audible whispers passed all round the table. Women forgot their manners in leaning forward to get a better view. They pushed their way amongst friends and strangers alike. The woman who was the centre of the general interest gathered it all in with rapturous enjoyment. Every now and then she smiled at an insignificant young man in plain dinner clothes by her side. Then the supreme moment came. The young man, who had shown signs of nervousness as the crowd increased, in throwing a plaque to the other side of the table, did what he had avoided doing most of the evening. He glanced up. Exactly opposite to him stood Alexander, Alexander's wife and Alexander's cousin. The General, as a producer, had not failed. The drama of the moment was complete. The eyes of the husband and wife met. The lady with the jewels looked up and laughed softly. Secretly it was the precise *dénouement* which she had desired. She threw the maximum on her favourite number as the ball began to spin. The monotonous announcement of the croupier became like a minor background to an atmosphere supercharged with emotion. . . . Everything after that was very correctly done. There was no exchange of salutations. The Grand Duke led his companions in dignified fashion from the table.

The young man who had been the unwilling companion of the lady with the grey wig and the marvellous jewels received his visitor with scant civility. He glanced at the card and threw it upon the table.

"Alexander recommends me to talk with you, General Besserley," he said. "I understand that you are a retired American officer. What are you now? A spy?"

"Something of the sort," the General agreed cheerfully. "A kind of ambassador, if

you like. I find employment because I never lose my temper. I am just as accustomed to rudeness as I am to civility.”

“Say what you have to say,” the young man enjoined.

“It is a very simple situation,” Besserley began. “You and Madame—I am instructed to call her that—are tired of having your affairs dealt with domestically. Madame on this occasion prefers an outsider. Alexander has vouched for me. The plain facts are at your disposal. Madame distrusted your shooting expedition and followed you here. Other wives have done the same thing. Morally, it is understood that they have the right.”

“Granted,” was the harsh assent. “She followed me here and she found out. Tell me the price of her withdrawal. I shall leave here, of course, to-morrow for the capital.”

“Madame declines to return to the capital for a month,” Besserley reported. “At the end of that time, she will meet you and discuss your future.”

“And for that month?”

“Madame will consider herself her own mistress. She proposes to leave for England to-morrow.”

It was perhaps the easiest bargain which Besserley had ever made, for his companion had expected other things and feared them.

“I consent,” he agreed.

Besserley produced a sheet of paper.

“To save time,” he pointed out, “I have written it down.”

“With your military title, I was in some doubt as to your status,” the young man sneered. “I understand it now. A signature by all means.”

He signed the paper. The General’s smile as he turned away was almost cherubic.

“I am glad to finish our business so quickly, sir, and I wish you good morning,” he said.

“Go to hell,” was the unamiable response.

General Besserley was one of a small party of very famous people seated on the terrace of the mountain restaurant, watching the car climb the pass until it disappeared amongst the pine trees. During the last few minutes he had realised that he was still a man of sentiment. There was a lump in his throat as he recalled those last few words of passionate gratitude from the woman with the beautiful eyes, and the bones of his right hand were still aching from the grip of the man who had calmly proposed to kill him. Alexander, smoking one of his inevitable cigarettes, laughed as

he lounged gracefully by his side.

“There is something exalting in this atmosphere,” he declared. “A few hours ago I was not sure that we were not involved in an adulterous intrigue. Now I feel as though I had been assisting at a sacrament.”

Besserley pulled himself together with an effort.

“I, too, am confused,” he confessed. “I cannot even now make up my mind whether I feel like an archbishop or the indecent uncle in ‘Troilus and Cressida’!”

III

THE MAN WHO HARNESSSED THE LAWS OF CHANCE

On every morning when he had not a luncheon engagement, General Besserley was accustomed to occupy the same small table upon the terrace of the Hôtel de Paris Restaurant. It was a table which had many minor advantages. It was out of the sun in the middle of the day and it had an uninterrupted view of that panoramic procession of pilgrims who, in a thin but steady stream, seemed to be always crossing the Place, climbing the steps of the Casino and disappearing within its mysterious precincts. These devotees, as a rule, were ordinary enough in appearance. It was an unfashionable hour and they were generally composed either of tourists or whole-hearted fanatical or sterile gamblers. The tourists were the most interesting to watch. They came in every manner of costume and they committed every sort of sartorial gaucherie. They carried cameras and every description of impedimenta unacceptable to the authorities, and they stoutly resisted being temporarily deprived of them at the door and forced to pay a franc for the privilege of their safe custody. The real gamblers were a smaller, less conspicuous crowd. They were, as a rule, carelessly dressed and made their entrance either furtively or with the inevitable plod of chained convicts. Nevertheless, General Besserley seldom got up from his table without having remarked someone in the crowd who had interested him.

On this particular day, at half-past one precisely, a rather shabby *voiture* drew up by the kerb on the opposite side, but immediately in front of the Casino entrance. From it a girl stepped lightly out and, with the assistance of the *cocher*, established her companion, a man of early middle age who apparently suffered from some form of lameness, on the empty seat facing the Casino. The *cocher* tipped his hat, flicked his whip and drove off. The man produced from his pocket some sheets of paper and the girl rather wearily leaned over towards him. The General summoned Henri, his favourite *maître d'hôtel*.

“Do you ever interest yourself, Henri,” he enquired, “in the people who pass in and out of the Casino at this hour?”

“Not often, sir,” the man replied. “As a rule we are too busy. I notice that you seem very interested sometimes.”

“I don’t let it go so far,” his patron explained, “as to interfere with my excellent lunch, but it does rather amuse me to watch the people at this unfashionable hour. Now, there’s a little *cortège* on the second seat which I have watched for three days following.”

“The young lady with the elderly gentleman, sir?”

“Precisely. At half-past one they always drive up together in a disreputable vehicle. The man is helped on to the seat and, with a pencil in his hand, goes through a sheet of paper on which I should imagine there are figures. Sometimes he does what you can see he is doing now—consults a book. It is a bound volume—looks like an almanac or something. Finally he buttons up his coat, pats the girl on the hand and in she goes to the Casino, carrying the sheet of paper with her. The man never leaves his place. You see—she is getting ready to go now? The man simply folds his arms and watches the door.”

“Another of those marvellous systems, I expect, sir.”

“Then why doesn’t the man go and play it himself?” the General demanded.

“I happen to know something about that, sir,” the *maître d’hôtel* confided. “The man sends the girl in to play because his own card of admission has been withdrawn.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know the exact particulars, sir, but the lame gentleman thought one afternoon that someone had taken his stakes and there was a furious fight in the Casino. This poor fellow here got the worst of it—they say he is crippled for life—but both of them had their cards of admission taken away.”

“Interesting.” General Besserley mused. “I don’t think, however, even if I were fool enough to play on a system, that I should care to do my gambling at secondhand.”

The *maître d’hôtel* was called away. His patron went on with his lunch. Contrary to his usual custom, however, as soon as he had finished, he signed his bill and, strolling across the Place, entered the Casino himself. It was the quietest time of the day in the “kitchen” but there was still the usual crowd gathered round the two or three more popular roulette tables. The General wandered from one to the other, throwing on an occasional *louis*, but really indulging in a leisurely search for the young woman who, with her companion, had awakened his curiosity. He discovered her at last seated at one of the least conspicuous tables in the room and, after making a couple of small bets, he moved round so as to stand nearly behind her. She had a strip of paper turned face downwards underneath her bag, but she was leaning back in her chair, and although she had a collection of plaques and what seemed to be a number of *mille* notes in front of her, she had apparently ceased for the moment to play. The place on her left suddenly became vacant and the General, who had just won an *en plein*, subsided into it. She glanced at him suspiciously for a moment and then, apparently reassured by his appearance, took no further notice of him.

Presently her companion on the other side, an unpleasant-looking young man, foppishly dressed, with hair the colour of burnished brass, tapped her on the wrist and showed her his watch. She nodded and, drawing the paper from underneath her bag, studied it for a moment. She then proceeded to place two plaques of a hundred francs each upon the *transversale* “*treize dix-huit*”, two *louis* upon “*quatorze*” *en plein* and two plaques upon “*manque*.” The stakes were considerably larger than the usual ones upon the table and General Besserley watched with interest. The ball was spun, the croupier chanted his usual warning and, a moment or two later, announced the result.

“*Quatorze—rouge—pair et manque.*”

The General watched his neighbour curiously. She showed no particular sign of satisfaction but there was a faint smile of relief at the corners of her shapely mouth as of one whose task is partly completed. She gathered in her winnings, which were of no inconsiderable amount, demanded also the *mises* and leaned back in her chair. The young man by her side whispered exultantly in her ear. She smiled but made no reply. Besserley, between the intervals of risking his twenty-franc pieces, still occasionally glanced at her. She was neatly but inexpensively dressed, her fingers were beautifully shaped and her fingernails well manicured without any objectionable splashes of colour. She was of medium colouring, pale, though her complexion was excellent. Her lips were full and shapely, undisfigured apparently by anything save the merest touch of lipstick. She answered a casual remark of General Besserley’s in excellent English but she showed no inclination to continue the conversation, although she talked rapidly with her neighbour upon the other side. About a quarter of an hour after her last win, she placed with deliberate fingers two *louis* on Number Seven, a plaque on the *transversale* “*sept douze*” and a plaque on the first dozen. She had scarcely completed her stakes when the ball was spun. A moment or two later the croupier announced the result.

“*Sept—rouge—impair et manque.*”

This time Besserley gave a little start of unaffected surprise. The croupier’s announcement did not astonish him. It seemed to him that he knew beforehand what number would be called. All the same, if she was playing on a system, it was a somewhat remarkable result. She, at any rate, appeared to be satisfied, for she took up her winnings, gathered together her few possessions and, with a nod to the croupier, left the place, followed closely by the young man with the strange-coloured hair. The General, who must be acquitted of ever having done anything of the sort before in his life, got up and followed her.

The young man with the flaxen hair was engaged in the pleasant task of changing a not inconsiderable sum of money at the bureau as Besserley passed. The girl was seated in an easy-chair close to the bar in the refreshment room. The General leaned over from the stool which he had appropriated.

“Congratulations, Mademoiselle,” he said. “I saw you have a very pleasant little win.”

She raised her eyebrows. Most people were pleased when a stranger of such distinguished appearance made a casual remark to them. His tone was always entirely respectful and his manners usually agreeable. This young woman, however, seemed almost annoyed.

“I have not won,” she declared. “It is impossible to win. A single coup, perhaps, but after that nothing arrives.”

The General showed evidence of surprise.

“I saw your two wins,” he remarked amiably. “I hoped that they meant success.”

The waiter brought her some coffee and a *crème de menthe*. She swallowed both eagerly and rose to her feet.

“You play again?” he ventured.

“Not to-day,” she answered. “I have finished my cycle.”

“Forgive me if I ask you a question, but I am interested in such things. I am an old habitué,” he assured her, “and a gentleman of mature years, if you will allow me to say so, or I should not have ventured to address you. Do you play upon a system?”

She looked him up and down. Her smile was not unpleasant but unamused.

“I come here to play as a business,” she told him, “and I do not like to talk to people. When my time is over, I go.”

“If I have annoyed you I am sorry,” he apologised. “I happened to be lunching on the terrace of the Hôtel de Paris and I saw you leave your companion. It struck me that he was a little anxious. I could not help hoping that you had won.”

“You saw me arrive with my friend?”

“I saw you arrive with a gentleman who seemed to be lame,” he replied. “I was naturally sympathetic.”

“You need not be,” she said a little shortly. “My friend has many compensations. The one thing which he hates more than anything else is sympathy.”

Besserley bowed gravely.

“I am exceedingly sorry,” he apologised again, “if I have in any way intruded.”

The girl went on her way without any word of farewell. The General remained upon his stool until she had disappeared. Then he rose to his feet and strolled

without undue haste to the main exit. The girl was just crossing the road. He loitered on the steps with his hands behind him, as if uncertain as to his movements. He saw the man with the stick lean forward towards her. His look of anxiety was unmistakable. He could almost fancy that he heard the shake of his voice as he asked a question. The girl shook her head. She had approached the seat dejectedly as the bearer of ill news might do. Besserley watched her gesture, the almost anguished flop back into the corner of the bench. Presently the same dilapidated old vehicle came trundling round the square. The *cocher* descended and, between them, the girl and he helped the man back into his place. They drove off. The invalid's head was downcast. The girl with the shabby little *béret* and indifferent expression was looking straight ahead of her. It was a mournful cavalcade. . . .

Perhaps the whole episode would have faded from Besserley's memory but for its curious sequel that same evening. He had not had the slightest intention of going into the Night Club which adjoined the Casino, but on his way to the *Salle des Jeux*, after a rather dull dinner party, he came face to face with Lady Grace. Her greetings were always effusive, for they were very old friends, but on this occasion she almost fell upon him.

"Uncle Sam!" she exclaimed. "You are about to save my life."

"Is it alcoholic refreshment you are needing," he asked cheerfully, "or aspirin?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she begged. "You know Prince Alexander is giving a supper party to-night in the Night Club? I accepted, but my escort has failed me and I should hate to go in alone. You need not stay, although of course you know how welcome you would be—all that crowd adore you—but do take me in and leave me in my place, there's a dear."

Besserley was more than willing. They made their way into the crowded room, he delivered over his charge and excused himself from a shower of invitations with difficulty. As he was leaving the table, by the dance floor he stopped short in surprise. Within a few yards of him the girl with whom he had spoken that morning, in the shabby *béret* and with the sulky expression, was dancing with the yellow-haired young man. The girl was wearing a simple but very beautiful dancing gown and, although she wore no jewellery, her hair was arranged in the fashion of the moment and the smile upon her face was entirely transforming. Besserley looked away as quickly as he was able but the mischief had been done. He himself had betrayed his astonishment and from the girl's sombre eyes had flashed a sudden illuminating gleam of annoyance.

General Besserley took his early cocktail the following day with his favourite

morning companion. Lady Grace was looking adorably cool and more attractive than ever in her smart after-bathing costume.

“For the first time in your life,” she declared abruptly, “you are neglecting me, Uncle Sam. Twice I have seen an absent gleam in your eyes. Twice you have scarcely heard what I said. Has one of these Midnight Follies bewitched you? If so, I shall wring her neck!”

“Not guilty, my dear,” he assured her. “I didn’t stop five minutes in the Night Club after I left you and I have never seen one of these bewildering beauties off the stage.”

“Quite as it should be,” she murmured. “I did notice, though, that you seemed suddenly—after you left me—to receive what appeared to be a shock. You were gazing at someone on the dancing floor.”

He nodded.

“You are quite right,” he admitted. “I was looking at someone on the floor and I did have something of a shock. I have come to the conclusion, however, that it is none of my business.”

“Meaning that you are not going to interfere?”

“Meaning that I am not going to interfere,” he acquiesced. “As you know, I am rather a meddler here. People seem to have formed the habit of putting difficult situations before me and asking my advice. I must admit that it interests me sometimes to give it and see how it works out. I dare say it is because I am an old chess player.”

“It works out wonderfully, as a rule,” she declared with enthusiasm. “I can think of heaps and heaps of people whom you have helped.”

“Just at the moment I am confronted with another sort of problem,” he confided. “By the merest chance, I seem to have come across a situation in which I believe that a man who is a complete stranger to me is being deceived by a young woman who is also a complete stranger. Is it, should you think, the duty of a neutral person, who happens to surmise the truth, to interfere?”

“A great deal of good has been done by interfering in others’ business and a great deal of harm,” she pronounced somewhat didactically. “I think it depends upon which of the two is deserving of the greater consideration.”

“As, for instance?”

“If the weaker person were being taken advantage of by the stronger, with results in any way serious, I think I should be inclined to be a busybody.”

“In other words, you would interfere on the weaker side, whether you were invited to or not?” he demanded.

"I believe," she said seriously, "that to do so is one of the natural impulses of life. If we can do good to the weaker, we should always interfere. If we wait until we are invited, then we are doing something which is not exactly a duty—it is something we do as a matter of course."

Besserley took a sip of his cocktail and lit a cigarette.

"You may be letting me in for a lot of trouble," he meditated.

"My dear friend," she replied, "what is it that keeps you so young, that makes you walk as though your feet were on the air, play tennis like a man half your age and dance so divinely? Simply because you never shirk trouble."

The General summoned a waiter.

"Well," he said a little reluctantly, "I asked for your advice, so I suppose I must take it. Here are your luncheon friends. *Au revoir*."

"Some day or other," she stipulated, as she rose to her feet, "you must tell me the story."

"Perhaps," he warned her, "there will never be one."

Half an hour later, from his usual table on the terrace of the Hôtel de Paris, Besserley watched the same little pantomime enacted in exactly the same manner as on the previous day. The shabby *fiacre* drove up, the lame man was helped to his seat, the girl with the papers in her hand crossed the road and was swallowed up in the Casino. Besserley lit a cigarette, strolled out from the hotel and deliberately seated himself on the bench next to its solitary occupant. The latter eyed him at first in unfriendly fashion. His manner, however, underwent a rapid change at the sound of his new neighbour's pleasant voice.

"Rather an interesting point of vantage you seem to have found here," he remarked.

The other assented wearily.

"I used to think so more than I do now," he confided. "The atmosphere of the place hardens one terribly. For those who come out obvious losers, I have no sympathy left. They cannot help it. They are doomed to lose. They are simply asking for what comes to them."

"And the winners?"

"I am sometimes inclined to be more sorry for them. Whatever they win to-day, they will lose to-morrow or on some metaphorical to-morrow."

"You speak confidently."

The lame man turned in his seat and Besserley had his first good look at him. He was untidily dressed but both his clothes and linen were probably of West End

origin. His face itself was rather a fine one, his features a little too slight, but his forehead commanding and his mass of grey hair carefully tended. The lines in his face, however, were deep. He seemed to be a bundle of nerves.

"I speak confidently because I know," he said. "None of these people can win except spasmodically. They all make the stupid mistake of thinking that gambling is a matter of chance. They ignore the great fact that it is governed by the cosmic forces of the universe."

"That sounds rather a strange doctrine," Besserley commented. "Are you seriously asserting that gambling is not a matter of chance?"

His companion glanced at him contemptuously.

"You have an air of intelligence," he remarked. "I thought, perhaps, you might have gone as far as that yourself. The spiritual outcome of life is governed by an unknown divinity. The mortal affairs are governed by equally rigid laws which by some extraordinary accident none of our philosophers have yet succeeded in formulating. Take this gambling, for instance," he went on. "I admit that the laws governing that are difficult but they nevertheless exist. I am perhaps the only man in the world who has worked them out correctly. It is no great credit to me. I have borrowed the mantle of a predecessor."

The General studied his companion furtively for a moment. He was forced to admit, however, that he showed no signs of madness.

"If you have mastered the laws of chance," he queried, "why don't you go into the Casino and make a fortune?"

"Owing to an unfortunate incident," the lame man replied gloomily, "I am debarred from playing in the Casino myself. I have worked out the formula however, which makes winning at roulette, which is the game I have concentrated on because of its fascinating variations, an absolute certainty."

"A system," Besserley murmured, trying to keep the sympathy from his tone.

His companion showed no sign of offence.

"I should not call it that," he meditated. "The general principles which govern the laws of chance I learnt in China years ago, from an old monk who had spent thirty years in his cell, studying them. He broke his vows, came down to Shanghai, played Fan Tan and won more millions than you or I could ever spend. He paid the price, of course, that one pays in China—he was murdered."

"And his discovery?" Besserley asked.

"I had no hand in the crime," the other went on, "but I was young and strong in those days, and when I saw that to save his life was impossible, I was first in that wonderful library of his in the palace he had built outside the City. I was a junior

official in the Chinese Customs, but I gave that up the moment I began to see a glimmering of light in the papers I found. I sailed for Europe ten years ago and it has taken me pretty well up to the beginning of this month to get the thing perfect. It was nine years," he concluded thoughtfully, "before I realised the share the calendar, especially the lunar changes, have upon inanimate objects."

"Look here," his companion interrupted good-humouredly, "you had better not tell me any more. We are all greedy for money these days and you might find yourself sharing the Chinaman's fate! Let me ask you one question, though, the question one always puts to this little band of imbeciles who believe they have found a system. If you have solved the laws of chance and can apply them, say, to such a game as roulette, why are you not a millionaire?"

The man sighed.

"A pertinent question and graciously put," he conceded. "Very soon I shall be one. The trouble is that upon the night when I completed my discovery, I naturally went down to the Casino and played. I won, of course, every coup. A man claimed one of my stakes. I forgot that money made no difference to me, I forgot how important the entrée to the place was, and I took the law into my own hands. You know how strict they are about any sort of brawling in the Casino. My card of admission was taken away. I have had to entrust the playing to my young lady friend."

"The young lady who comes down in the carriage with you?" Besserley observed.

"Yes."

There was a brief pause. Besserley proffered his case, his companion accepted a cigarette eagerly and smoked it with obvious enjoyment. The fumes of the tobacco seemed to steady his nerves.

"We shall get it right, of course," he explained, "but I must tell you something. The young lady is very intelligent but she has absolutely no head for figures. I work the whole thing out for her day by day with absolute certainty. She only has to bet seven times in the first quarter of the moon, five times in the second, nine times in the third and ten times in the last quarter. Those are all the bets she has to make. She need not understand the reason for a moment. In fact, intelligent though she is, she never could, but the numbers are there, so that you would think a child could not make a mistake. Yet, either she does make a mistake or there is a misprint in one of my volumes of logarithms—which is a sheer impossibility. She has a fortune in her hand and yet, day by day, she comes out without having won a penny."

"How do you account for that?" Besserley asked.

“There is only one explanation,” his companion declared eagerly. “The poor child loses her nerve and makes mistakes. When the moment comes, her attention is wandering, the thing becomes too big for her and she picks the wrong number. . . . I do not know why I should confide in you, a stranger, but you look reliable and kindly. You are not,” the man added with a sudden burst of alarm, “connected with newspapers in any way?”

“Certainly I am not,” Besserley assured him. “You can rely entirely upon my discretion. If I might offer my advice, though—why do you not entrust your principles and instructions to someone else for a day?”

The man moved uneasily in his seat. He was already beginning to watch the door.

“I could not do that,” he muttered. “She would break her heart if she thought that I had ceased to trust her.”

“But meanwhile,” Besserley pointed out, “you must be losing a great deal of money.”

The man’s features seemed again racked with anxiety.

“That is true,” he admitted. “I am coming very near the end. We have had to sell some furniture. She has had to go home to live with her mother. To-day, though, the figures are so distinct that she can make no mistake. She will come out with seventeen *mille*, four hundred. Then we shall drive away. We shall take a cup of coffee at our favourite café and to-morrow we shall double the stakes. To-morrow we shall win thirty-five *mille*!”

Besserley looked across the road.

“Well,” he remarked, “your anxieties will soon be at an end, for here comes Mademoiselle.”

The man leaned forward in his place, raising himself slightly upon his stout rubber-shod stick. He smiled across the few yards of dusty thoroughfare—a pathetic smile of supreme confidence. Mademoiselle appeared a little shabbier than usual but her expression was inscrutable. The General rose to his feet. If she recognised him, she took no notice.

“Well?” the lame man exclaimed, and there was a note of anticipatory triumph in his tone. His hand went forward. There was a caress at the tips of his fingers. She ignored it.

“It was partly my fault,” she confessed. “I was pushed out of my seat and I was angry. I missed what should have been a coup. For the rest you must have made another of your mistakes. Tell me again—what were the symbol numbers to-day?”

“Seven, seventeen—four, fourteen—twenty-eight, twenty-nine,” he answered

breathlessly.

She nodded.

“It was not I who made the mistake, then,” she declared. “Not one of them turned up.”

“You lost—everything?” he faltered.

“Seventy francs I have left,” she told him. “Who is this gentleman?”

The man was incapable of replying. His whole frame was shaken. He put out his hand and the girl helped him to his feet. A glaze seemed to have come before his eyes. He appeared to be partially blind and yet to be seeing terrible things. The old *voiture* lumbered round the corner and drew up in front of them. The girl indulged in what might have been a sigh but seemed more like a yawn. She helped him into the carriage.

“To-night,” she enjoined, “you must be more careful. We cannot afford another mistake.”

They drove off. Neither of them seemed to think of offering any farewell salutation to the other occupant of the bench. Besserley threw away his cigarette and entered the Casino. He made his way directly to the one particular table at which he had discovered the girl and tapped upon the shoulder a young man who was seated there. The latter rose to his feet at once and handed over the card upon which he had apparently been marking the numbers. Besserley compared it with the crumpled-up ball of paper which the lame man had dropped from his nerveless fingers on to the seat. The numbers which the young woman had declared had not turned up were there in their appointed places with a ring around each. Besserley added up quickly the result of the indicated stakes. The amount which should have been won worked out at seventeen *mille* four hundred.

At his accustomed hour on the following morning, the young man with the brass-coloured hair and somewhat arrogant bearing was just finishing his very excellent lunch at one of the most popular small tables at the Café de Paris. An empty pint of Chambertin stood by his side. His *fine* and coffee had just been placed upon the table. He toyed for a moment with a cigarette, tapped it upon his platinum and gold case and lit it from a briquet tendered by an officious waiter.

“The bill, Charles,” his patron directed. “Mind that you leave out the *hors d’œuvres*. They were all beastly. There was nothing I could touch. I shall report you to the management if you bring me such a collection again.”

The waiter hurried meekly away. At this precise moment the young man felt a tap upon his shoulder. He turned abruptly around. A slight, dark, very unobtrusive-

looking stranger, neatly dressed and wearing horn-rimmed spectacles stood by his side.

“Who are you?” he asked insolently. “What do you want with me?”

The reply was smooth but cold.

“I am an official of the Casino, Monsieur. The Commissaire of Police requests that you will visit him for a minute or two in his bureau.”

“The who?” the young man who had just completed his luncheon demanded.

“The Commissaire of Police, Monsieur. He has, as you may be aware, a bureau in the Casino. I must ask you to step across with me.”

“I shall do nothing of the sort. You officials ought to know better than to disturb a gentleman at his lunch. What can the Commissaire of Police want with me?”

“That, Monsieur, is not my business. On the other hand, I regret having to inform you that you must accompany me at once. The matter of lunch is not of importance as it seems to me that you have finished your meal.”

The intruder’s tone had changed and for the first time a grim apprehension seemed to seize the young man. He muttered something incoherent, paid his bill and strode out of the place. His unchosen companion walked close to his side. There was a gendarme, too, who seemed to be never more than a foot or so away. Nevertheless, he had recovered much of his swagger before he crossed the threshold of the Casino. There was no way in which he had transgressed the law, therefore there was nothing for which he could be touched. He would stand no nonsense. Nevertheless, the forbidding appearance of the small bureau into which he was ushered, the forbidding look of the man who had glanced up from his desk—making no motion to rise to his feet—and the sight of General Besserley seated in the one comfortable chair did little to reassure him. His stock of courage was really very small and he felt it ebbing away. The man behind the desk began to interrogate him at once.

“Your name is Louis Massène—at least, that is the name upon your passport?”

“Are you endeavouring to insult me?” was the indignant retort. “My name is Louis Massène. What have I done that you march me here as a prisoner?”

The Commissaire made no direct answer.

“Show me your *carte d’entrée* to the Casino.”

The young man produced it. The Commissaire tore it in half and threw the pieces into the wastepaper basket. Perhaps the former knew by this time that real trouble was coming, for he wasted no breath in idle questions.

“You have been living for the last few weeks, Massène,” the Commissaire said, “on sums of money varying from fifteen to thirty *mille* a day supplied to you by a

young woman, Henriette Dumesnil.”

“It is a lie!” the accused man blustered. “I have been living on my own winnings at the tables, if you want to know.”

“You have a bankbook in your pocket, I see. Show it to me.”

“My bankbook is no affair of yours,” was the angry reply.

Nevertheless the bankbook was produced during the next few seconds. The Commissaire, after glancing it through, placed it upon his table and covered it with a paper weight.

“Two hundred and eighty thousand francs, I see, Monsieur,” he said, “paid in day by day with the utmost regularity. You have been a fortunate young man to have met with such a friend.”

“My money is my private business,” Massène declared. “Whether it was given me or not is no concern of yours.”

The Commissaire stroked his closely cropped black moustache.

“You have cajoled this money out of a young woman, knowing perfectly well that it belonged to her companion,” he said bluntly. “Day by day the money she won at the Casino was handed over to you. However, we shall not argue about that, because you are going to restore it.”

“Not one franc,” was the vicious rejoinder.

“Because you are going to restore it,” the Commissaire repeated. “You must remember that the police in France and Monaco have long memories and what they do not remember their records tell them. Your present name is well enough. But, there is the name of Jean Brissot, for instance. There is the name of Henri le Clerc, I think. I forget for the moment in which prison he served but the record is there.”

The young man was shaking from head to foot.

“You have dyed your hair, I suppose, as one of your disguises,” the Commissaire continued, “but you have other identification marks, if I find it necessary to send you to prison.”

“What do you want me to do?” Massène faltered.

“Sign a cheque for the whole of this balance except ten *mille* and clear out from the Principality within an hour,” was the stern command. “The police car will take you over the frontier. What happens to you afterwards is no concern of ours, so long as you never set foot in the Principality again.”

“I will divide the money,” the young man suggested. “The girl gave it to me. She was my mistress. I had a right to take it from her. When I had money I gave it to her.”

“Zut!” the Commissaire scoffed, dipping a pen in the ink. “The cheque is to be

for two hundred and seventy thousand francs left open and payable to the Commissaire of Police, who will endorse it back to its rightful owner.”

Massène became hysterical. He must say good-bye to his friends—he must say good-bye particularly to his sweetheart. The Commissaire looked bored and all the time in the background there was General Besserley, very grim, and preserving silence with difficulty. The young man signed the cheque and outside climbed into the car, to which he was conducted. He recognised fate when he met it and he knew very well that he was leaving the Principality for ever.

There was a moment, almost immediately after Besserley had crossed the threshold of the man whom he had come to visit, when he hated himself for having taken Lady Grace’s advice and hated himself worse still for his present position. The look almost of horror in the lame man’s face as he realised the arrival of his visitor, the blush of humiliation which brought a streak of colour to his wan cheeks, made Besserley feel as though he had been guilty of a flagrant act of bad taste in forcing his way into his presence. It had been no easy task to discover the address—a little court ending in a cul-de-sac high up in Beausoleil. Three rooms—one empty—the salon a pitiful exposition of stark poverty. Besserley, a little out of breath after climbing three flights of singularly unpleasant stairs, was acutely distressed by that shamed, questioning glance.

“I do not understand,” the invalid exclaimed angrily. “I do not receive visitors. I do not wish for them. What do you want with me, sir?”

More than ever Besserley hated himself and the whole purpose of his coming. He felt himself guilty of the grossest of bad taste in this intrusion upon another man’s hidden life. There was not a scrap of carpet upon the floor, one chair was lying broken in a corner, and a decrepit horsehair couch had been pushed back against the wall. There was practically no other furniture except the bureau at which the lame man was seated, which was piled all over with papers and strange-looking books, and a small celestial globe. At one end were the miserable remains of a paltry meal.

“I apologise most humbly for having come,” Besserley began, “but indeed you interested me so much the other morning—we talked together on the seat in front of the Casino, you know—”

“Get it over,” the tenant of the miserable room interrupted harshly. “I am not in the humour for visits from anyone. Perhaps you imagined from what I said the other day that I had a system for sale, that there was a little cheap money to be made! I looked as though I happened to be down and out!”

“Mr. Hawkins,” Besserley said gravely, “I am a rich man. Gambling interests me

very slightly. My visit to you is a personal one. You will probably call it an impertinence.”

“Get on with it, at any rate,” the other begged, with an effort at patience. “I have a great and wearisome work before me to discover some stupid blunder I have made in linking together the inevitable. Every moment I spend in idle talk is a valuable moment lost.”

“I am going to be absolutely brutal in my directness,” Besserley assured him. “I am going to wield the surgeon’s knife ruthlessly. You sit there with thirty or forty books before you, with a calendar, some charts which I don’t understand, a globe which I do not know how to use. You have evolved a system therefrom which you think governs the laws and rules of chance. My friend, let me offer you encouragement. You may have done it. You think you have failed. You have not failed. You can spare yourself all the trouble you are having now. You have won, on the figures that you yourself have produced within the last fortnight, something like three hundred thousand francs!”

“You lie!” the lame man cried harshly. “I won nothing. Not enough to keep body and soul together. My fault,” he added bitterly. “Somewhere my calculations have failed me.”

“Your calculations have not failed,” his visitor persisted. “It is the person whom you entrusted to deal with them who has failed you.”

Besserley was an impressionable man and he felt the dramatic horror of the silence which followed upon his words. He knew, as though by instinct, that the man before him, crouching over the desk with twitching features and the terrible light in his eyes, had been through the torments of hell with the same suspicion. He had struck his blow. It had probably broken the man’s heart. There was nothing to be done now but to complete his horrible task.

“I picked up your sheet of figures for yesterday’s play,” he went on. “Upon them you should have won seventeen thousand four hundred francs. The numbers turned up exactly as you had them down.”

The man who was leaning over the table suddenly produced his heavy stick from a hidden place and struck furiously at Besserley, who sprang to one side just in time. The second blow, more feebly dealt, he avoided easily.

“You are a liar!” Hawkins shouted. “It was Henriette herself who placed the stakes. Henriette—who has cared for me, looked after me, given her days and all her thoughts to keep me alive till we won our way to fortune. Curse you! If I were a man again, you would not stand there, telling me lies.”

“I am telling you no lies,” was the grave rejoinder. “Mademoiselle left this

apartment some months ago, ostensibly to live with her mother. She did nothing of the sort. She has been living with an adventurer of the worst type, a young man who has taken your winnings as your numbers have turned up and paid the amount each day into the bank—into his own account. I am sorry,” Besserley went on, gaining courage every moment, “but that is the plain truth. Here is the money which that young man has been forced to disgorge,” he added, throwing a pile of *mille* notes upon the table. “The young woman has deceived you. She may have her own explanations, but the truth is simple. She has been living with this man and keeping him. I have brought you what is left of the money she has won on your figures. Women more often than not fail us in life, my friend,” the General went on bravely. “Forget it. But remember this—the results of your researches have proved themselves and you have done the most wonderful thing any man has yet succeeded in doing. Incredible though it is, you have evolved a system which has won money day by day exactly on the numbers you have worked out and in the manner you have indicated.”

The man at the table, who had listened with the pallor of death on his face and blank despair in his tortured eyes, tried to speak. The few minutes that followed were terrible. He kept opening his lips and producing nothing but hoarse, broken noises. Besserley had then a great fear. This man whom he had confronted with the horrible truth was about to die! He was on the point of death even at that moment.

“Remember,” his visitor said, with eager sympathy in his tone, “you have succeeded where everyone else in the world has failed. You have probed your way into the hidden cycles of chance. The world will count you greater than even its most wonderful mathematicians. If a woman has been false, what does it matter? You have conquered fate itself.”

The lame man sat as though turned to stone. Watching him closely, Besserley knew that the immediate danger of his collapse was past.

“You can abandon all your struggles,” he went on. “As you have prepared your daily set of figures, so you can go on preparing them. If you wish it, I will play them for you to-morrow, or better still—I have more news for you. Your ticket for the Casino is to be restored to you as soon as you like. You have only to present yourself there—I will take you myself, if you wish—and you will be reinstated. The Casino has defied all systems for fifty years and it is content to challenge yours. Work out your figures for to-morrow and we will play them together.”

“Play them together,” the other muttered. “I see.”

Besserley produced his cigarette case. He felt that things were going better. The lame man took one into his shaking fingers and lit it. His visitor pointed to the money.

“Very nearly three hundred thousand francs there,” he announced cheerfully. “Take my advice. Let me go and spend a *mille* for you. I will send you in some things to eat and drink. Have a decent meal and go to bed happy. Would you like me to find you fresh apartments? You could move out of this misery to-night. We could rig you out with some—forgive me—some better clothes. The sooner you make a fresh start, the better.”

The stricken man never moved a muscle of his face. If he felt gratitude he failed to show it. Nevertheless, he took a *mille* note from the pile and handed it over.

“You are very good, according to your lights,” he acknowledged, “although you have poured out the lava of hell with a liberal hand. Across the way there is a wine shop. Leave them the note. Tell them to send me two bottles of champagne, one of brandy, some Caporal cigarettes and the change. Will you do that and see me again to-morrow?”

“I will do that.”

Hawkins pointed to the door. Always afterwards the General thought that it was a weak impulse which prompted him to take his leave.

Henriette mounted the chipped, unwashed stairs in the unsavoury building, lifting her skirts high above her delicately shod silk-stockinged legs and high-heeled shoes. An expression of distaste darkened her features. Her eyes were filled with sombre disgust. Day by day she hated the more her visits to the man whom she was deceiving. Very soon, when her own faith had become firmly established, she would hand him back more money, she would induce him to double the stakes, treble them perhaps. Louis was pressing this upon her every day. The sooner she could escape from this disgusting bondage the better. She was conscious of a slight feeling of uneasiness too. Louis had not returned after his usual saunter round the fashionable bars, and this summons from her crippled guardian, as she chose to call him, after he had announced his intention of working without disturbance for twenty-four hours, was unexpected. She had made up her mind, however, to waste no time upon him. She was due at a *Thé Dansant* at Beaulieu with Louis and she had no intention of postponing it. She reached the landing. The old fellow was really a nuisance! She turned the handle of the door and entered. Then she knew at once that something different was afoot. Somehow or other, notwithstanding his ailments, he had succeeded in washing and struggling into his better clothes. Someone had been in and cleaned the room. The mass of papers and books upon his desk showed some signs of arrangement and, more wonderful still, upon the part of the table which he had cleared away, stood two bottles of champagne with glasses, a bottle of brandy

and a bowl of flowers! He rose to his feet and smiled at her. It is true that he was supporting himself upon his stick but he nevertheless stood there, a wild, yet gracious figure, a smile parting his lips—a smile of desire and invitation, yet a smile which had something terrible underneath it. She felt herself shivering, although she scarcely knew why.

“What is it that has arrived, *cher maître?*” she demanded, trying hard to seem amiable.

“Success!” he answered. “I have found the mistake in my calculations. Already the cornerstone of the Casino is rocking. We can pull down the pillars when we wish, you and I.”

She seated herself upon the corner of the decrepit horsehair couch which he had dragged up to the table.

“But the champagne?” she asked wonderingly.

“It is to celebrate our victory,” he told her. “Here am I—a broken-down cripple—Nicolas Hawkins—a scholar once, perhaps, but a poor thing now, who has succeeded where the philosophers and astronomers and men of science of every nation have failed. I have harnessed the laws of chance and driven a bit into their teeth. To-morrow we will win a million francs!”

There was a pop as he drew the cork of a bottle. In the girl’s heart was cold fear. Was he deceiving himself, this man? She knew well enough that there had been no flaw to be set right. Perhaps her fingers trembled as she took the wine. She raised the glass to her lips, however, at his bidding.

“The roses are beautiful,” she said, “and the wine is excellent, dear Nicolas. But why is there such a smell of petrol in the room? You should open the windows oftener.”

“They cut off the current of my one poor electric switch,” he confided. “I borrowed a lamp from Madame below. Perhaps I spilt some of the oil. My fingers are sometimes unsteady.”

He sank on to the couch by her side. With his long arm he reached his glass from the table.

“To the great man of science whom the whole world will soon honour!” she cried, as she too raised her glass.

“I will drink with you, but I will change the manner of the toast,” he replied. “To the man whom the divinity which rules over this world has given power to probe one of its greatest secrets and then sent him—a poor blindfolded fool—to stumble on through life in agony. Drink, Henriette!”

She emptied her glass. He did the same. He refilled them and they both drank.

Suddenly she felt his arms around her. He seemed to be putting out all his hidden and terrible strength. Well, she had given him what passed for love before. If that would satisfy, he could have it. She even tried to welcome his lips. . . .

“Nicolas, there is something burning!” she cried out.

He closed her mouth with his own. Yet he managed to laugh, he managed to speak words which she heard, notwithstanding the sudden rush of smoke, the crackling of the flames, the splitting of the floor beneath them. She was only conscious for a few more seconds.

“Louis!” she shrieked.

He laughed horribly. With her fading senses she heard his words of derision. Either the smoke was suffocating, or his fingers on her throat were stifling her.

The Commissaire shrugged his shoulders.

“We do not understand inquests as you hold them,” he explained to General Besserley. “Besides, there is nothing left to hold an inquest on. Neither body is recognisable.”

“Are any of the man’s effects saved?”

“Not a thing,” the Commissaire declared. “Not a book, not a scrap of paper, not an article of clothing. Perhaps it is just as well.”

“Why?”

But the Commissaire only repeated his gesture.

“One has heard this sort of story all one’s lifetime,” he confided, “but there are two croupiers and two chefs at one of the tables in the ‘kitchen’ who are prepared to swear that the system which the girl played for him day by day won seventeen days following the same amount and that it was practically undefeatable. People might think that this was the reason why these two had met with their death.”

The General shook his head. He was not feeling at all his usual self.

“They met with their death,” he acknowledged solemnly, “because I took a woman’s advice.”

IV THE PHANTOM FLEET

It was during the service of *apéritifs* before a men's dinner at Monte Carlo, the annual dinner of an old-established and highly popular club there. The Comte de Wrette, a well-known Belgian millionaire, who was numbered amongst the guests, turned to his sponsor.

"Tell me again," he asked curiously, "the name of the gentleman to whom I was just presented?"

His friend promptly acquiesced.

"That is one of our very popular residents," he confided. "General Besserley, an American. He is one of our oldest members too—came to the inaugural meeting and joined the club right away."

"General Besserley," the other repeated thoughtfully, "of the American Army?"

His host shrugged his shoulders.

"At one time or other, one presumes so," he assented. "Besserley very seldom talks about himself but I have heard that he commanded a brigade during the War, was one of the first wounded and went straight back to the Secret Service in Washington—where he really belonged."

"That is very interesting," the Comte de Wrette declared. . . .

The two men sat at opposite ends of the table and did not happen to come into contact again until the close of the evening when, the speeches all concluded and a sufficiency of wine consumed, the proceedings broke up in a mist of alcoholic good humour. It was then that Besserley, stepping into his automobile, glanced around and saw the Count under the portico of the hotel, eyeing with distaste the spattering raindrops.

"Give you a lift?" General Besserley asked.

"You are awfully kind," the other replied. "Are you going by any chance to the Sporting Club?"

The General smiled.

"By a very singular chance," he admitted, "I am. Get in, please."

The two men drove off together. De Wrette was a man of medium height but of quiet, rather undistinguished, appearance. He was neither tall nor short, stout nor thin. He wore a slight black moustache and a small, very closely cropped imperial. He was of pallid complexion with grey, secretive eyes. Besserley, a man built on a larger scale altogether, tapped a cigarette upon the case which he passed to his companion.

“Going to join the club?” he enquired. “It isn’t a bad place.”

“It would give me much pleasure,” the Count replied, “but I doubt whether I am often enough in these parts. I have recently joined a business house in Paris and I find many demands upon my time.”

“Curious thing,” Besserley reflected, “how few French or Belgian people we see down here.”

“You are likely to see more, if things continue as they are at present.”

“What do you mean?”

De Wrette shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, it really seems as though all the money in the world were drifting into French hands,” he observed. “They do not want it—I always think too much money is one of the first signs of decay in any nation. I think their present prosperity is to be regretted. It is, none the less, however, an obvious fact.”

“You should consider yourself lucky that you have French connections,” General Besserley said carelessly. “It is not so pleasant for us others to see our money decrease in value every day.”

“The whole thing is rather chimerical,” De Wrette pointed out. “We are no longer at the mercy of real events. We are at the mercy of what the world calls currencies.”

The two men entered the club together but separated on the first floor with a few courteous words. De Wrette mounted to the gambling rooms, Besserley stopped to speak to a few acquaintances. He waited a reasonable time, then descended the stairs and made his way by the underground passage back to the Hôtel de Paris. He collected two or three cable forms from the hall porter and retired to his apartments. Arrived there, he unlocked a somewhat formal-looking despatch box, which had the air of not having been opened for months, and drew from it a small leather-bound code book. With it by his side he set to work to concoct a cablegram. The task was evidently an unfamiliar one to him, for it took him the best part of an hour. Just as he had finished, there was a knock at the door. He turned the form over on its face and answered the summons.

“Come in,” he invited.

It was a very obvious fellow countryman who made his appearance. An American business man—suave, confident, with ingratiating manners and friendly smile. Besserley had been out of America just long enough to forget what was expected in the way of a handshake and he rather winced after the formality had been concluded.

“James Brogden’s my name, General,” the newcomer announced, presenting a card. “I’m a Philadelphia man—Brogden and Biddle. Real estate and a side show of

banking. I'm glad to meet you, sir."

"I am always glad to meet a fellow countryman," the General declared slowly, opening and closing his fingers. "Step in, won't you."

He ushered Mr. Brogden into his salon. A tentative enquiry as to refreshments brought an enthusiastic assent. The waiter appeared and departed with an order. Mr. Brogden fingered his tie.

"F.I.C.O.," he said.

"I have not been out of the game long enough to have forgotten that," the General replied. "I am wondering, though, whether there has been any mistake. You understand that I am on the full retired list?"

"This is a special job."

"I can guess the nature of it already," the General continued. "Of course, I will do what I can. It is not an easy situation, though. Mine was a genuine retirement. I am well known here for just what I am. If I get into any trouble, there is no one at the back of me."

Brogden shrugged his shoulders.

"Washington doesn't take too much stock in that," he remarked. "I suppose they reckon even if we retire from the service we stay good Americans. They have always run anything they have had in the shape of Secret Service by trained amateurs and I'll say that they've done pretty well by it."

"I suppose you have some sort of communication for me?" Besserley queried.

Mr. Brogden nodded. He lifted his rather long, double-breasted coat and disclosed the hip pocket with three buttons in a line and an ominous little bulge. After fingering about for some time he produced a letter.

"You kept your Angier code?" he asked, with a flash of anxiety.

The General nodded.

"Yes. We are all supposed to keep that, unless we are dismissed from the service," he reminded his visitor.

"There's your letter, then, and I guess when you have it in your hand and I have drunk that Scotch," Mr. Brogden added, as the door opened and a waiter appeared, carrying a tray, "the sooner I get going the better."

"Things shaping well at home?" the General asked amiably.

"Business is foul. Boost it as much as you like, you still have to come back to the same thing—business is foul. I have a client to see over in London. I think I'll fly from Cannes to-morrow morning. I have not got enough of the holiday spirit left for this place. They tell me you are one of the big sports here."

"I don't know about that," Besserley answered, "but if you were staying for a

few days, I might have made it agreeable for you.”

“Better not,” was the frank reply. “They have got stiffer and stiffer about that since your day. They keep to the same principle—business men who can be trusted—out-and-out Americans. We’re the stuff they trust for any work that’s got to be done. But they don’t like it mixed up with the social side as they do over here. I’ve done my job with you, General, and I’m thankful to say that I’ve got through with it pretty quickly. There’s the letter in your hand. I came over on one of these round-the-world-trip steamers and there isn’t a soul who tumbled to it that I was carrying a warrant to bring you back into the game again. A clean job and finished. I’ll bid you good-day, sir.”

The General held out his hand and Mr. Brogden, of Brogden and Biddle, Philadelphia, clasped it. This time, however, it was the General who provided the muscular force. With an old trick of his college days, he swung his visitor, who was by no means an undersized man, round by the wrist till he called out in agony. Another moment and he was lying on his back on the sofa and the small lumpy article which had a few seconds ago been in his hip pocket was in Besserley’s hands. The latter, with his feet planted squarely upon the carpet, stood a couple of yards away.

“Gone out of your senses, Besserley?” the man on the couch gasped.

“Perhaps so,” was the steady reply. “Not quite so badly as you think, though. I may be a bit rusty, but I haven’t forgotten all the old tricks. Have you seen the wireless this evening? There’s a sheet hanging up in the hall.”

The man on the couch made no reply. He ventured to raise himself a little. His knuckles showed white, where he was gripping the side of the couch. He was breathing fast. He had the air of a man afraid.

“What do you mean—wireless?” he demanded.

“Mr. James Brogden of Brogden and Biddle, land and real estate agents of Philadelphia, was reported missing from the *Homeric* last night, under mysterious circumstances,” the General confided. “You know what that generally means? Murder. You and I, assisted perhaps by the Commissaire of Police, Mr. Brogden, will have to have a little conversation before you make the next move in the game. You may be in it all right, but I imagine you are on the other side.”

The stranger in the room shivered as he looked up at the towering figure dominating him.

“General,” he said, “I don’t see how they ever let you get on the retired list.”

“I don’t want any flattery,” was the curt reply. “What became of Brogden?”

“He was—dealt with.”

“By you?”

The pseudo Mr. Brogden, of Brogden and Biddle, Philadelphia, shook his head vigorously.

“I am a Number Seven man,” he protested. “They don’t ask that of us. They do it themselves, and pretty neat they are too. Those Japs can do almost anything with a knife.”

“The newspaper report is that he is missing,” Besserley observed.

“Knifed first and pushed overboard. There were three of them in it, all in the second class. They had been waiting for a chance all the way from New York.”

“Nice bright lads,” General Besserley commented. “Where are they now?”

“Oh, they’re around,” the other answered cheerfully. “Guess they’re in Nice at the present moment.”

“And what’s the idea of trying to work something on me?” the General asked.

Mr. Brogden coughed.

“That accursed wireless,” he complained, “has got in with the news twenty-four hours too soon. Now that you know I am not Mr. Brogden of Brogden and Biddle, staff Number Seven F.I.C.O., we’re through with the idea. Pretty slick idea, too. But then, these chaps are a slick race. I think I won’t waste any more of your time, so long as there’s nothing doing.”

General Besserley raised his eyebrows.

“So you think I am going to let you go?”

“I’m sure you are,” was the cool rejoinder. “There’s nothing you can do about it. Nothing you can keep me for. I have not stolen anything of yours, I have not threatened you, I have not broken the law. I called to do a little business with you but it was business which only Mr. Brogden of Brogden and Biddle could have handled.”

The General paused to consider the situation.

“You admit,” he said, “that you—posing on the boat, no doubt, as a reputable American—are concerned with these three Japs in the murder of James Brogden—”

“Not so fast,” the other interrupted. “I do not admit anything of the sort. I am not in that branch of the game. I had nothing whatever to do with that trouble.”

“But you know who did it?”

“I can guess. That wouldn’t be any use to anybody.”

“You know where they are hiding?”

“I know where they are. That wouldn’t help anyone, either. There’s not a scrap of evidence against them and I’m not the sort of fool who would risk having his throat cut giving them away.”

“Your idea is, then,” Besserley pointed out, “that having failed in your mission with me—whatever it may have been—you will walk out of this room and get on with the dirty work of betraying your own country to her natural enemies?”

“There is not a darn soul who could stop me!”

Besserley reflected.

“No,” he admitted, “I don’t suppose there is. I should like very much to know, though, under what name you travelled on the *Homeric*.”

His visitor smiled.

“I don’t see how you are going to find that out,” he said, “and so far as I am concerned, you never will.”

“The Commissaire of Police—” the General began.

The other, however, shook his head.

“My dear friend,” he remonstrated, “don’t try any bluff of that sort on me. I have committed no extraditable offence, and you know it. You also know that you haven’t the right to detain me here a single moment longer than I care to stay.”

Besserley threw open the door.

“Then get out,” he ordered brusquely.

The three men were probably the filthiest-looking objects to be met with in a quarter of the town consecrated to vice and uncleanness. Their black hair was matted, their features were almost invisible with dried coal dust and dirt. They wore the disreputable slops of stokers on a tramp steamer. They sat together at a corner table in one of the worst cafés of the worst quarter in Nice—the region which lies in the heart of the old town—a region seldom penetrated by the most intrepid of slum seekers and which even a gendarme approaches with hesitation. That they were Orientals was apparent, but of what nationality it was hard to say. They talked together in some foreign gibberish and they were drinking some repulsive-looking liquid, the nature of which was concealed by the fact that they drank it out of cups. Occasionally one of them would stagger to the counter, holding out his cup, watch whilst it was filled with more noxious-looking liquor from a black bottle by a disreputable-looking barman, pay for it with a crumpled note and stagger back to his place. There were stains on the floor and stains on the marble-topped table around which the three were crouching. They had the sleight of hand of most Oriental races and there was no one amongst the half-drunken company, gradually becoming fewer in number, who noticed the final destination of the cups full of liquor. . . . A stranger stumbled into the café, followed by a growl of curses from outside. From the clatter upon the pavement, it appeared that he had upset a table in his clumsy progress. A

vicious-looking waiter in a singlet and the remains of a pair of trousers followed him truculently. With shaking fingers the newcomer pressed a note into the man's hand.

"That will pay for the drinks," he muttered in broken French. "My friends there," he went on, pointing to the three men. "Shipmates—dirty little rats."

He reeled to the table, dragging a chair with him. Not one of the three turned their heads but they seemed to be conscious of his approach. He dragged his chair up to the table and took a genuine drink from the glass of brandy which the waiter brought him. Afterwards a curious thing happened. A conversation between the four men was started and carried on—in English.

"Got book?" one of the three asked.

The new arrival was wearing a soiled and stained suit of blue serge of nautical cut and was without shirt or collar. His appearance seemed to be well in keeping with the men he had claimed as shipmates.

"The old cuss tumbled to me," he scowled. "I got away. All I could do."

"No book," one of the others murmured softly.

"No book," his neighbour repeated, almost in a whisper.

The newcomer, who in features bore a singular resemblance to the pseudo Mr. Brogden, of Brogden and Biddle, spat on the floor.

"It's this bloody wireless," he confided. "There it was in the hall—suspicious disappearance of Brogden overboard. After that, all I could do was to quit."

"Very unpleasant," one of the three little men murmured. "You read papers—yes? They say a search is being made in Nice for some Japanese who were travelling second class. Very unpleasant. He ask you any questions, this General?"

From outside came a crazy sound of shouting from a drunken Neapolitan, essaying a song in praise of the sun. Two women were quarrelling violently in high-pitched falsetto voices. A table with its load of glasses was thrown over on the pavement. The three men who were dressed as ship's stokers rose to their feet.

"There will be more gendarmes here soon," one of them said. "We mount to our rooms. We will have a little talk with Mr. Brogden there."

The latter rose to his feet unwillingly. He finished his brandy.

"Anything to drink up there?" he asked.

"Plenty drink everywhere—plenty drink," one of the men assured him coaxingly.

"I wouldn't trust you," Brogden declared. "You were drinking water all the time on the steamer. A lily-livered drink—water."

One of the three men whispered to another, who took a bill from his pocket and went to the bar. They all passed on into the rear premises of the place in solemn procession, the last one carrying a bottle of cheap brandy. The leader unlatched a

door and they mounted the stone steps. On the first landing a man was lying asleep, groaning stertorously. The three Orientals walked meticulously around him. Their companion stepped over him with a curse. On the next landing a man and a woman, half undressed and quite drunk, were leaning with their backs to a door which apparently they had been unable to open. From behind other closed doors came an orgy of sound—shouting, quarrelling, cursing. In one room a fight was going on. On the third landing, Brogden stopped to wipe the sweat off his forehead.

“I’ve had enough of this,” he muttered. “I’m going to leave you guys right here.”

“We have arrived,” one of the three men assured him. “This is our room here opposite. Two questions we have to ask. It is very little. Perhaps some more money for expenses—yes?”

Brogden looked them all three over.

“Say, I’m damned if I know how you fellows get all this money you handle.”

There was a thin, strained smile on the lips of the one of the three who did most of the talking.

“There is always money for our honourable friends,” he said.

Brogden leaned against the wall. The brandy was very crude, poor stuff.

“Don’t look as though you owned a dollar between the three of you,” he declared.

They half insinuated, half pushed him through a door close at hand. There was no electric light but a ghastly corner of moonshine stole through the dust-encrusted window. Brogden put his hand to the back of his neck.

“What’s that?” he called out sharply.

No one answered. There was no need. Three inches of blue steel were already quivering in the middle of his neck. He collapsed, a crumpled-up heap upon the bare floor.

They belonged to a methodical race indeed, those three. One by one they stripped stark naked, stepped into the middle of the pewter bowl and washed their bodies inch by inch. As each one finished, they threw the water of their ablutions out of the window, down the three stories into a broad river with a narrow path alongside, which ran below—the river with a dry bed for many months of the year but swollen now with recent rains. One of the three had dragged out a suitcase from underneath the neatly turned-over bed. The first man was soon attired—a neat, dapper little gentleman, with his clean collar and brightly polished shoes. The second followed suit but the last of the three, before he stepped into his basin of water, dragged what remained of Brogden to the low window sill, peered down below and,

scorning help from the others, flung his burden into the gulf of darkness. He listened to the thud and the splash, nodded his head gravely and then he, too, stepped into the water and washed and washed and dried himself. There were no signs of blood in the room when they had finished. They had known where to strike. Out of the window went their soiled and miserable garments. Then, with reverent fingers, one of the three placed a little brown box upon the mantelpiece and opened it, disclosing a small statue of the Japanese Buddha. One by one they took their turn in front of it. For several unhurried minutes their heads were bowed, their lips moved without sound. Then they closed the box. One of them carried it under his arm. Through the window went the suitcase—a cheap affair of canvas. After it went three rolls of stokers' overalls. They patted the bed and looked around, then one by one they left the room. They passed down the unlit staircase, passed the drunken man still snoring, passed the man and the woman, now asleep. Passed the shadows of others stealing up and down, each with that furtive air of secrecy. The café was deserted. There was a line of white light in the sky. The three Japanese parted outside. One made his way towards the station, another towards the port, the third disappeared into the deeper shadows of the neighbourhood. There was an empty room in the lofty tenement house above the Café des Etrangers; the unrecognisable remains of a human being floated and bobbed amongst the stones towards the arches of the Pont des Sept Arcs, and some miscellaneous articles of miserable clothing had gone their way towards the rubbish heap of the city.

For once General Besserley varied his usual morning programme. He occupied his accustomed seat at the Royalty Bar for only a quarter of an hour and, just as the little crowd of habitués were beginning to stream in, he finished his solitary cocktail, descended the steps into the Boulevard des Moulins and entered the bank. Chudleigh, the manager, came forward to meet him.

“Want any money, General?”

Besserley shook his head.

“Just a word in your office,” he said. “I sha’n’t keep you. I have a very simple commission for you.”

The manager led the way. Besserley seemed, for him, to be in a curiously suspicious frame of mind. He not only waited until the door was closed but he looked carefully around the room, as though to assure himself that there were no listeners. Then he drew from his pocket two long envelopes, each sealed in three places.

“My dear Chudleigh,” he began, “are your new vaults in action?”

“For the last two months,” was the prompt reply. “Like to look over them?”

The General shook his head.

“Is my box moved there?” he asked.

“You have a niche all to yourself,” the bank manager reminded him.

The General handed over the envelopes.

“There you are, Chudleigh,” he said. “I may not require you to take care of them for more than twenty-four hours.”

“But during those twenty-four hours they will be as safe as in the Bank of England,” the other assured him. “Do you want me to deposit them now?”

“Just what I am waiting for you to do. As soon as you come up and tell me that they are safe, I will give you final instructions.”

Mr. Chudleigh who, except that the General was an old friend, thought that he might have trusted a subordinate with so ordinary a transaction, hurried off and returned in a few minutes.

“Until you release them,” he announced, “there is no person in the world could get at those envelopes.”

“Capital,” Besserley replied. “What time do you close?”

“Four o’clock as usual,” was the somewhat surprised reply.

“Then between half-past three and four I shall be up again,” Besserley told him. “If by any chance—come this way a minute, Chudleigh,” he broke off suddenly—

“One moment,” the bank manager begged, spotting an important client. “Step into my room.”

The General did as he was bidden but not before he had waved his hand and spoken a word of salutation to the Comte de Wrette. He had barely entered the manager’s parlour before Chudleigh followed him. Besserley closed the door.

“This may sound a little melodramatic, Chudleigh,” he said, “but if I am not in before closing time, you have a commission to perform, and I want your word that you will perform it.”

“My dear fellow,” Chudleigh assured him. “Anything in the world.”

“You yourself go down to the vaults, you bring out those envelopes and you hand them over to your most trusted clerk who can be spared for forty-eight hours. Here is my open cheque for ten thousand francs. With that you hire an escort for your clerk—you can arrange that with the Commissaire—and see that he travels to Paris by the Blue Train to-night. He goes straight to the United States Embassy and he hands over that envelope. He catches the same train at the Gare du Nord and hands over the other one to our Ambassador in London.”

The manager’s perpetual smile had faded.

“This sounds like serious business, General,” he observed.

Besserley shrugged his shoulders.

“It is very likely,” he confessed, “a mare’s nest. On the other hand, it might be of the greatest possible importance. We have talked of currencies and the European conditions until we are both pretty well sick of it. What would another war mean between two first-class powers?”

“The end of the world,” Chudleigh groaned.

“Well, it might mean that,” Besserley said, “if anything happened to me and those envelopes were not delivered.”

For a moment or two Mr. Chudleigh wondered whether his old client and friend had suddenly taken leave of his senses. He looked carefully into his face and he saw the lines there which belonged to the man of whom rumour still told strange stories.

“You may rely upon me, sir,” he promised. “If it would make you any easier, I have imminent business myself in Paris and I will take them myself.”

The General shook him by the hand.

“That’s very good of you, Chudleigh,” he acknowledged. “You need not pack your bag just yet, though. You will almost certainly see me back again before four.”

The General paused on the top of the stone steps to light a cigarette. This was an old trick of his when he wanted to make quite sure whether or no he was being followed.

There was consternation in the picturesque entrance gardens of the famous Beaulieu restaurant. The *maître d’hôtel*, hurrying up from the restaurant to the small chalet-like hotel in the grounds, paused abruptly and in obvious discomfiture. The commissioner, in magnificent uniform, who threw open the door of Besserley’s car with a broad smile, paused in the middle of his bow and the welcoming words faded away upon his lips. The concierge at the door hastened to put on his glasses. The proprietor, with his flowing tie, hurrying up to welcome a distinguished client, stopped short in surprise. The whole trouble was that General Besserley, one of their most esteemed patrons, had ordered a marvellous luncheon in a private room in a place notorious for its private rooms, its excellent food, wonderful wines and perfect service—and the General had arrived alone. Besserley descended from the car and, as a man of the world, he was quick to grasp the situation. For the first time that morning he smiled.

“I am expecting a guest,” he announced, “perhaps two. You have my usual suite on the first floor?”

“Everything is prepared, sir,” the *maître d’hôtel* assured him. “If Monsieur will

give himself the trouble to mount.”

Besserley shook hands with *Monsieur le patron* and mounted. By degrees the consternation faded away. The guests were to arrive. There were many explanations of such a situation. Besserley was ushered into a very pleasant sitting room with a wonderful view of the sea on one side and the gardens on the other. The table was beautifully decorated with roses, the linen and glass were, as always, perfection. There was a slight film upon the decanter of vodka, which was as it should be. He scrutinised the labels on the Montrachet and Chambertin and discovered that they were of the right vintage, the Montrachet in its lightly filled ice pail, and the Chambertin reposing in its basket.

“Everything,” General Besserley declared, “is perfect, as usual, Louis. Be so good as to bring me at once a Dry Martini cocktail in the shaker. I am a little in advance of my time.”

“Monsieur is expecting, perhaps?” Louis asked with a little cough.

“Two gentlemen,” Besserley announced firmly. “One is Monsieur le Comte de Wrette. He is doubtless known to you. The other is Professor Kralin. They may arrive together or separately. Show them up at once.”

All excitement died away. The Comte de Wrette was a famous Belgian millionaire and a valued client. Mr. Kralin was unknown. Two ordinary guests. The romance had passed from this little luncheon party. Madame, when she was told by her husband, sighed and regretted the changed times. Madame, her sister-in-law behind the desk, shook her head and also dreamt of the past. The violinist, who was hoping for an invitation across the gardens to the chalet, packed away his favourite violin and resumed his ordinary instrument. He too sighed. And amidst it all a very beautiful car turned into the grounds and two gentlemen enquired at the chalet for General Besserley and were ushered into the sitting room. . . .

If General Besserley, for once, when giving a party, was a trifle ill at ease, he showed no signs of it. He shook hands with the Count, he shook hands also with Professor Kralin, a tall man with gross features, a prominent forehead and piercing eyes, and he noticed with a sigh of relief that both men seemed attracted by the preparations for the feast. They accepted easy-chairs on the balcony and cocktails served in beautiful glasses.

“It is not my custom,” Professor Kralin remarked, “to spoil such excellent wine as I see on the sideboard by drinking cocktails, but a speedy opportunity to wish for your better acquaintance, my host,” he added, with a little bow to Besserley, “cannot be neglected.”

“I, alas,” the Comte de Wrette confessed with a sigh, “am an *apéritif*

worshipper. Like a great many men who seem to be idlers but who find every hour of their day occupied, I am always just a trifle exhausted when the time comes for luncheon or dinner. I need the slight impetus of alcohol to clear my brain.”

“The European world,” General Besserley remarked, with a smile, “has formed its own opinion on that score. However, I, in my idleness, have never outgrown my American tastes.”

The smiling face of the *maître d’hôtel* appeared at the French windows.

“*Monsieur le général est servi,*” he announced.

The three men sat at a round table of ample dimensions and both the service of luncheon and the luncheon itself were as near perfection as possible. The conversation seemed a little elusive. They talked of Einstein, the internal condition of Germany, the ebb and flow of art and religion in the cultured countries of the world. They talked as men of intelligence who are used to the exercise of their brains. But with all three there was a general understanding that this conversation was nothing but the flashes of lightning before the storm on the stillness of a summer night. Everything had been perfectly arranged. With the service of coffee and the warming of the glasses for the old brandy, the *maître d’hôtel* and his myrmidons faded from the place. General Besserley rose from his chair. He closed the window leading out on to the balcony. He crossed the room and locked the door. There was a little twitch about the lips of De Wrette and his hand moved slightly towards his pocket. Besserley, with a genial smile, laid the key by his side.

“My two guests,” he said—“I hope I may say my friends—these precautions are for you and not for me. I have a few words to say which I fancy you would wish spoken without the risk of eavesdroppers.”

“Let us have those words,” the Professor begged, lighting his cigar. “I am in the hands of my friend De Wrette and De Wrette brought me here. Why—I do not know. But whatever may happen from now on, I have eaten a most excellent luncheon and drunk some wonderful wines. You are a great host, General.”

The General bowed. He resumed his place between the two men.

“I have a few gifts in life,” he said. “The gift of expression is not one of them. The remarks I have to make may sound almost crude.”

The General also lit a cigar. He served the brandy.

“Comte de Wrette,” he went on, “I have lived in Europe for twelve years. You have filled a great place in European society for about the same time. You must give me credit for one thing—there is a certain freemasonry amongst those who have served behind the scenes in every country of the world. I am one of the few breathing who know that you, with a Belgian mother, are a Japanese by birth, the

son of the famous Baron Nyashi, who was the greatest diplomat your country ever possessed. I have never mentioned the fact to a living soul.”

The eyelids of De Wrette never flickered.

“I have no remark to make,” he said, after a brief pause. “There are cemeteries in many countries of the world where repose the bones of those who have even hinted at the fact which you have just stated.”

“Naturally,” Besserley agreed, “but we have passed those times. The lives and deaths of individuals seldom have any effect upon the wheel of history. I have asked you here because I want to tell you both that I have discovered—by accident, if you will; not by means of my own intelligence—the secret of your wonderful scheme, De Wrette, of which I propose to be a cog in the wheel. I shall now prove my knowledge. Only a few months ago the finest Japanese fleet that has ever sailed out of harbour steamed proudly into the Pacific, into new waters. There came a protest from my country. Whether it was well advised or not it is futile to discuss. The reply from Tokio was the reply that a proud and successful nation was bound to send. Your country has made great history within the last ten years, De Wrette. It has nothing further to learn from the West. It has no need to stand bareheaded before the Presidents or the monarchs of any country. Still, you lack a little of that complete strength upon the seas which you crave. You, De Wrette, discovered how to atone for that.”

A look flashed from Kralin to De Wrette. For the first time there was a gleam of something which might be counted emotion in the former’s face.

“De Wrette,” Besserley went on, “I was a soldier during the early part of the War but I passed into the Secret Service at Washington within a few months. For one year I had to work on naval matters. It was just at the time of the Russian *débâcle* that I met a cousin of the first man who tried to restore order to your country. Never mind his name. From him I learnt what had been kept a profound secret. In your naval docks at St. Petersburg a small but complete fleet was in course of building. In another two years these ships would have been ready for action. There was a plan—but that does not concern us. There came the revolution. There came the new Russia. What happened to those ships no one knew, for even to their hulls they were disguised, the great gates of the navy dockyards were sealed, and the prison burying-grounds had been heaped with the bodies of those who had whispered. Only within the last eighteen months has the roar of hammers and machinery reawakened with the silent coming and going of a multitude of work people.”

“From what province in fairyland has such a story reached you, General?” Kralin

asked.

“You may well ask,” Besserley replied gravely, “for I will admit the censorship inaugurated by your dictator has been almost impenetrable. Yet, if you wish to know, the hint of what was happening reached me from a so-called Mr. Brogden of Brogden and Biddle, land agents of Philadelphia.”

No word. The smoke from the cigars was curling upward. It was almost impossible to hear the breathing of either of the two men who sat with their eyes fixed upon Besserley. Once more De Wrette’s hand had stolen downwards.

“It is true,” the host of the party went on, “that the gentleman bearing that name met with an unfortunate accident on the *Homeric*. He made friends with one or two tourists from your country, De Wrette, and I think we all three know what became of him. But he was a man of careful habits and two days after the news of the fatal accident to him was published, I received a letter in an old cipher written in indelible pencil and posted in Southampton by a steward off the *Homeric*. An ignominious way of learning a great historical fact but there it is. The man whom you sent to me, De Wrette, although I imagine you scarcely trouble yourself about such trifles, and who posed as being Mr. Brogden of Brogden and Biddle, and wished for a little information I could have given him, or rather a codebook I possessed, was too obvious an impostor. He went back to Nice to report to your three Japanese friends, and I have an idea somehow or other that we shall not hear much of him again. To proceed. For how much money I do not know, but you, De Wrette, have made a perfectly legitimate deal with Professor Kralin of Leningrad, of whose official position I will not speak, to buy those recently completed ships. They have been cunningly and marvellously completed and by skilful handling in camouflage would probably make the long voyage into the Pacific in safety. The only condition that was necessary for the success of your scheme was secrecy. You have now lost that necessary condition.”

Still there was silence. Neither man spoke but Besserley knew that never in his life had he been nearer death.

“I am no longer a man of affairs,” he went on. “I am a retired servant of my Government, but I have seen the agony of war. I have seen its futility and if my life can hinder another one, it is cheerfully offered.”

He raised his glass to his lips, threw his head back and drank slowly the remainder of his brandy. Still there was silence from his two guests.

“If those ships ever leave port and come in touch with your fleet, De Wrette, there will be war, and such a war as will shake the world. Therefore that thing must not happen. It is one of those incidents—this bargain between you, Professor, on

behalf of your Government which needs so badly the money, and you, De Wrette—or shall I call you for once Nyashi?—representing Japan, of which no one knows. I honestly believe that we three are the only living persons who are acquainted with the full details.”

“The only three alive,” De Wrette said ominously.

“Exactly,” Besserley went on. “But although I would offer my life willingly, if it were necessary, my life if I lost it within the next thirty seconds,” he added, with a glance at De Wrette’s right hand, “would never alter the course of history. At a certain hour to-morrow the whole story will be simultaneously in the hands of the American Ambassadors in Paris and in London, but if we shake hands across this table, and if this bargain is forgotten, and we each go our own ways, no word of it will ever pass my lips. If the packets which I left behind me and which even all the wit of a De Wrette could never intercept, be read by the two men to whom they are addressed, there must be war just as surely as though your scheme had succeeded. Not such sudden war, perhaps, but war which would come of smouldering anger, of righteous anger, on the part of my country-people.”

Besserley wondered afterwards what means those two men found to convey the one to the other their secret thoughts. Yet in some measure they succeeded. De Wrette rose to his feet. His hand was no longer in his right-hand pocket. He moved towards the bell.

“You permit us, General, to ask for our car?”

“By all means,” was the courteous response. “Unless I can persuade you to have half a glass more brandy?”

“That will I do,” the Professor said, helping himself liberally.

De Wrette unlocked the door. The *maître d’hôtel* appeared. Orders were given. The sound of wheels was heard below. De Wrette held out his hand.

“I must thank you, General,” he said, “for the most wonderful luncheon and the most entertaining hour of my life.”

“It was a very good luncheon,” Professor Kralin declared. “It was wonderful food and wonderful wine. And as for you, my host—a little drama—shall we call it that?”

“Some touch of the film about it,” De Wrette observed.

“A slight lacking in reality,” the Professor agreed.

The three men shook hands. De Wrette, at the last moment, turned back. He poured out a little more of the brandy and he raised his glass to Besserley. No words passed. The toast, whatever it may have been, was a silent one. A moment or two later the sound of a motor horn was heard and the car crawled out of the gardens.

The *maître d'hôtel* bowed enquiringly to his distinguished patron.

“The lunch, I trust, was satisfactory, General?” he asked.

“As always—wonderful,” Besserley declared, passing his handkerchief lightly across his forehead. “The bill, if you please, Louis.”

V THE DEVIL'S WIND

The mistral raged and all the way from Marseilles to Monaco the almost uncanny beauty of the country at such times brought scant relief to nerve-racked humanity. In the background the snow-capped Alps seemed to have moved a hundred miles nearer to the sea; even the violet line of the Estérel was traced now with the hard precision of a pencil cutting its way into the skies. At Marseilles the sportsmen of the underworld murdered their mistresses, convinced that the worst that could happen to them would be a few words of gentle admonition from the authorities.

In the more sophisticated region of Cannes, Nice and Monte Carlo that part of the population who had the misfortune to be overcome by drink in the streets were conducted courteously to their homes by apologetic gendarmes. "*C'est le temps du mistral. Que voulez-vous?*" It was the madness of the devil's wind. . . . Even on the terrace of the Royalty Bar in Monte Carlo it had its effect.

Colonel Costerleys, a somewhat frail but charming old gentleman, one of the oldest and most esteemed residents of the Principality, brought his bath chair to a standstill by the side of the table where his friend, General Besserley, was seated.

"I don't drink as a rule in the morning," he declared, after the customary greetings. "I must get the dust out of my throat somehow or other, though. An Americano, waiter. You gentlemen will join me?"

"We have just ordered," Besserley explained. "If you stay long enough, though, there's no telling what may happen!"

The Colonel shook his head.

"I'm going across the road as soon as I've finished my drink," he confided. "Thank heavens, I have some men coming in for bridge this afternoon and don't need to turn out again to-day."

"How is Miss Caroline this morning?" Besserley enquired.

"Not up when I left," her father grumbled. "She's all right, though. Late hours seem to agree with these young people. There's the Countess' car there, I see," he added, glancing towards the waiting automobiles. "I expect that means that the child's out to lunch again."

He set down his glass, waved his hand to his friend and glided off out of the gate, across the road, disappearing into the hall of the Imperial Flats.

"Dear old humbug," General Besserley remarked, smiling. "He's always grumbling at Caroline's being out so much and yet nothing makes him happier than to think how popular the child is."

“Pretty and attractive,” his companion, Doctor Marius, a retired physician, admitted. “All the same, she’s a selfish little pig.”

“Better not let her father hear you say so,” the other warned him. “Both he and her mother worship the girl. . . . Doctor, I’m going to have another cocktail. This accursed mistral has made my throat like a lime kiln.”

His friend, who occupied the other chair at the table, shook his head deprecatingly.

“The mistral,” he declared, “is the most cleansing of all nature’s elements in this part of the world. It kills, in all probability, a thousand million germs a second.”

“All the same,” the General demanded, “haven’t you ever felt the impulse to kill someone when this wind blew hard in your face and the sun shone on your head and all your friends seemed to be suddenly hard, brilliant but hateful people?”

“Nerves,” was the abrupt commentary. “Certainly I never feel anything of the sort.”

Suddenly, from close at hand, from somewhere across that open space where the few automobiles were parked, and opposite to which was the entrance to the Imperial Flats, there came the sharp biting report of a service revolver. The General sprang to his feet.

“My God!” he exclaimed. “Someone else has felt it!”

Owing to the disconcerting ravages of the wind, General Besserley and his companion were the only two customers seated outside in the gardens of the bar, and from the interior, which was rather more crowded than usual, the reports were inaudible. Besserley was the first to thread his way between two of the automobiles drawn up against the kerb. He was followed closely by Doctor Marius, his late companion, and two chauffeurs made almost simultaneous appearance, evidently from the neighbourhood of their vehicles—one still carrying the newspaper which he had been reading. The third chauffeur remained in the driving seat of his powerful Bugatti, his face as white as the face of a ghost, his dilated eyes fixed upon a very terrible sight. Stretched motionless upon the ground in the middle of the dusty street in front of the flats, and in a direct line with the entrance to the bar, was the crumpled-up body of a girl. The wind had played havoc with her skirts and the *béret* she had been wearing had parted company with her yellow hair. She herself, however, lay ominously still.

Those few seconds of awed silence disclosed a hideous little cameo of drama which no one who was there ever forgot. The burning sunshine and the pitiless wind—Doctor Marius rising slowly from his knees, where he had been bending over the

fallen figure, remembering even in that terrible moment to brush the dust and small flints from his trousers—General Besserley with his arms outstretched to keep back the crowd added to every moment by people streaming out of the bar. All these things seemed natural but terribly impressive adjuncts.

“Is she dead?” Besserley asked.

The doctor nodded.

“I will put her in my car and drive her to the hospital,” he said. “Quite useless, though. Get these chauffeurs to help me.”

In two minutes it was all over. The body of the girl had been lifted into the automobile, which the doctor himself drove. There was not a speck of blood upon the road, no sign of any struggle. The girl had been shot through the heart, collapsed and died before she could even call out. Besserley summoned one of the proprietors of the bar.

“Telephone to the Commissaire of Police to come at once,” he directed. “Also send to the Casino for Commissaire Delous. Tell Guido to try and keep the people back from here. The police should be the first to search the ground.”

Francis hurried off on his mission. General Besserley, bare-headed, remained at his post. His manner showed all possible reverence and distress, but his eyes at every opportunity were searching the ground between the low kerbstone off which the girl had stepped and the spot where she had lain. Clear-headed though he was in every emergency, his brain was in a turmoil. The whole thing seemed incredible. Carrie Costerleys, the little girl with whom he had danced and flirted lightly only a few hours ago—pretty, selfish, shallow-brained, but amusing always and amazing vital—DEAD! Swept off the face of the earth. Even now on her way to her grave. The hot wind bit him but he shivered as he faced the questions which everyone else was debating. What enemy in the world could a child like this have had? Whose hatred could have brought her to so pitiless and cruel a death? She had been the spoilt plaything of the place, the epitome of its gaiety and frivolity. Her life had seemed like an open book to everybody. What hidden story could there have been which had culminated in so overwhelming a tragedy?

A motor car flashed round the corner and drew up in front of the entrance to the flats. General Besserley retired from his solitary vigil. He moved, however, only a few yards away. He was slowly absorbing the whole scene into his mind—the open doors of the building through which she must have issued, the three automobiles, the two chauffeurs standing talking together, the third rigid in his driving seat. The Commissaire of Police of Monaco showed himself to be a man of discretion and determination. The exit of the short road leading to the bar and to the Imperial Flats

was guarded by a couple of gendarmes, carbines in hand, and no vehicle, chauffeur, nor any of the visitors to the bar were allowed to leave. A gendarme also guarded the steps down into the Boulevard des Moulins.

A preliminary examination was held in the extension to the bar, which was separated from the bar proper by a thick curtain. One by one, the morning patrons of the place were led before the commissaire and practically every one of them gave the same reply—they had heard nothing of the report and their view of the exit from the flats was blocked by the cars. They had, in short, neither seen nor heard anything of the tragedy. Afterwards it was the turn of the chauffeurs. The possible motive for anyone in the position of a chauffeur committing a vicious and deadly murder, when the victim was a young woman in an utterly different world, was hopelessly obscure, but the fact remained that the fatal shot was most easily fired from behind or between or even inside one of the cars. However, it appeared that not one of the three chauffeurs had seen the girl on her exit, had seen anyone else in the street, or had been able to form any idea as to whence the bullet had come. All three of them had heard the report and had immediately been on the *qui vive*. There was the girl lying in the dust but no signs of any other person, no possible indication of the direction from which death had reached her. The commissaire, at the end of the enquiry, was a tired and a puzzled man.

“One gathers but little light concerning this terrible affair,” he said gravely to Besserley. “I ran into the hospital on my way here. The young lady was shot through the heart from the front. There was no one in the road between the automobiles and the flats. The bullet must have come therefore from behind or inside one of the automobiles or the gardens. You yourself, with the doctor, were the only people in the gardens.”

“The topmost of the steps leading down into the street would have been a point of vantage,” Besserley suggested.

The commissaire extended his hands.

“But that,” he pointed out, “was within a few feet of where you were seated. You must have either heard footsteps or been conscious of the proximity of the report, if the gun had been fired from there.”

“That is quite true,” Besserley agreed, after a moment’s reflection. “I was talking to my friend, the doctor, at the time. If a shot had been fired so close to us, it would have pretty well blown our heads off.”

The commissaire considered the matter with knitted brows, tugging all the time at his small black moustache.

“Is it possible, General,” he asked, “that anyone could have shot Mademoiselle

in the way she was shot and escaped into the flats before you were on your feet?"

"Absolutely impossible," Besserley declared confidently. "Mademoiselle was shot through the heart approaching in this direction. It was a matter of seconds before the doctor and I were on our feet and in view of the scene of the tragedy. There was not a soul in sight. Further, no one left the place before your arrival and no one has left it since."

"It is clear then," the commissaire decided, "that the murderer must either be one of those three chauffeurs or is at present in the bar."

A gendarme approached and saluted.

"Mesdames and Messieurs are anxious to know whether they can leave," he announced.

"I am sorry," was the curt reply, "no one is to leave at present. I require a few minutes for reflection."

There was no grumbling. Secretly no one wanted to move. Everyone had the feeling that at any moment there might be a dramatic finale to this terrible episode. By the commissaire's orders two more gendarmes were posted at the entrance to the flats. All of the people now therefore who could have been concerned in the crime were under his control. He made his way into the bar.

"I regret the necessity very much, ladies and gentlemen," he began, "but I must ask you all—every one of you without exception—to submit yourselves to a search."

"A search! What for?" protested one of the habitués.

"The weapon from which the shot was fired which killed Mademoiselle Costerleys."

"But how could it have been fired from here?" someone asked.

"I admit that it could not have been," the commissaire agreed. "On the other hand, I do not know who was inside the bar and who was in the gardens when the shot was fired. If I made a difference, I would have to rely upon hearsay. It is better that every one of you here should submit to a brief search. I ask you as good citizens all to help me."

No one made serious objection. The search was a thorough one and it was concluded in about twenty minutes. It was, as everyone including the commissaire had expected, unsuccessful. The latter then visited the cordon which he had drawn around the automobiles. He called one of the two gendarmes to him.

"The cars here must be searched closely," he ordered. "It does not matter to whom they may belong. Remember that it was only a matter of hiding inside one of them for a few seconds. Whilst you proceed with this, the chauffeurs are to come

inside and I will interrogate them. Who are the owners of the automobiles, Inspector?"

"The nearest one, the big limousine, sir," the man replied, pointing it out, "is owned by Lady Hart. She lives at Mentone but comes over here most mornings. That is her chauffeur in dark blue, standing by the bonnet. He has a very good character."

"And the next one?"

"That belongs to Milady Lewitt, *une anglaise*, who has a villa at Beaulieu. The chauffeur is French and he has been in her service, I believe, for many years. We see him on the road most days."

"And the third?"

"The long automobile like a racing car, that belongs to the Comtesse de Croilles. It came here empty to take Miss Costerleys over to the Comtesse's villa at Eze."

"And the chauffeur?"

"The young man in black livery seated at the wheel."

"Is he well known here?"

The inspector shook his head.

"He is an Italian—a stranger to most of us, I think, sir."

"Instruct the three men to leave their cars and follow me into the room leading out of the bar," the commissaire directed. "Meanwhile, get on with the search. Is that understood, Inspector?"

"*Parfaitement, Monsieur.*"

The commissaire strolled back towards the room in which he had held his brief enquiry, looking carefully at each vehicle as he went. The inspector spoke a word or two to the two nearest chauffeurs, who prepared to follow him. When he reached the third one, however, the young Italian appeared to hesitate.

"My mistress," he said, "must be informed at once of what has happened. Madame will be greatly upset. She was expecting Mademoiselle Costerleys for lunch."

"These are unimportant matters," the inspector told him curtly. "You must wait for permission to leave the place and come with me at once to the commissaire."

The man appeared to be about to descend and the inspector half-turned away. In another moment, however, there was a roar from the supercharged engine. The inspector swung round. The chauffeur was bending over the wheel and the powerful Bugatti, which had started away with a jump, was already round the corner, racing towards the exit from the street where the two gendarmes were posted.

"*Mille tonnerres!*" the inspector shouted. "Return at once. You are not

permitted to leave.”

There was no response. The inspector signalled to the gendarmes below, one of whom immediately stepped into the middle of the road and levelled his carbine. The driver of the car took no notice. He swung round the corner on two wheels and disappeared from sight.

“Shoot, you idiot,” the inspector shouted wildly.

The man shook his head. The inspector suddenly remembered that, according to a recently issued order, unless on special duty, carbines were to be carried unloaded. He dashed back to the bar, brushing to one side the people who were streaming out, attracted by the sound of the shouting. He sprang to the telephone.

“What is it that has arrived?” the commissaire demanded breathlessly.

The inspector, still turning the handle of the instrument, pointed outside to the empty space where the Bugatti had stood.

“It is the automobile of the Comtesse de Croilles,” he explained. “When I told the chauffeur that he must submit himself to interrogation, he declared that he must return to his mistress to take her the news. He has one of those quick-starting cars. He was gone before I could reach him. The man below failed to stop him. . . . Exchange? *Eh, bien*—Bureau de Police, Monaco—quick—”

The commissaire himself snatched away the instrument and jabbered his commands. The frontier gendarmerie, Beaulieu and Nice were to be spoken to. The main roads were to be barricaded and barred. At all costs, the car of the Comtesse de Croilles with the black-liveried chauffeur was to be stopped. Let them serve out loaded carbines all along the coast and shoot if necessary. Mentone was to be advised also and guards to be placed on the Upper Corniche.

“I come to the bureau myself to fetch the other car,” the commissaire shouted, tossing the receiver to the inspector. “I shall go to Nice by the lower road and confer with Monsieur Dubois there.”

The few people left in the place were stupefied. General Besserley drew the two chauffeurs on one side.

“What sort of a man is he, this chauffeur of the Comtesse de Croilles?” he enquired.

“Pretty well a stranger to us, sir,” one of the men replied. “He has been driving for the Comtesse for about a year and often used to come up here to fetch Miss Costerleys, but he never spoke much to any of us.”

“As we put it in English, sir,” the other man said, “he sort of gave himself airs. That didn’t go very well with any of us, so, except for an odd cigarette now and then when we were waiting, we left him alone.”

“What do you suppose he meant by racing off like that?” the General asked. “Did he lose his head or what?”

“Must have gone crazy, sir, I should think.”

“It’s this bloody mistral,” the other chauffeur suggested.

“See anything of him about the time the shot was fired?”

“He hadn’t moved from his seat ever since he came,” the English chauffeur declared. “He reversed his car against the kerb—he’s a fine driver, I will say that for him—and he just sat there, looking like a ghost. Jules and I were the other side at my car, with the bonnet open, looking at one of my plugs when the shot was fired but he was sitting there just the same a few seconds afterwards.”

The General crossed the road and exchanged a few words with the hall porter of the flats. Colonel and Mrs. Costerleys had been advised of the tragedy by the doctor, he was told. Mrs. Costerleys had fainted and the Colonel had had one of his bad attacks. The doctor was sending a nurse and he had left word that they were not to be disturbed on any account.

“My stick is in the Colonel’s chair,” Besserley said. “Do you mind if I fetch it?”

“I noticed it when he came in, sir,” the man replied. “If you will excuse me, that’s the bell for the lift. Would you mind just stepping into the box room and fetching it yourself?”

He hurried off. Besserley pushed open the door of the luggage room on the right, where the Colonel usually left his bath chair, and recovered his stick. He lingered in the place for several moments—an untidy-looking apartment filled with disused trunks, packing-cases and a bicycle or two. He looked thoughtfully out of the window at the spot where the body of the girl had been found, at the little knot of people still talking in excited fashion across the way, at the trees and shrubs leaning back before the increasing gale. As he recrossed the road a few minutes later, his cheeks stung by the wind, he had to clutch his hat with both hands to save it from being swept away. He was in very bad spirits and very bad temper.

“Curse this mistral,” he muttered to himself.

At five o’clock that afternoon Lady Grace, by no means her usual neat and imperturbable self, was shown up into General Besserley’s salon at the Hôtel de Paris. She had evidently spent a wretched afternoon. Her eyes seemed to be already pleading with him for help and courage, even before she spoke. He helped her to an easy-chair and ordered tea.

“Don’t talk about it unless you want to,” he begged. “I don’t mind confessing that I went into the Casino and played for an hour or two this afternoon, hoping to

forget it.”

She threw off her cap and held her forehead for a minute.

“Uncle Sam,” she said, “you saw the terrible beginning this morning: I the awful end. I was to have lunched with Eugénie de Croilles. The news was telephoned to the villa whilst Eugénie and I were waiting. Eugénie is distracted and I don’t wonder at it.”

“Could the Countess throw any light at all upon the matter?” he asked.

“Too much,” Lady Grace groaned. “I am afraid that that wretched chauffeur, who has acted like a lunatic, is at the bottom of it all.”

“You mean that he—shot Carrie?”

“I am afraid so,” Lady Grace sighed. “Of course, Caroline always was an utter fool, and Antonio, the chauffeur, is the son of an Italian count or something of that sort. Eugénie knew that he was by way of being a gentleman when she engaged him, but she didn’t think it mattered. She is proof against that sort of thing herself. All the same, if anyone had asked me, I should have said that Carrie was better able to get out of that kind of mischief than anyone I know.”

“She was a heartless little devil,” Besserley affirmed.

“She told Eugénie last night that she had promised to go away with him. This morning she telephoned that she had written him, to say that she had changed her mind. We were all going to talk it over at luncheon.”

“I see,” Besserley murmured. “You think, then, that he knew when he went to fetch her this morning that the whole thing was off and that out of revenge he shot her?”

“I am afraid,” Lady Grace admitted, “that there is no other solution. He would scarcely have run off like this in the face of police orders unless he were guilty.”

“According to her own story, she has been rather asking for it,” the General meditated.

“She was honest enough last evening,” Lady Grace confided. “She told Eugénie—she admitted it quite openly—that she had led him on. She said that he made love so beautifully.”

“Silly little idiot!”

Tea was served and Lady Grace drank hers feverishly.

“Of course,” she remarked, as she lit a cigarette, “everything now depends upon whether they are able to arrest Antonio. He never came back to the villa, you know, and up till half an hour ago, at any rate, there was no news of his having been captured.”

“Do you want him to get away?” Besserley asked curiously.

Lady Grace acknowledged it frankly.

“It was a foul and terrible thing to do, of course,” she said, “but it would be much better for everyone if he escaped. There would be a certain amount of scandal, of course, but nothing to what there would be if he were brought up in Court and pleaded his love affair with her as an excuse. She’s just the sort of idiot to have written him a lot of silly letters. It would kill poor old Colonel Costerleys, to say nothing of her mother. They are charming old people, but they are very proud and they are devoted to Caroline, though neither of them realised what a flighty little creature she really was.”

“What did you think of the young man?”

“I liked him—the little I knew of him,” she confessed. “Of course, that really was not very much. He was always driving Caroline back and forth—at all hours of the night too. I have only spoken a few words to him, but I have always found him most respectful and nice.”

“Perhaps if he’s a decent sort, he might keep his mouth closed, even if he’s caught,” Besserley suggested.

“He won’t be able to keep other people’s mouths closed,” she sighed. “A young man like that doesn’t shoot one of his employer’s friends dead for nothing.”

The telephone bell rang. General Besserley remained for some minutes in conversation with his caller. When he had finished and rung off, he passed on the news.

“The car has been found,” he confided, “at the bottom of the gorge at the spot they have christened lately ‘suicide corner’.”

“On the Middle Corniche?”

He nodded.

“Just past the bridge at Eze. The car must have been deliberately driven over the precipice. It was completely smashed to pieces, of course.”

“And Antonio?”

“No trace of him.”

“I think that’s queer,” Lady Grace remarked. “Did no one see the car pass the cafés at Eze?”

“There appears to have been scarcely anyone about. The mistral was blowing to such an extent that all the outside chairs of the cafés had been taken away and no one was able to stand upright. A Chasseur Alpin, who was sheltering with his motor bicycle, saw the car flash by but he had been up in the mountains and had not heard about the murder. There was someone cowering over the wheel when it passed and he put its terrific speed down to the fact that the driver had got the mistral in his

blood.”

Lady Grace indulged in a dreary little gesture.

“It would have made a finer ending,” she said, “if he had gone over with the car.”

“I shouldn’t think,” Besserley reflected, “that there was one chance in twenty of his getting away. The whole neighbourhood is being thoroughly patrolled and unless he has friends near and a change of clothes—which is not likely—they ought to have him before nightfall.”

“Poor Antonio!”

“You are not sympathising with him?”

She looked speculatively away.

“I wonder,” she murmured. “The dead are beyond sympathy. Sometimes it is the living who need it.”

A pale-faced young man in a dark travelling suit was dining alone, a few evenings later, under the trees of a well-known hotel at Brignolles. He had ordered his dinner carefully and he ate in leisurely fashion. His clothes might have been ready-made but on his slim figure they looked well. His linen and cravat were well chosen, his hands well kept. He was in the act of pouring himself out a glass of wine when he paused to watch a little incident which was developing before his eyes. A car had been driven rapidly into the short drive and pulled up in front of the main entrance to the hotel. It was driven by a gendarme whose companion was an older man in plain clothes but with an official air. Both men descended. They engaged the proprietor, who hurried out to meet them, in conversation. After a few words the latter pointed across the garden to the trees, under which the solitary diner was seated. . . .

The hand which held the glass of wine shook ever so slightly. A few drops were spilt upon the tablecloth but when the young man raised his glass to his lips, he drank steadily till the glass was empty. The gendarme and his companion were approaching. They had left the avenue. They had reached the grass. For a single moment the young man looked over each shoulder, looked even behind him at the brick wall. There was no way of escape. He knew that very well. He was trapped. He awaited fate. The man in plain clothes, alert, military in bearing, saluted him courteously.

“Your name is Antonio Fraletti?” he asked.

The young man leaned back in his chair.

“That is so,” he admitted.

“You are charged with the murder of Miss Caroline Costerleys two mornings ago, outside the Royalty Bar at Monte Carlo. Why did you do it?”

Blank silence.

“Why did you do it?” the commissaire repeated. “Come, come, Fraletti, there is no secret about the matter. You might just as well own up. Why did you do it and what have you done with the revolver?”

Blank silence. The young man poured himself another glass of wine and drank it. He was on the point of proceeding with his meal when his interlocutor stepped forward and laid his hand upon the table. His tone had become sterner and more threatening.

“You will have to talk presently, you know, young man. Why not now? Silence does not help you. We shall find means to open your lips.”

There was a whispering of wind in the thick leaves overhead but no other sound. The young man seemed to have lost interest in the proceedings. He had taken up his knife and fork again. The commissaire laughed unpleasantly.

“Well, well,” he said, “there’s no need to waste time over you here. You are under arrest, Fraletti. We are going to take you back to Monaco.”

The young man shivered.

“Could it not be somewhere else?” he asked.

The commissaire rubbed his hands and smiled.

“That touches you!” he exclaimed. “Monaco—the scene of your crime.”

The young man rose to his feet.

“I am willing to go where you choose to take me,” he said. “I have a small car here. Will you permit that I follow you, if I give you my parole?”

The commissaire was amused.

“So that you might do as you did with the automobile of the Comtesse de Croilles, eh? This time, though, I suppose you would go with the car. No, my friend. You will sit behind, in my own little saloon. You will be handcuffed to the gendarme here. A strong man, mark you. I myself shall drive. In that fashion we may return safely.”

And in that fashion Antonio Fraletti left Brignolles.

Three days later there was a great change in the appearance of Fraletti. He lay in a most unpleasant cell in the dreaded prison of the Principality. He was unshaven, his clothes were unbrushed, his linen was soiled. He had lost his composure. He scratched now and then at the walls. He even shook the door. His cheeks had fallen in. His eyes were full of the hunted light of the utterly stricken man. When at last the warder appeared, he rushed at him, only to be thrown backwards upon the floor.

“Come, come, not so violent,” his jailer admonished. “What’s the matter with

you?”

“I want water,” Antonio moaned.

“Well, you can ask Monsieur le Commissaire,” was the curt reply. “You have had your allowance. The first lot, remember, you threw away—as you did your food. Come along, you are going to see him now.”

“Anywhere—anywhere,” the young man begged, “out of this place!”

They half dragged him into the bureau. The man in authority was seated behind his desk. He looked up as the gendarmes entered with the prisoner and he smiled faintly. The young man would surely, in this condition, be more amenable.

“Bring the prisoner here,” he ordered, pointing to a space in front of his desk.

Antonio was led to the place indicated.

“Are you feeling a little more loquacious this morning, Antonio Fraletti?” the commissaire asked.

“Give me some water,” was the brusque but imploring reply.

“Water, eh?”

“The prisoner threw away his first two allowances,” the gendarme explained. “Since then he has had time to get thirsty.”

The commissaire pointed to the water bottle which stood upon his own table.

“Give him a tumblerful,” he directed.

The gendarme obeyed. Antonio drank it feverishly.

“One more,” the commissaire conceded. “Now, Antonio, you look more like yourself again. Don’t let us waste time about this business. As a matter of form, we want the revolver with which you shot Caroline Costerleys.”

Silence. Antonio had the air of one who had not heard.

“I repeat the demand,” his questioner continued sharply. “There is no object in giving us trouble, Antonio Fraletti. It does not improve your position. It makes it worse. We know that you killed the girl. Why did you do it?”

Silence. The prisoner was looking steadily at the wall.

“So you are going to give trouble, eh?” the commissaire observed. “Very well. We too can make trouble, you know. Be sensible, young man. It is a bad business but nothing can change what has happened. You may just as well deal with the matter in a straight-forward way. We want you to tell us where we shall find the revolver with which you killed Miss Costerleys.”

Silence.

“Tell us then why you did it. Give us a reason.”

Silence. This time a silence which seemed charged with an even greater amount of defiance.

“You were probably badly treated by the young lady,” the official went on. “Young ladies do forget themselves sometimes, and I expect when you are washed and brushed up and have your best clothes on, you are a decent-looking fellow. Young people will be young people. The young lady had been encouraging you, without a doubt. We found some of her letters. We are quite prepared to believe that the young lady treated you badly. No reason why you should be obstinate about it. Come along, young fellow, and we will send you down to your dinner and there may be a packet of cigarettes on the plate—but where shall we find the revolver?”

Silence. More hopeless than ever. The Commissaire tried again and again to break through the silence of Antonio Fraletti, which seemed by now to have placed him behind an impregnable wall. At last, the former rose to his feet.

“Take him back to his cell,” he ordered. “No cigarettes—lowest class of rations—no lights. We will try him again a little later on.”

Antonio was led away. For the moment his expression of agony had departed. Looking at his rigid features, one might have imagined that he had succeeded in mesmerising himself.

Everybody said that the Costerleys were wonderful. They made a terribly pathetic but dignified appearance at their daughter’s funeral and one by one they received a few intimate friends. The Colonel was perhaps a little frailer than ever and for the time he had given up his pet hobby—the bath chair—and drove with his wife at quiet hours of the day in the limousine. One morning he actually limped across the road and took his place by General Besserley’s side.

“Got to be done some day, my friend,” he remarked, as he released his hand from the other’s grip. “There’s the wife, too, you know. Got to face it. Order me something—I don’t care what. This first morning keep the others away, if you can. If you and I have a few minutes alone, I shall feel I have broken the ice.”

“You have done the right thing,” Besserley assured him. “I’ll choke ’em off if anyone comes near. I’m ordering you a Dry Martini made just like mine.”

The Colonel dallied with his drink. His eyes wandered now and then around the place, but he appeared to notice none of the greetings which came to him from every side. He was wearing dark glasses, the better to excuse himself. Presently, however, as though irritated by the obscurity, he took them off. He leaned forward in his chair. He gazed directly at the spot where the Comtesse de Croilles’ Bugatti had stood. He spoke to his companion but his eyes were fixed upon the place. He seemed to be seeing a ghost.

“Must have had some sort of grit, that young man,” he said. “Never opened his

mouth—so the papers say. Never answered when they charged him—never gave way once when they put him through the third degree—never spoke when they brought him into court.”

“Quite a little drama, the closing scene,” Besserley agreed sombrely. “A French court is very seldom quiet but when they sentenced him, you could have heard a pin drop. Afterwards, there was a sort of murmur of voices in a minor key—sounded like a long-drawn-out sob.”

“This was yesterday?” the Colonel murmured.

“Yesterday,” Besserley replied. “I suppose we all ought to have been ashamed of ourselves, but everyone who could fight or beg their way in was in the courthouse.”

The Colonel’s voice had sunk lower still. He seemed to have subsided also in his chair.

“What was the verdict?” he asked, in a scarcely audible whisper.

Besserley looked at his companion in surprise.

“Haven’t you read the paper?”

The Colonel shook his head.

“I read the beginning,” he acknowledged. “I couldn’t finish it. There was a mist before my eyes all the time.”

“He was found guilty and sentenced to be hanged.”

“To be hanged,” the Colonel repeated.

“Pretty awful retribution.”

“When?”

“Sunday week,” Besserley confided. “They don’t give them long to think it over. The young man seems to have had an amazing amount of self-control. He refused to plead, to answer a single question, to make any comment.”

“He said nothing when he was sentenced?”

“Not a word. He just turned round and they marched him off.”

The Colonel rose unsteadily to his feet. He leaned on Besserley’s arm.

“Give me your help across the street,” he begged. “It’s time I was going home.”

They crossed the road together—the Colonel a very frail figure, clinging to his stalwart companion. When they reached the hall, they both, as though with one accord, stopped. Without any word between them, they turned to the luggage room. The Colonel closed the door behind them.

“If you will open that window about a foot,” he pointed, “I will show you where I stood when I shot Caroline. Here,” he went on, unfastening a locker in which were a few walking sticks, caps and other impedimenta of the sort, “is the revolver.”

They stood once more at the window.

“You don’t seem surprised,” the Colonel muttered, under his breath, his watery blue eyes twinkling nervously. “Did you know?”

“I guessed,” Besserley answered gravely. “I came in here that afternoon. The window was still open and you had left the key in the door of the cupboard.”

“The letters!” Colonel Costerleys exclaimed.

“They are still there,” Besserley assured him. “I only glanced at one. Directly I read the first few sentences, I understood. I put them carefully back in the jacket pocket.”

“Now I will tell you,” Colonel Costerleys went on. “Antonio sent in the letters, addressed to her. She had probably prayed for their return. Well she might for, God help her, they were terrible. I opened the packet. I read them. I was nearly crazy with the gossip that was going round. I made up my mind to kill him. It was a long carry but that is a powerful weapon and I have been a crack shot all my life. I was there waiting when Caroline came out. She paused and looked back. She turned almost as though she were going into the house. Besserley, what came over me, I don’t know, but all of a sudden I saw that it was she who was the sinner—not he. A sentence of one of those letters blazed in my brain and, as she stood there facing me, I shot her. That’s all. I always felt that you knew.”

“Yes, I knew,” Besserley repeated gravely. “Perhaps it would have been better if I had left things alone. Give me the weapon, Colonel.”

The Colonel backed away. There was a clearer light in his blue eyes. One felt that his fingers were tightening upon the butt of the revolver.

“Don’t be foolish, Besserley,” he said. “You can’t seriously imagine that a man of my age, an invalid suffering day by day, who has killed his own daughter in cold blood, wants to go on living. I just had to set matters straight. It is pretty well done now. You can see—to him.”

Besserley moved forward. He had never felt in such a state of indecision in his life. Suddenly the poor little Colonel, with his peevish mouth and watery eyes, seemed to have taken charge of the situation.

“You can tell the whole truth, if you think it necessary,” the latter concluded. “On your story, though, I think they should let him go. Try that, anyhow. It would be better for the wife. I won’t try to shake hands. It might make you an accessory. Good-bye.”

Besserley’s involuntary movement forward, his shout of remonstrance, were both too late. Colonel Costerleys, with a very firm finger and a swift upward movement, had blown out his brains.

VI THE MYSTERIOUS PIRANDETTIS

General Besserley watched the smoke curl upwards from his after-luncheon cigar and sipped his coffee with an air of satisfaction. He was seated at a pleasant table against the wall in the Grillroom of the Milan Hotel and although, being a resident of Monte Carlo, he was far from his usual haunts, the cheerful ebb and flow of conversation by which he was surrounded, high-pitched and familiar alike in slang and intonation, saved him from any tendency towards homesickness. Then came a sudden break. A single sentence from a strange-looking young foreigner at the adjoining table to his companion—an attractive girl in an exotic sort of way—struck an entirely alien and disturbing note in the general hubbub. The conversation of these near neighbours of his, since the time of General Besserley's entrance, had been conducted almost in an undertone. These few words, however, were uttered by the young man with so much emphasis that, without any effort of listening, they forced themselves upon his attention.

“Biarritz! It is too near the frontier. We have enemies in Spain. Rudolf was attaché there when Alphonso was on the throne, and he made friends with the Italian Tessaro. We must pause somewhere. Let it be at Monaco.”

The girl's black hair was plastered down almost to her eyebrows. Her lips were the colour and texture of scarlet geraniums, her intense pallor had been increased by the almost reckless use of powder. Both her dark eyes and her mouth lost all their beauty from the sombre light in the former and the sulky curve of the latter. Her figure, as she leaned across the table in her tight-fitting black dress, was the figure of a boy.

“A pig's hole,” she muttered.

The young man, who had a small bald spot on the top of his dome-shaped head, a large but thin nose and the mouth of a weakling, shrugged his shoulders. A gleam in his eyes, which might have been a warning, flashed across the table. The girl half-turned her head. Besserley, ashamed of having played the eavesdropper, was lucky in being able to catch the eye of a passing acquaintance. He accentuated in his greeting his American accent and his transatlantic heartiness. Reassured, the girl leaned back in her chair and occupied herself with her vanity case.

Besserley's newly found acquaintance—Mr. Henry P. Coleman, by name—accepted an invitation to share the former's table and, as he seated himself, glanced curiously at the couple who had already excited his friend's interest.

“That's queer,” he muttered, almost under his breath.

Besserley ventured once more to turn his head towards the adjoining table. A good-looking young man in well-cut tweeds and of military appearance had paused on his way out from the restaurant and was talking pleasantly but earnestly to the unusual couple. Apparently at his suggestion, the young man called for and discharged his bill. The three rose together and made their way towards the glass doors.

“What’s queer?” Besserley demanded.

“Well, the appearance of the couple themselves, for one thing, then the coming of the young man,” his friend replied.

“Do you know who they are?”

“As it happens, I do. The young man and girl call themselves the Comte and Comtesse Pirandetti. They announce themselves as brother and sister and they have a suite of rooms on my floor in the Court here.”

“Why do you say ‘call themselves the Comte and Comtesse Pirandetti?’” Besserley queried.

His acquaintance flicked the ash from his cigarette.

“Of course, it may be the secondary title of another family,” he conceded, “but the Pirandettis themselves are extinct. They must be either persons of some importance travelling incognito or—adventurers.”

“The young man who came and talked to them seemed all right, anyhow,” Besserley remarked.

“That’s why he holds his job,” was the dry response.

“His job?”

“That young man,” Coleman confided, “is one of the Chief Commissioner of Police’s new experiments, an ex-army officer with a good record and of excellent family, turned loose upon Scotland Yard.”

“A detective!” Besserley exclaimed.

“You’ve said it,” his friend chuckled.

Besserley, a few nights later, opened his napkin, pushed on one side the floral offering designed for his buttonhole and glanced up and down the long table with its brilliant array of glass and flowers, its crowd of fashionably dressed women and more or less distinguished-looking men. A few minutes ago in the reception room he had sworn deeply to himself that nothing in the world would induce him to attend another Monte Carlo gala dinner. And now he was utterly content! He was filled, indeed, with the possibly baseless but keen sensation of a new interest in life. Beside him the Comtesse Pirandetti, to whom he had just been presented and whose card

he had found next his own, was languidly studying the menu.

“Do people ever go through a performance like this, I wonder?” she speculated.

“Odd members of my sex sometimes,” he replied. “Yours, as a rule, have too much regard for their figures.”

She turned her head and Besserley realised, now that she was no longer in a state of subdued agitation, that her eyes were wonderful and her mouth attractive, notwithstanding the still vivid colouring of her lips.

“You think I should take care? You are being personal?” she asked.

“Even a blunt American,” he assured her, “would not have ventured upon such a subject if the necessity in your case had existed.”

“You yourself,” she remarked, as she helped herself to caviar and leaned on one side to permit the filling of her glass with vodka, “have not always what is called a good appetite. Perhaps the air of London does not agree with you so well as this.”

“I had been up very late the night before,” he confided. “Besides, a friend that morning had lured me into one of those subtle dens of indigestion—an oyster bar.”

“So you have not forgotten me,” she observed.

“I never forget people who interest me.”

She indulged in a very slight grimace.

“I am not flattered,” she told him. “You were only interested because you have the reputation of being a seeker after adventures and you saw us both marched off by a detective.”

It was Besserley’s turn to help himself to caviar and he did so in silence.

“I didn’t even search the evening papers or read the Police Court news in the morning,” he assured her. “By-the-by, your brother?”

“How clever of you to guess at the relationship! Stephen is here at the other end of the table, rather overshadowed by our portly hostess. *Enfin*, they tell me, General Besserley, that you are a dangerous man to know here. Is that true?”

“It is, at any rate, flattering.”

“Subtle,” she admitted. “Nevertheless an evasion. They tell me that you unmask hypocrites, bring criminals to justice and rescue the young and innocent from the dangers of this Principality.”

“You amuse yourself with me,” he complained.

“I would not dare. I was wondering,” she went on, the faint drawl in her speech becoming more pronounced, “whether it might not be a good thing to take the initiative.”

“The initiative!” he repeated. “That sounds intriguing but—I don’t understand.”

“To offer myself and my brother as fit subjects for your good offices,” she

expounded. "To enlist your protective sympathies instead of your sleuth-like gifts."

Besserley finished his vodka and made a wry face.

"You have the design to topple me from my plaster pedestal," he complained.

"On the contrary, I am trying to ingratiate myself with you. My brother and I are anxious to spend a few quiet days here without having our past lives looked into. We want people to continue to think of us as they do now—just ordinary travellers from it does not matter much where. We do not wish our sins advertised, our terrible past exposed. I have met the Commissaire of Police here. My brother has had an interview with him. He is a kindly man and well disposed. It is you we fear!"

"And with reason," Besserley assured her, with a solemnity relieved by the humorous light in his eyes. "No amateur detective or writer of fiction, seeing you two seated together, as I did in the Grillroom of the Milan, conversing in mysterious whispers, bringing an entirely alien note into that bourgeois American environment, could have failed to recognise in you material of the most wonderful kind."

"You forget the detective who marched us out," she reminded him, after a stiffly civil word or two with her neighbour on the other side.

"I did not like to drag him into the conversation," Besserley explained, "but he remains in the background of my memory. I shall never forget your tragic exit."

"So humiliating," she murmured.

"There is this much to be said for Scotland Yard's new idea of employing gentlemen in the profession," Besserley meditated. "It helps the criminal to preserve his *amour propre*."

She assented with a touch of eagerness.

"That," she declared, "is why we left the restaurant with our heads up, even though we had to enter a taxicab—a vehicle which I loathe."

For a time their conversation was interrupted. The Comtesse's left-hand neighbour insisted upon further speech with her and Lady Grace, who sat on Besserley's right, took the opportunity to address severe words of remonstrance to her dear friend.

"Uncle Samuel," she expostulated, "the caviar has come and gone, the fish has followed suit, and as yet you have not spoken a single word to me! Has the mysterious and beautiful foreigner completely turned your head?"

"Is she mysterious?" he queried mildly.

Lady Grace's shrug of the shoulders was very feminine.

"I do not know," she admitted. "I never met her before. One is rather inclined to take people for granted here, though. The Duchess does not believe in the motley throng. As a rule, she is very particular indeed about her guests."

Besserley was inclined to edge away from the subject of conversation.

“Good tennis this week?” he enquired.

“Not particularly. Too much Royalty about the courts. We had one or two fair sets yesterday. Don’t go away again for a long time, please. Monte Carlo is never quite the same without you.”

Perhaps Besserley was tired of fencing. He looked his neighbour in the face. He had every excuse, for was a very charming one.

“I wish you always thought so,” he said.

“Are you sure that I don’t?”

“If the gods had only given me a little more conceit,” he reflected.

“My dear man, you have assurance,” she told him, “which is just as good—and brains. You ought to know—you ought to have us all tabulated. I suppose you know just how much you like everybody. You probably know just how much they like you.”

“Then, answering you with equal frankness,” he declared, “in your case, I am dangerously near that borderline in my convictions when an elderly gentleman like myself hesitates to take anything for granted.”

“Hesitates, indeed! If you were only as bold as your words!”

The Comtesse claimed his attention.

“You are unfaithful,” she complained.

“Only superficially,” he hastened to assert.

“I still retain your interest?”

“If only I could convince you how much of it.”

The time for dessert had arrived. She accepted and peeled herself a peach.

“I believe you are beginning to look upon me as a possible case,” she sighed.

“Is there any mystery about you?” he asked ingenuously.

“Mystery! How can you have any doubt about it when you overheard parts of our incautious conversation at the Milan, when you saw us led away to a public vehicle by a detective? International spies still exist, do they not, in real life as well as fiction? You might at least give me credit for being one of these.”

“I have already decided,” he assured her, “that you are at least a Queen—probably an Empress. The trouble of it is that I cannot remember for the moment which country is suffering from your absence.”

“You have no geography,” she regretted. “I doubt whether you are really well read in the history of your times. It is astonishing to me that you should have made such a reputation!”

“Sometimes,” he confessed, “I wonder at it myself.”

“Nevertheless, I believe that you would make a better friend than an enemy.”

“Try me,” he begged.

She dipped her amazing fingernails—they seemed to him like the petals from a geranium blossom—into the glass bowl. He watched them with fascinated interest. Their lustre was not disturbed. She touched her lips with their delicate tips. The scarlet remained undimmed. She flashed a quick glance at him and caught him watching her.

“Everything about me is changeless,” she assured him. “I am really Queen Cleopatra, although I am threatened by Scotland Yard! You will gamble afterwards—yes?”

“Whatever you choose.”

“Hussy!” Lady Grace murmured under her breath, as they all obeyed their hostess’ gesture and rose to their feet.

On their way into the Salle des Jeux, Besserley edged his way towards his hostess.

“Duchess,” he asked, “who was my charming neighbour?”

“The Comtesse de Pirandetti?”

“I am afraid,” he confessed, “that leaves me still ignorant.”

“Well—she is the Comtesse de Pirandetti. That was her brother, the sardonic-looking young man who sat upon my left.”

“But I have never heard of her before,” Besserley meditated.

“To tell you the truth, neither have I,” his hostess confided. “I had a card from Ann Lanchester, my greatest friend. On the back of it was written—‘Do be kind to my friends, the Pirandettis. Elizabeth is delightful.’ The note was left at the hotel this morning with some wonderful flowers and their cards. I was two short for dinner this evening, so I asked them.”

“And you know no more of them than that?”

“Not a thing. Ought I to?”

“Who is Ann Lanchester?” Besserley asked a trifle curtly.

“She was the second daughter of the Earl of Castledene. She married Lanchester, a great landowner in the west of England, and she has a position at Court. Anyone she sent to me I should take to my heart.”

“Is any one of your guests acquainted with them?” Besserley persisted. “The inner circle of life in Europe is, after all, a small affair.”

The Duchess was mildly annoyed. No one, however, cared to quarrel with General Besserley.

“My guests to-night,” she pointed out, “are nearly all English. It happens so

sometimes. The Pirandettis, I gather, have travelled very little in our part of Europe. . . . Do be kind, please, and see if you can find a place for Her Highness at a *chemie* table. She does not like to play high unless she is winning, she never goes a *banco* and she gets furious if her own banks are not made up! However, you need not tell people that beforehand. There seems to be a vacant place at that hundred-franc table on the left.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he promised.

It was one of the most brilliant nights of the season at the Sporting Club. Several famous cocottes from Paris and a sprinkling of cinema stars from all parts of the world, but mostly from Hollywood, presented a dazzling display of feminine beauty, daring toilettes and marvellous jewellery. The great world looked on with amusement, sometimes not unmixed with a dash of envy. Even the gamblers occasionally lifted their heads to watch the intrusion of some diaphanous vision from whose fingers the *mille plaques* dripped like *louis*. Besserley, having fulfilled his mission, strolled through the rooms, tall and dignified, exchanging greetings right and left, and all the time successfully concealing the fact that his was less a leisurely saunter than an earnest quest. From the bar to the gaming tables, to the odd corners of the rooms and even up into the Night Club he passed, lingering here and there to speak to an acquaintance, but always searching. Nevertheless, his quest was in vain. The mysterious Pirandettis had apparently taken an early leave of their hostess and had departed elsewhere to finish their evening.

Besserley presented himself the following morning at the bureau of the Hôtel de Paris and summoned one of the reception clerks.

“Can you tell me,” he enquired, “whether the Comte and Comtesse de Pirandetti are staying here?”

The young man looked at him in obvious surprise.

“But, Monsieur le Général,” he reminded the enquirer, “it is less than an hour ago since I sent flowers from you up to the Comtesse with your message.”

Besserley, genuinely perplexed, remained silent for a moment.

“Do you by chance remember the message?” he asked.

“Certainly, sir,” the man replied. “One of your stewards from the yacht—not the one who usually comes—arrived here soon after nine. He presented your compliments, some marvellous roses, and invited the Comtesse and her brother to go for a short cruise this morning. They accepted with pleasure and both left half an hour ago.”

Besserley nodded and turned away. He walked the whole length of the lounge

with his hands behind his back, then he turned into the bar and threw himself into an easy-chair.

“George,” he remarked, “I noticed that there was a strange yacht—if you can call the thing a yacht—in the harbour last night. She looks like a converted torpedo boat with most of the paint scratched off. She is up alongside the *Jacqy* on the left. Do you happen to know to whom she belongs?”

The man shook his head.

“No one seems to know, sir. There’s no owner on board, apparently, and she was flying a flag I never saw before in my life when she came in. Guido thought she was Turkish but when I went down to have a look, there was not a sign of life on board and she was only flying a house pennant.”

General Besserley looked out into the enclosure and saw that his chauffeur was waiting there. He visited his apartment for a few minutes, descended and stepped into his Hispano-Suiza.

“*Le port*,” he directed.

The Comte de Pirandetti reclined in a deck chair on board a small vessel which he was already beginning to discover was exceedingly ill adapted for anything in the shape of a pleasure cruise. He removed his cigarette from his lips and looked around him with an air of disgust.

“What then can have happened to this American, of whom you think so highly, Elizabeth?” he demanded. “We arrive for a pleasure cruise. We are not received. We are asked to wait for our host. We leave the harbour—Damnation!”

He sprang to his feet. His sister looked up at him calmly.

“What is the matter, Stephen?”

“Do you not realise it?” he cried. “We are brainless idiots! We were warned away from Biarritz, not because of the danger from Communists, but because this place suited Rudolf better! We are probably his prisoners at the present moment. We are being abducted!”

The Comtesse knocked the ash from her cigarette.

“I came to that conclusion as soon as we had passed out of the harbour,” she admitted coolly. “It is really deplorable. We have protected ourselves—with the help of others—so admirably, and yet, at the last moment, we walk into the simplest of traps!”

The face of the young man by her side was livid.

“Do you really think,” he demanded, “that this is an affair of Rudolf’s?”

“Of Rudolf’s or Yakovitch’s,” she agreed. “I thought, somehow, from the

insincere tone of Nicolas Yakovitch's last few letters, with all their mysterious warnings, that he had gone over to Rudolf."

"But what makes you so sure that this is a trap?"

She lit a fresh cigarette. She possessed a nerve of which he showed no evidence.

"Can you imagine an American boat so badly kept as this?" she asked. "Certainly not a boat belonging to a man like General Besserley. Then again, the steward and officer who received us—neither spoke a word of English nor was their French any too good. We are trapped, my little brother. No use," she added, as he strode to the side. "We are too far off to shout. What I should like to know is—who is on board? With whom have we to deal?"

Almost as she spoke there emerged from the companionway a tall fair-haired man in nautical attire, to the wearing of which he seemed unaccustomed. He came forward with a smile of mingled greeting and triumph. He addressed them in a language which was not English and was not French, and certainly was not Italian, yet it was one which they all three knew very well.

"So at last," he exclaimed, with a wave of the hand, "the hour has struck. The time for the conference has arrived."

The Comte shrank back in his chair. He seemed too terrified for speech. His sister glanced indifferently at the newcomer.

"At any rate, dear Cousin Rudolf," she scoffed, "you had to bring the navy of our beloved country out to fetch us. You could not manage the Royal salute, I see."

The colour flushed into the fair man's cheeks and an angry gleam flashed in his eyes.

"Our country may yet possess a navy," he replied stiffly, "when her natural ruler is on the throne. I suggest that we proceed below. There are things to be spoken of which must not be overheard."

"I prefer the fresh air," the Comtesse said.

"I hate your filthy boat and I am going to be very sick," the Comte declared. "Stop the engines at once and we will hear what you have to say."

"If I anchored here," was the curt reply, "you would soon feel worse than you do now. Better come below. There's brandy there. Perhaps one might stumble upon some champagne!"

The Comte rose, groaning to his feet.

"Anywhere, if there is really brandy," he agreed.

Elizabeth also rose with a sigh. They all three descended into a bare-looking saloon. There were no signs of luxury and only one steward in attendance. At his

master's bidding, he produced a bottle of brandy and poured out a tumblerful.

"My cousin will take something?" her host enquired, his manner a mixture of clumsy courtesy and defiance. "There is plenty to drink, very little to eat, I fear. The champagne is excellent."

"I will take nothing on board this disgusting ship," she told him. "Let us know at once what new form of assassination you propose. Get it over. There is nothing to discuss. I hate words."

Rudolf's eyes flashed and for the moment he was almost good-looking. His features were rugged but not ill-shaped. He had at least the presence and bearing of a man, spoilt though it was by his bullying voice, thick lips and small eyes. He took the fixed chair at the end of the table and motioned them to seat themselves one on either side of him.

"Listen," he began, "my little cousin hates words. So do I. There is only one simple matter to be decided between us. You know what it is. Who is to be King of Palania?"

"That is a question easily answered," Elizabeth declared. "The period of regency expires next week and we have certain information that the people have already chosen their king. Without a doubt, my brother will ascend the throne the week after next. The voting is something like thirty-three to nineteen in his favour. We are just returning from a tour through Europe, and we are already assured of the support of the only powers that count."

"Nevertheless, I have a word to say," Rudolf exclaimed fiercely. "I care nothing for those bought votes or the honeyed words of diplomats! When the time comes, it is I who will present myself to the Archbishop. Palania is too wild a country to be ruled by a milksop like Stephen here."

"The ascent of a king to the throne of Palania is a constitutional act," Elizabeth continued calmly. "You have tried your best with the clergy, the military, the people and the Parliament. You have failed. Palania has rejected you. It is my brother who will rule and if he is something of a weakling, I am not."

A gleam of admiration found its way into the rugged features of Prince Rudolf of Palania. He smashed the table in front of which he was seated with his fist.

"Very well," he exclaimed, "one knows who would govern, in that case. Very well, my dear Elizabeth, you shall have your way and rule over Palania, but on one condition only. You shall marry me. You shall be my Queen."

For the first time, Stephen showed signs of emotion. He finished his tumbler of brandy and rose unsteadily to his feet.

"It is a conspiracy, this!" he shouted. "I have been duped. You, too, Elizabeth.

Unless,” he added, spreading the palms of his hands upon the table and leaning towards her, “unless you are in this—unless it is you who have brought me into this trap.”

She laughed scornfully.

“You fool,” she declared. “Do you not know me better than to imagine for one moment I would give over my body and marry with a lout like that, even for the joy of ruling over my own people? It is you to whom the throne belongs, Stephen, and you shall have it.”

Once more the deep scarlet flush had mounted slowly to the temples of the flouted man. He rose to his feet and his voice, which had been loud and raucous, was little more than a whisper. He changed his language to French. He was in the throes of a very obvious passion.

“Very well,” he decided, “we have finished with words!”

He struck a clumsy iron gong which stood by his side.

“The torture chamber?” she mocked.

“The only Court of Palania,” he answered, “which has ever stood the test of the ages. Follow me, if you please.”

He led them once more on deck—this time to the starboard side of the ship. There were newly ruled chalk lines at measured distances. He opened a chest which stood beside the rails.

“What is this that you are proposing?” Elizabeth scoffed. “A game?”

“It is the game of steel and fire,” her cousin replied. “Our ancestors gained and held the handful of rocks we call our kingdom through the knowledge of it. It shall decide this matter between Stephen and me.”

There was a brief, ugly silence. Neither Elizabeth nor her brother understood exactly what was happening. In obedience to a gesture from Rudolf, a seaman dragged forward the chest. He laid upon the nearest boat, which was swung inwards, two highly burnished and venomous-looking cavalry sabres, a couple of revolvers and a box of cartridges. Rudolf watched him approvingly. He turned with a smile to his visitors.

“Very well,” he continued, “you will not give way. You refuse to bargain. Stephen and I have equal rights to the throne of Palania. The voting of a few greasy tradesmen and bought clergy is of no account. We will settle the matter for ourselves here and now. We will go back a generation or two. We shall not lose by that. The present one is foul enough! Stephen and I will fight for who shall ascend the throne. In the generations when we flourished, Palania was conquered by the sword and held by the sword. We shall only be remaking history.”

He drew one of the sabres from its sheath, bent it approvingly, and with a few rapid sweeps sent it whistling through the air. Then he picked up one of the revolvers, broke it and stroked its smooth surface caressingly. Stephen stood like a ghost. Elizabeth was watching her cousin with rising colour and fascinated eyes. Rudolf, turning round, caught her expression and laughed triumphantly.

“The blood of our race, Elizabeth,” he exclaimed; “it still flows in your veins all right! Do not deny it. You love a fight. As for Stephen here—well, I am not so sure! I have seen him wield a sabre at least as cleverly as I can in the guardroom of the barracks, and at a revolver target I should say he was slightly better. But when it comes to the real thing—who knows?”

“Rudolf has taken leave of his senses,” Stephen declared. “The thing is impossible.”

“Why impossible?” Elizabeth asked, frowning.

“For one thing, duelling is forbidden in the army of which I am the titular chief,” Stephen reminded them. “For another, there are no others of our own rank here to act as seconds.”

Rudolf’s retort was hard and scornful.

“You know little of our country’s history if you think that duelling is extinct,” he scoffed. “You may think so in Vienna, where you spend most of your time. There is fighting in Karota every week. Ours may be a savage country but we do not go to law on questions of honour. As to seconds, you and I are nobles; we need no seconds. The laws of fighting are easy enough. You shall, if you wish, make your own conditions.”

Elizabeth sat down on the top of the chest with her arms akimbo. She had thrown aside her hat and the wind was doing as it pleased with her hair. Rudolf looked at her in amazement. A moment ago he had been assured of her sympathy. It was an indubitable fact now that she was laughing.

“This is all too absurd,” she declared. “If we were in the fastnesses of our own country, perhaps one might absorb the atmosphere and take the business seriously, but cannot you see, my dear cousin and brother, there is the Casino of Monte Carlo a few hundred yards away, a whole world of highly civilised people almost within gunshot? How on earth can we enact a scene here which belongs to the Middle Ages?”

“Times may change outside our country,” Rudolf argued fiercely, “but the laws of honour will continue to eternity. Come, Stephen, my cousin, you are in a position from which no man with your traditions and ancestry can escape. We are equally matched, you and I. The sole advantage I have is that of muscle, which is no

advantage at all in this business. If you choose revolvers, there will be more for you to aim at. If you choose the sabres, you have as long an arm as I and equal skill. I am really indifferent because whichever you choose, I am quite sure that I shall kill you.”

Elizabeth shook her head perhaps a little sadly.

“The days are past for this sort of thing, Rudolf,” she said. “Put your weapons away. Stephen will await the decision of our Parliament and you know very well what that will be.”

“My sister is right,” the young man insisted eagerly. “My life belongs to my country. I have no right to gamble with it and I refuse to do so. What you propose is an absurdity. Why, even if you killed me on this wretched vessel, you would be thrown into prison. The same thing would happen to me if I killed you. We have no choice in the matter. We are forced to subscribe to the laws of civilisation.”

Rudolf again picked up one of the sabres, felt its edge and once more sent it whistling through the air.

“I regret,” he said, “that if you take that view, it is my duty to kill you.”

There was a silence composed of so many elements of reticence that it gained a strange and vital tenseness. A flock of sea birds circled screaming around. A gust of the east wind sent a cushion, which no one seemed to notice, slithering along the deck to become the plaything of the waves. The sunlit sea danced beneath them. The clearness of the atmosphere was such that they heard the Blue Train come rumbling through the Roquebrune Tunnel. Not one of the three spoke. Stephen was gazing with fascinated eyes at the uncovered sabre which his cousin had tried to force into his hand. Rudolf, only a yard or so away, stood still—a grim and threatening figure. Elizabeth crouched back in her chair, as though afflicted with a spirit of humiliation. Her eyes were downcast. . . . The Commander, in his ill-fitting uniform, made hesitating approach.

“I beg Your Highness’ pardon,” he said, addressing Rudolf. “I have to report that there is a motor launch coming up alongside and a large yacht following.”

Rudolf’s eyes flamed and he swore for several moments in a language which seemed to lend itself to fluent profanity.

“Can the yacht catch us?” he demanded.

“Whenever it pleases. It travels at a speed greatly exceeding our own. It is flying the Stars and Stripes. The motor launch is, I imagine, a racing craft. She is alongside at the present moment.”

Elizabeth, emerging gracefully from the mediaeval ages, strolled to the side of the ship and looked over. She waved her hand in welcome.

“General Besserley and the American flag!” she laughed, although in that laugh there was an undertone of bitterness. “We cannot get away from the new world, Cousin Rudolf,” she added, turning towards him. “Put away your playthings.”

Besserley circled round, the wheel still in his hand, until he was barely a score of yards away.

“Can I come on board?” he called out. “I have a message from the port authorities. My yacht is coming up behind.”

“You can take your yacht to hell!” Prince Rudolf of Palania shouted, as he disappeared through the companionway, slamming the door behind him.

“Ring down dead slow and lower the gangway,” the Commander ordered.

“Explanations are always cumbersome things,” Besserley remarked, as he stood by Elizabeth’s side on the balcony of the Summer Sporting Club, looking across the moonlit sea, “but now that I know so much, I must confess I should like to know why you were marched out of the Milan Grill by a detective?”

“A clever man like you really believed that!” she remonstrated, smiling up at him. “We were in London incognito, but we had been granted an Audience and the English Foreign Minister had visited us twice. You have read in the papers, I dare say, that Stephen’s life has been attempted several times. Once he was wounded. That afternoon we were to visit the Foreign Office and they insisted upon an escort from Scotland Yard. It was a very simple matter. We had promised our Prime Minister not to return until the day before the opening of Parliament—about a fortnight ahead. We wished to visit one of the pleasure spots of Europe where the Communist element was unknown. We had discussed Biarritz but that morning Stephen had received a letter from a friend, warning him that in the present unsettled state of Spain, Biarritz was too near the frontier. I have a strong suspicion that that letter was prompted by Rudolf, who could just manage to get here from the Adriatic, but certainly could never have arrived at Biarritz. That is the secret of our visit here. The strange craft in which Rudolf was playing about was a partially disabled Italian gunboat, damaged by a German submarine and brought into our port.”

They were silent for a few moments. From behind them, in the crowded room, came the monotonous chanting of the croupiers, the occasional click of a falling ball, the pleasant murmur of well-bred voices.

“You have been such a wonderful friend, General Besserley,” she said, “that I think I ought to tell you the latest news. A Special Envoy arrived here from the capital this afternoon. Parliament is to open earlier than we expected and Stephen is assured of the throne! We leave here to-night.”

“That’s wonderful news for you,” he said.

“It is wonderful news,” she admitted, without turning her head.

“And but for me,” he reflected, “I mean, if I had not blundered in, instead of being the sister of the King, you might have been Queen!”

This time she looked at him and it was given to Besserley to see something in her eyes, those sombre passionate eyes which so seldom revealed themselves, that no man had ever seen before.

“I am ambitious,” she confessed, “and I love my country, but I should have been very unhappy.”

Lady Grace, with Stephen by her side, stepped out from the Salle des Jeux.

“I deeply regret to hasten this parting from our good friend,” the King-that-was-to-be announced. “The car is already waiting, Elizabeth, and word has come that the plane will be at Cannes an hour earlier than it was scheduled. It will be necessary, you will remember, to change our clothes for the flight.”

Elizabeth rose deliberately, almost with reluctance, to her feet. The little business of farewells seemed to be undertaken somehow or other in a spirit which savoured of embarrassment. Stephen palpably was ill at ease. The sight of Besserley reminded him of an episode he had every desire to forget. There was, perhaps, enough of the Palanian fire in his veins to make him acutely conscious of his ignominious showing in a moment of crisis. His few words of gratitude were stiffly spoken and lacked cordiality. The tremor in Elizabeth’s voice, however, the only half-veiled sweetness in her eyes, the faint pressure of her fingers against Besserley’s lips as he bade her farewell, more than atoned for her brother’s coldness. Besserley felt himself, for the few moments that followed her departure, caught up in one of those acute, but swiftly passing, paroxysms of romance to which even the hardened pilgrim through life, of emotional temperament, is sometimes subject. . . .

Lady Grace looked a little curiously at Besserley as soon as they were left alone.

“I don’t mind confessing,” she observed, as she took the place which Elizabeth had vacated, “that I hurried that young man up a little. The fact of it is, I was getting furiously jealous! You must not sit in the moonlight with sentimental Royalty.”

Besserley’s answering smile was almost natural.

“I do not think,” he said, “that the Comtesse—I suppose I should say the Princess—will remember that sort of sentiment when she gets back to her own country.”

“Very likely not,” Lady Grace agreed, leaning towards him, “but partings are always dangerous things and I made up my mind that if anyone was going to propose to you in the moonlight, it should not be the Princess Elizabeth!”

VII

THE BUTTERFLY IN THE DEATH CHAMBER

Josephine, Marquise de Vaucuse St. Pierre, the sweetest of women, but always something of a *poseuse*, flattered herself in those strange misty moments that her passing from this world into the nebulous future of eternity was a journey exquisitely in keeping with the æsthetic beauty of her own well-ordered life. She lay upon a rosewood couch of the seventeenth century drawn up before one of the high oriel windows of the Château, her face turned towards the mysterious Estérel. There was a delicate fragrance about the lace at her throat, the lavender-coloured silk of her dressing gown, the ancient leather-bound missal which rested by her side. Her eyes, still blue, looked out upon a scene she knew well—a landscape of green pastures and olive trees, of flowering fruit orchards and a darker line of pine trees which stretched in irregular fashion to that silver streak of the sun-bathed Mediterranean. She remembered the consoling words of the priest who still remained in attendance but she found it hard to believe that the world to come could hold anything more beautiful.

Something woke her from a long daydream. It may have been the appearance of a marvellously coloured butterfly, fluttering aimlessly in and out of the window, resting now upon its grey stone sill and preening its wings with almost feminine vanity. She made the slightest movement with her head. A nurse bent over her.

“The Marquis,” she whispered.

The nurse glided away, a solemn but dignified figure of peace in the garb of her religious order. A moment later the husband of the dying woman was at his wife’s side—a long grey man who moved with the help of a stick.

“Josephine?”

“It is you, dear Edouard,” she murmured. “There is a thing which I had forgotten. Strange, because my mind is still so clear. It was the butterfly which made me think of it.”

“Speak slowly, dear one,” he begged. “What can we do?”

“There is a man,” she said. “We both know him. We knew him better, perhaps, in our younger days, but I asked Louise—they tell me that he still lives in Monaco. His name is Besserley.”

“I remember him well,” the Marquis answered. “He dined here not many years ago. Last time we were at the Palace you talked to him.”

She inclined her head slowly.

“I should have sent for him before,” she regretted, with a little sigh. “The doctors

tell me, however, that the end will not come until night. There is still time. Send a message, dear Edouard, and see if he is to be found.”

It seemed to the Marquis a strange request, but he made no comment. He shuffled across the room—he was a very old man—sent for his secretary and gave the necessary orders. A few minutes later a powerful motor car was gliding down the winding avenue. The Marquise watched it for a moment and then closed her eyes. There was a packet resting under the silk counterpane. Her fingers touched it as she moved.

“I shall sleep,” she whispered to the nurse, “but do not be afraid—I shall wake again.”

“You would like to speak to the doctor or the Bishop?” the nurse enquired.

“Only to the man for whom I have sent,” she answered, closing her eyes.

Besserley, in his grey tweed coat and white flannels, sunburnt and muscular, seemed to bring a strange element of vitality into the stately apartment of death. The wan-faced Sisters, the gaunt figures of the Curé and the Bishop, the Marquis himself—old and infirm—all seemed rather like ghosts as he passed by in the anteroom. The Bishop moved uneasily in his high-backed chair. It was like the introduction of a flavour of paganism into a spiritualised and sanctified corner of the world. It seemed to Besserley himself that the woman lying upon the couch, to whom he was presently conducted, gazing her last upon a very exquisite fragment of the earth, was, notwithstanding her ebbing flame of life, still nearer to humanity than the little group of watchers. They placed him in a chair by her side and left him. He lifted, with reverent fingers, the Bible from the arm of the seat to a place of safety, and the glimmer of a smile parted her lips.

“The Bishop has been reading to me,” she confided quietly. “I have confessed all my sins to the Church. One brief episode is a secret between God and myself. I wish to speak of that to you.”

Besserley was troubled. His friendship with the household was a slight one. He wondered whether in her last moments the Marquise was wandering. Perhaps she guessed his thoughts.

“I have sent for you,” she went on, speaking almost in a whisper, yet with marvellous distinctness, “because I had a great wish to seek the aid of a man of this world and not one of my friends outside. They would only say more prayers over me, and it is not prayers I need. It is service.”

“Anything I can do,” he assured her.

“I believe it,” she answered. “Before I tell you what it is, I must lift the curtain

just a very little way from my past, fifty-five years ago.”

A nurse glided into the room. She touched the wrist of her patient and held a glass to her lips, then, with a warning glance at Besserley, she disappeared as silently as she had come.

“I know that I am getting weaker,” the Marquise murmured. “It is not a very terrible thing I have to confide to you. Fifty-five years ago, long before I married the Marquis, I was dancing in opera at St. Petersburg. I had great success. I went on to Vienna and Paris. My life at that time was very different. I had a lover—all women had in those days—and a daughter. That was a great many years ago.”

She paused for a moment, as though to collect her breath. When she continued, the sad depths of her eyes were filled with memories.

“They passed out of my life, when my family took me back and forgave me. I was married to the Marquis in St. Petersburg. The Tzar himself and many of the Court were present. My brief period of wandering was forgotten. Money was plentiful in those days and I took care that my daughter was provided for. I have scarcely thought of her until these last few weeks—since I have been lying here, looking back on many years of happiness. It is these butterflies which fly in and out of my window, live in to-day’s sunshine and die on the morrow which made me think —”

There was a slight change in her voice and breathing. Besserley leaned forward, alarmed. With trembling fingers she placed a packet in his hand.

“You live in a world where I suffered, though only for a few years,” she whispered. “If you see another prisoner who is good at heart as I was, set her free—before—it is—too late. You understand?”

“I understand,” he assured her.

She waved her hand towards the other room.

“They are all good,” she murmured, “but they are all old. They would not understand. I sent for you because everyone says you are a man with a great heart. The money that is there is for your disposal. . . . Dear friend, please go. I think something is coming to me. My husband. I promised—my husband—his hand—”

The Marquis was lingering upon the threshold and he came hobbling across the room, tears streaming down his withered cheeks. Besserley crept away. Before he had left the Château grounds, he heard the tolling of the bell in the private chapel.

Seated upon the window sill of a rude barn attached to a farmhouse almost hidden amongst the enfolding hills, Besserley, by the caprice of a sensation-loving hostess, passed on one evening a few weeks later to the second scene of the little

drama into which the dying legacy of the Marquise had directed him. There were two or three oil lamps hanging from the walls, some rude benches on which thirty or forty people were seated, a muffled whispering of curious, half-hushed voices. No one quite knew what it was all about. The house party with whom Besserley had come, after dinner at Napoule, were themselves mystified.

“I thought we were to see a girl dance,” a young man whispered to Besserley.

“I believe that something of the sort happens,” was the cautious reply.

From behind a rather shabby curtain of black velvet came the sound of softly struck chords upon an ancient but carefully tuned piano. The melody, although it seemed to lack both time and purpose, had a curious fascination of its own. It seemed like a blend of the paganism of modern Russian music and the chants of long-past ages. Every now and then there was something which was almost like a discord, then the wail of a slower movement. There was a fainter sound behind it all, as though from the distance there might be coming a slowly moving band of pilgrims, singing fragments of a religious anthem.

“Hanged if I can make out what it is all about,” the young man grumbled. “No smoking, either. How far is it from the window to the ground, General?”

“A good deal too far for what you are thinking of,” was the warning reply.

“I believe I am going to be hysterical,” a young woman who had just won a famous tennis tournament confessed in an undertone.

“It is like a séance of some sort,” their hostess murmured.

An almost unseen hand fluttered around the lamps. The room was suddenly in darkness, except for the white shirt fronts of the little party who had been dining and the strained faces of one or two of those whose emotions had been aroused. With a creaking sound the curtain rose. At first it seemed as if there was nothing but a well of empty space, then lights from some illusionary background, the figure of a living woman dressed in white, her hands upraised, her features almost indistinguishable. The music recommenced. Whatever it meant to the audience, it was readily enough interpreted by the single performer, who slowly moved, in rhythmical effortless movements, her body turned now as though in pain when the music sank to the minor, cruder chords, now in the smoother joy of content, when a wave of fuller melody filled the room. . . . There was a harsh interlude. The girl swayed and rocked upon her feet, as though seeking passionately for guidance. A long, suffering cry in a strange tone broke from her lips. Her body writhed as though in agony. The cry which still ebbed and flowed from her lips seemed to turn from a prayer to a curse, then died away in sweet but inhuman notes. So a priestess might have called from the altar on which she was sacrificing her own child. So she might have sobbed when

the sacrifice was accepted. . . .

There was a long pause but no one moved. The face of the woman was downcast and invisible. Her hands rose and fell. Her body trembled. The music which had died away came back. From some unseen place came the sound of crudely simulated thunder. The flash of light, however, a few minutes later, was real and vivid, a surprise to the whole shivering audience. For a single moment the whole of the stage seemed to be bathed in ambient illumination. The girl's face shone out—the face of a dying saint. Her body seemed suddenly stretched upwards. Her white fingers almost reached the ceiling. Her head was thrown back and a single long, marvellous cry rang through the building, as though some imprisoned spirit was seeking to escape from its narrow confines. Then, in the silence that followed, the creaking of the falling curtain was heard. There was nothing visible but crushed black velvet. Fingers again almost unseen relit the oil lamps. . . .

No one spoke. It was a silence with peculiar qualities. Then someone seated near a lamp pulled out and glanced at his watch. A murmur of astonishment broke from his lips and was caught up by others in the room. Thirty-five minutes! Somehow or other a little chorus of voices, still half-hushed, seemed released. People began to rise to their feet. It was a curious fact, though, that no one uttered a word of criticism. His companion spoke to Besserley, but Besserley made no reply. He was still seated in his original posture, his eyes fixed upon the shabby curtain. The young man by his side slid to the floor.

“I'm off to have a cigarette somewhere,” he muttered, “or I shall choke.”

The hostess of the party—a very charming woman whom all her guests afterwards declared had never been so silent, except in sleep, for any half-hour since they had known her—leaned forward.

“You need not worry about your cigarette, Fred,” she told him. “The performance is over.”

They stole out—even the more frivolous ones—like ghosts. Voices were hushed. Footsteps fell softly upon the cobble-stones. By degrees they began to talk but not a single voice was raised.

“If only one knew what it meant,” one woman almost sobbed. “I felt like crying—I felt like calling out and there seemed to be no thoroughfare for the emotions. I didn't know whether I was enjoying it or hating it.”

When they came to compare notes, everyone confessed to having become conscious of the same sense of mental disturbance. Besserley alone amongst the little party finding their places in the row of cars remained silent. Lady Grace touched his

hand as they stepped into the car and found it cold.

“My dear,” she murmured, “I had no idea that you were so impressionable.”

Besserley found himself.

“It was not so much the performance,” he confided, “although I thought that was wonderful. It was the girl’s face.”

“I scarcely saw it,” his companion remarked. “What do you mean—‘the girl’s face’?”

“The likeness,” he answered. “The likeness to someone I once knew.”

“Am I to feel jealous?”

Besserley shook his head.

“The woman of whom she reminded me,” he told her, “had one foot in heaven.”

The toilers were scarcely at work in the fields on the following morning when General Besserley was knocking at the door of the farmhouse next to the padlocked barn. The woman who answered his summons was voluble but discouraging. Mademoiselle and her maid and the strange young man who played the music had taken all their things away in a cart after midnight, as they had done a month ago, after their first appearance. She did not know their address. She did not read or write. She did not even know their names. They might come again. They might not. They had paid all they owed but on the whole Madame found them a nuisance. They spent little money and as for what Mademoiselle was pleased to call the dance—there might be people who saw merit in it. For herself it was an imbecility. People had called it heathenish and so it seemed to her. She had watched the performance the first time. Never again! There was dancing down in the village at feast time which was good enough for her. . . .

Besserley ordered wine. He sought out Monsieur. He spoke to others attached to the place. They knew nothing. They cared less. These two, they came and went, and that people should pay even fifty centimes to watch and listen to their performances seemed incredible. He drove on to the nearest village. He ordered strange drinks in various cafés, asking always the same question. No one knew the name of the young woman or the name of the young man, her companion. Besserley left the district in a disappointment which amounted to disgust. The thing was incredible but it was true. There was not a soul within half a dozen kilometres of the lonely farmhouse who knew the names of these strange performers.

Fortune came to him that night, however. Glancing round the restaurant of the casino for a supper table, a curtain, by the side of the stage only a few feet away from him, was lifted, and he found himself looking straight into the eyes of the girl

whom he was seeking! It was only a momentary glimpse, for she dropped the curtain at once but it was long enough for Besserley. He called the *maître d'hôtel*.

"I will take this table for supper," he told him.

The *maître d'hôtel* was amazed. As a rule, Besserley was one of his most exacting clients.

"You will find it very noisy, sir," he ventured. "I am afraid your friends would not care for it."

"To-night I shall be alone," was the brief reply. "I was going to ask a few people but I have changed my mind."

Besserley took his seat, swallowed the cocktail which was brought to him, ordered wine and supper, which he had little intention of eating. Presently the usual signal for a turn was given by the orchestra. The guests who were dancing left the floor. The girl and a young man—a typical gigolo—came through the curtains and commenced their evolutions. Besserley glanced at a programme which had been placed upon his table and stared at it for a few moments without raising his head. The names of the dancers were Josephine and Raymond. . . .

The man danced well enough. The girl resembled a marionette more than a human being. There was nothing seductive in her movements. She danced as one who is filled with contempt for her own performance. It must have seemed obvious to the entire audience, Besserley reflected, that some antagonism existed between her and her partner. She seemed frozen by his touch. She looked over his shoulder, even when they were performing the most complicated evolutions. The dance was skilful enough, but it awoke no enthusiasm. They left the floor to a very feeble display of applause. Their second effort was no better. Besserley moved his table to give them a little more room as they passed. The girl offered no word of thanks. The young man was suave but indifferent. They disappeared behind the curtain and almost before it dropped Besserley could hear the man's voice raised in anger. He touched a *maître d'hôtel* upon the shoulder and sent for the manager, who hurried up.

"Everything all right, I hope, General?" the latter asked anxiously.

"Perfectly," was the brief reply. "I wondered whether you would do me a favour."

The man bowed.

"Anything, General," he assured him.

"Well, then, I shall ask you something I have never asked before. I should like an introduction to those two young people who have been dancing this evening."

The manager hesitated.

“General Besserley,” he said earnestly, “I have never had two performers here to entertain my guests who would not have considered such a suggestion an honour. As for these two, Miss Josephine, at any rate—well, I don’t know what to make of them. I can only tell you this—I am not going to keep them longer than the week.”

“You do not consider them capable?”

“Oh, they are capable enough, but they are not trying, at least the girl is not. She is a beautiful *danseuse*. I engaged her once before, but she made it a condition that she dance alone. Nowadays people won’t look at that sort of thing and I had to insist upon it that she take a partner. You have seen them dance, General. You can see what a miserable business it is. He does all right, except that he is furious, and I don’t blame him. The girl is just like a piece of ice. I will introduce you, if you wish, but I warn you I won’t answer for their manners, especially the girl’s.”

“I’ll take my risk,” Besserley decided.

He followed the manager behind the curtain. The two occupants of the room looked round angrily.

“You young people do not seem to have been doing your best to-night,” their employer said austerely. “This gentleman is one of our most valued patrons—General Besserley. I have promised to present him to you and I keep my word. If the General is satisfied with your performance to-night, I am afraid he is the only one amongst my patrons who is.”

The manager slipped away without another word. Besserley bowed to the girl and nodded to the man in friendly fashion.

“I feel a terrible intruder,” he said genially, “but so much of your dancing to-night was good that it astonished me to realise how bad the rest was. Some little trouble, I imagine. I wondered whether I might be of any service.”

The girl looked up.

“No one,” she said, “could be of the slightest service.”

“Mademoiselle is crazy,” the young man explained. “As for me—she is ruining my chances.”

“Would it be too much to ask you if you would join me in a bottle of wine and perhaps a little supper?” the General invited.

“Thank you,” the girl replied. “I do not drink wine and I do not wish for any supper.”

“You won’t even tell me what is wrong?”

“I will,” Raymond declared, suddenly moving towards the curtains, as though determined that the girl should not escape. “Listen. We are supposed to be partners. I have a wonderful offer to dance at Nice and at Monte Carlo. She will not go.”

“Nothing would induce me to dance at either place,” the girl said. “I am under a promise not to do so.”

“Furthermore,” Raymond went on, “people on the Riviera nowadays are more particular than they were. They like dancing partners to be married. I wish to marry Miss Josephine and she refuses.”

She stared at him a trifle insolently. For the first time, there was the shadow of a bitter smile upon her lips.

“Well, would not anyone?” she observed.

He looked for a moment as though he would have struck her. Then he addressed himself to Besserley.

“You can see for yourself, sir,” he pointed out, “intervention is hopeless. I shall leave her to starve or to live on shadow dances at ten francs a time!”

The girl picked up her cloak.

“You will be so kind as to excuse me, sir,” she said, turning to Besserley.

He held the curtain in his hand but he barred the way for a moment.

“I wish to have the opportunity of talking to you about your future,” he said. “For two or three days I shall be on my small boat the *Echo*, in Garoupe Bay. You would be welcome at any time you chose to pay me a call. Permit me.”

He drew aside the curtain. The girl passed swiftly out without speech or thanks. Besserley remained watching her threading her way through the crowd, looking neither to the right nor to the left, until she reached the exit and disappeared. Then he returned to his table.

The owner of the small yacht, at the sound of the splash, dropped his pipe on the deck and peered into the darkness.

“Hello,” he called out; “anyone there?”

There was no direct response, but he fancied that he caught the sound of a cry of terror partly suppressed. He turned on the electric reading light which hung over his head. Not twenty yards away was an overturned rowing boat and the shadow of some dark object in the water. He tore off his coat and kicked off his slippers.

“Bring the dinghy round, Auguste,” he shouted through the open galley. “Someone is in trouble out there.”

He stepped over the rail and dived in, swimming with long powerful strokes towards the boat. At first there was nothing to be seen: then, to his horror, he caught a glimpse of a white face, the slim body of a girl just below the surface. He swam round and got his hand underneath her neck.

“Don’t struggle, please,” he begged. “Lie on your back and float if you can.”

There were no signs that the person whom he was gripping either heard or understood. Her inertness, however, made Besserley's task easier. Auguste brought round the dinghy and together they lifted her on board the yacht and down into Besserley's cabin without difficulty. He bent over her and made a brief examination.

"She was only in the sea a few minutes," he declared. "Get me a blanket. That's right."

He chafed the girl's hands, drew off her soaking shoes and stockings and rubbed her feet gently.

"Now then, young lady," he enjoined, "open your eyes, please. You will have to get rid of those clothes."

She obeyed and Besserley knew that this strange thing had indeed happened. Her face was deathly pale, her hair was dripping and her deeply set eyes had not lost that dull glaze of despair. Nevertheless, she was easily recognisable.

"You are the monsieur who asked me to pay him a visit?" she murmured drearily. "I have come."

"What made you fall out of the boat?" he asked.

"I jumped out."

"Can you swim?"

"No."

He gave Auguste an order and busied himself rummaging in his wardrobe. Presently he produced a huge greatcoat and a couple of sweaters. Auguste reappeared with a tumblerful of cherry whisky.

"Drink half of that slowly," Besserley ordered. "When you have done that, take off those clothes and do the best you can with these things. When you are well wrapped up, knock at the door or call out. I shall be in the little salon beyond. You understand?"

"Yes."

Besserley sat in the salon and gazed out of the opposite porthole. For a time his efforts to concentrate upon the immediate situation were hopeless. He could see only that strangely beautiful old lady, with the unearthly light in her eyes as she looked towards eternity: the girl in the barn gazing through its whitewashed walls: the *danseuse* at the Casino, with her scornful indrawn lips and eyes wilfully averted from the business of the moment. Once more, when he was summoned into his cabin, he saw those eyes turned towards him from the heap of crumpled blankets upon the bed. He pulled himself together with an effort.

"Well?" he enquired. "Do you feel yourself again?"

"Yes," she answered, with a voice unexpectedly strong. "I am sorry to have

been so troublesome. Still, you had better have let me drown. It would have been kinder.”

He sat on the edge of the bed and took her thin delicate fingers in his.

“Look here,” he expostulated, and this time his tone was kinder though still a trifle gruff, “I wish you nothing but good. There is nothing about me to be afraid of. I might become a real friend to you. Take another sip of that stuff and tell me why you tried to do this thing and what your trouble is.”

She reflected for a moment. Then she raised herself on her elbow and looked steadily at her rescuer.

“I will tell you, if you care to listen,” she promised, “why I have lost hope in the world, why I am anxious to leave it.”

“Little fool,” he exclaimed kindly. “At your age, you have not learnt yet what there may be to live for.”

“I have learnt,” she answered sadly, “why death is better.”

“Tell me about it,” he insisted.

“It is not much of a story,” she began, the weariness still aching in her tone. “My mother was a singer and a *danseuse*. She thought she had saved enough to send me to school. The bonds which she supposed to be Government bonds, however, turned out to be forgeries. The shock killed her and two years ago I was left with no one—”

“That is very sad,” he said. “Where were you?”

“In Paris,” she answered. “We always lived there. The only person I knew who could help me was the man who procured engagements for my mother. I went to see him—I became a professional *danseuse*.”

“And a very good one, I should think, when you try,” he remarked. “You were not trying at Cannes the night before last.”

“I loathe that sort of dancing,” she told him. “I have found something better to do but I have no money and I cannot do it. I have a contract with that gigolo Raymond, and he makes me do turns, as he calls it. With the dancing which I love, which I would willingly do for love, one cannot earn the bread one eats or keep a roof above one’s head.”

He reflected for a moment.

“I must know everything,” he said. “Someone must help you with all that lighting. Someone must have collected that music for you—must have taught you to produce what you feel so wonderfully.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “That is true. It is someone, alas, who is as poor as I am. He works in an office here in Cannes. His name is Rostard—Pierre Rostard. All that we

had for the other night he made himself. All the technique that I have he taught me.”

“It was a marvellous performance,” Besserley said.

There was a sudden light in her eyes. She leaned towards him eagerly.

“You really thought that—really—with all those handicaps in that crude barn?”

“I really thought it,” he assured her. “So did the others whose opinions were worth anything. So would many other thousands. Do you realise, I wonder, that you had the most difficult audience possible? The world is full of people who are looking for the best things. Down here, most of them are satisfied with the worst. . . . Now about this trouble with your partner, Raymond?”

“I have told him that I will dance no more,” she explained. “I would rather starve than live in such a banal way. I have a contract with him. He is rough and cruel and he wants me to marry him. I would sooner die. I would sooner even listen to the men whom he would love me to be friendly with, the rich men who come here to gamble and have money to spend. And I will not do that. It seems to me I must either starve or give up the work I love and live ignobly with Raymond. When I saw you standing in that barn—when I heard you speak last night—I suddenly had a gleam of hope. I thought you were different. Last night I made up my mind to come and ask you for help. Raymond only sneered. I think he was afraid that you might take me away from him altogether. Anyhow, he told me what I hated to hear. To-night, though, I was desperate. I thought if I had to have that sort of help from anyone, I would rather have it from you. The manager of the Casino told me how to find you. I came down to the beach and it was dark. I borrowed a boat and I rowed out here, and then, when I got within a few yards of your yacht, I lost my courage. The night was so beautiful, death did not seem so ugly a thing as the other, so I thought I would die.”

“You are very young, I should think,” Besserley reflected.

“I am nineteen.”

“Just one or two more questions,” he begged. “Why did you refuse to dance at Nice or Monte Carlo?”

“Because before my mother died, when she was afraid that I too might have to earn my living by dancing, she begged me never to dance at those places. They were near my grandmother’s home. We were all so alike she was afraid that I might be recognised.”

“And your name is Josephine.”

“My name is Josephine. That is my real name. My other name—well, that does not matter. My mother was treated cruelly by her family. I would not approach them or accept their help if they offered it.”

“Nineteen,” he repeated. “Considering the life you have led, Miss Josephine, you seem to me to know very little of the world.”

“How should I know anything of it?” she answered bitterly. “I was at school until my mother died: a very strict convent school, too. My mother came to see me once every three months. She took me away only when she found the money had gone. Except for one other I have never spoken for more than a few minutes with any man but Raymond, the dancing partner my mother’s agent found for me, Raymond whom I loathe and hate, Raymond, who tried first—oh, horrible, impossible things and now wants me to marry him.”

“And the other?”

“Ah, but he is different! He taught me my art. He wrote the music and made the records. Some day he will find an interpreter and he will be famous through all the world!”

“What is he to you now?” Besserley asked a little bluntly.

“Nothing,” the girl answered, “except the man who has saved my soul as you saved my life to-night. We love one another, it is true. After to-night he will hate me!”

Besserley rose to his feet. The significance of her last speech he ignored magnificently.

“You will have to stay where you are until morning,” he said. “There are more blankets, and cold things to eat, if you become hungry. Auguste will dry your clothes upon the stove.”

“I must stay here,” she repeated, and her voice sounded more like the fluttering of the sad wind amongst the wet leaves of the elms.

“Where the mischief else can you stay?” Besserley demanded, with a touch of irritation in his voice. “Those scraps of clothes of yours are wet through and I don’t keep a stock of ladies’ apparel on board. You need not be afraid of inconveniencing me,” he went on, in a slightly milder tone. “We get the east wind here once a week, so I keep a room at the hotel and my clothes and servant up there. I was thinking of going there anyway, to-night. Auguste,” he called out, “the dinghy.”

The little heap of blankets shook. Her face crept out. She was gazing up at him with parted lips. A passionate hope shone in her eyes.

“You mean—that I am to stay here alone?” she faltered.

“Sorry, but there is no help for it,” he answered. “You have not explored my boat or you would not ask such a question. Now listen to me and put all these foolish fears out of your head. I shall be back here some time to-morrow morning and I shall bring with me that fellow Raymond, unless I can deal with him first, probably your friend the musician, and certainly a lawyer. You need not ask yourself

how miracles come about but there is one brooding over your head. . . . As for the morning, Auguste will bring you coffee and whatever else you want.”

“But I have not thanked you,” she sobbed. “Come back!”

“Well, as I am old enough to be your father,” he smiled, “I am not afraid of coming back.”

She raised herself from the tumbled mass. He took her face firmly in his hands and kissed her on the cheeks.

“Play the woman,” he begged her. “Forget everything except that to-morrow’s going to bring you happiness.”

Nevertheless he left her sobbing, only this time her sobbing was more like the happy passing of the spring breeze through the budding limes.

The end of it all was very much as Besserley had planned it. Raymond, with twenty-five *mille* in his pocket and a new dancing partner, enjoyed quite as much success as he deserved and remained the typical interpreter of the semi-acrobatic type of dancing popular in the cabarets of the Riviera. Josephine and her husband passed on to shine in very different circles. Josephine, as the mystical exponent of what was in reality a new art, shared with her husband, who in poetry and music had become its almost inspired prophet, a unique place in the inner circles of hedonistic art and culture. They started in Paris by creating a furore. They passed through the transitional stages of fashion to become a habit amongst the intellectuals. Besserley was only one of a motley troop of pilgrims who travelled over to Rome for the first night of one of their new productions. It was afterwards, in one of the stately salons of the Palazzo which had been lent them for their brief visit, that Besserley at last told her the final truth. The three—Rostard, Josephine and himself—were seated at a round table after an exquisite repast. Rostard was preparing a peach for his wife. A footman served them with coffee. Rostard waved his hand and the man took his leave. The meal was ended. Through the open windows came a breeze laden with all the sweetness of the Campagna, the perfume of the lemons in the garden and the slow turgid movement of the Tiber. The young man leaned across the table to Besserley.

“Tell her now,” he said.

Besserley drew a miniature from his waistcoat pocket—an ancient miniature set with diamonds—and placed it in her hand.

“But this is exquisite,” she murmured.

She remained silent, though in a state of quivering excitement. The light shone in her beautiful eyes. Her delicate fingers trembled.

“That is the picture of your grandmother—Josephine, Marquise de Vaucluse St. Pierre,” he told her gently. “It was sent to me by the Marquis soon after her death. It is the answer to the question you have so often asked me. You should have no hard feelings about her, child, or shrink from accepting her as your benefactress. She sinned once in her life, perhaps, and she had a proud husband to protect. Her death was as beautiful a thing as you have made visions of life seem to many people. If you have ever felt, my dear,” he added, “that you have anything in your heart against her, for your mother’s sake, you should forgive.”

Josephine’s eyes were soft with gathering tears. She leaned forward and kissed the miniature.

VIII

GIANTS IN THE COUNTINGHOUSE

General Besserley—bland, genial and dignified as usual—sat at his favourite table in the Hôtel de Paris bar, talking to a visitor from the great steamer which lay off the Casino.

“Time for one quick cocktail before I leave,” the latter remarked, giving the order.

From below came booming through the open window the warning siren. General Besserley heard it with regret. He had enjoyed his chat with this unexpected visitor who had brought him news of many friends and whose carefully pronounced criticisms of conditions in New York had interested him very much.

“Sorry you are not making a longer stay, Mr. Blun,” Besserley said politely, as they raised their glasses.

“My misfortune,” the other replied. “Before I go, General, I am asking a favour of you.”

“Go ahead,” was the courteous rejoinder.

“I want you to drive with me in one of those little two-horse carriages down to the dock. It’s a queer sort of request, I know, but I would be glad to have you come. I’ve signalled to that coachman to draw up his team.”

Besserley called for his hat and rose to his feet.

“Quite a pleasant idea,” he acquiesced.

The two men took their places in one of the well-kept open *voitures*, for which Monte Carlo was famous. They drove off with much cracking of the whip. Mr. Sigismund Blun turned towards his companion. He was a typical-looking lawyer, as his letter of introduction had announced him, colourless, tight-lipped, with keen eyes well hidden behind tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles.

“I’ll tell you what I want to say to you, General,” he began. “Did you ever hear of the Miller brothers?”

“Vaguely, if ever,” Besserley replied. “I don’t read that sort of stuff much on this side.”

“Well, let me tell you this,” his companion went on. “There have been some tough guys in New York during the last fifteen years but nothing more dangerous than the three Miller brothers, although not one of them has ever been in the Police Court.”

“That sounds interesting,” Besserley observed.

“Headquarters would give their souls to round them up,” the lawyer continued.

“They just can’t do it. I should say that between them they have committed at least a dozen cold-blooded murders, besides the men they have shot in self-defence or in quarrels. They’re the cleverest criminals the New York police have ever had to deal with. That’s what they are.”

“Why are you telling me about them,” Besserley enquired, “and why this vehicular pilgrimage? Remember, we shall be on the wharf in a few moments.”

“I know all about you, Besserley, from Washington of course,” his companion volunteered, “and I know you have done a little of the old work over here. I want to give you a word of warning. One of that Miller gang is here in Monte Carlo and if he gets busy, you keep out of it. Never mind if it’s your dearest friend in trouble—take a trip to Paris or London. Those Miller boys are just hell. I wanted to tell you this, but I could not afford to take a chance of being overheard, so I figured this was the safest way of getting a private word with you.”

“This is very good of you,” Besserley acknowledged. “I’m not looking for trouble, I can assure you. Tell me, where did you see this man Miller?”

The lawyer hesitated. Although they were now on the wide stretch of wharf approaching the tug, he looked around cautiously. Evidently the Millers had made themselves feared amongst their fellow country-people.

“There was a chap in a tweed coat and very well-cut flannel trousers, with the man you said was the tennis secretary,” Mr. Sigismund Blun confided, as the driver brought his horses to a standstill. “That was Guy Miller, and whatever he wants here in Monte Carlo, General, don’t you get in his way. This warning is going to cost you a few francs, because I haven’t any more French money, but I promise you it’s worth it. Don’t forget to look me up when you come to New York. We’ll lunch at the Lawyer’s Club. Best food in the world.”

“A pleasant cruise to you and thanks,” Besserley called out cheerily, as his acquaintance sped up the tug.

Besserley drove back to the Hôtel de Paris, conscious of a sense of agreeable exhilaration. Sometimes he regretted his early retirement from government service, or wished that his work, instead of being chiefly political, had led him into more direct touch with this amazing science of criminal detection. He had it in his blood, that was very certain, for the thought that one of the three men whom his new acquaintance had described should be in the Principality at the present moment brought him a pleasurable thrill of interest. Of course he might have come to try his luck at the tables. All civilised gangsters were reputed to be mighty gamblers. If not, he wondered who there was at present in the place worthy of his sinister attention. He

paid off the *cocher* with a generous tip, and mounting the steps into the bar came face to face with a possible answer to his speculation. A tall, elderly man, clean-shaven, with a long, distinguished-looking face and wearing a fur coat, although the day was warm, came through the swing doors, leaning upon the arm of one of the most beautiful women Besserley had ever seen.

“Good morning, sir,” he said. “Glad to see that you are getting about again.”

Prince Adrien Martinoff, who in his day had been a great figure in the Principality, returned the greeting courteously.

“I am quite recovered, thank you, General Besserley,” he acknowledged. “You will allow me to present you to the Baroness von Ruhl, who has just arrived from New York. The Baroness is one of my, alas, rather distant connections, who only condescends to remind me of her existence at far too long intervals.”

The woman laughed pleasantly. Her hazel brown eyes met Besserley’s with interest.

“My uncle talks like that,” she said, speaking with a curious accent, in which there remained only a slight suggestion of the American, “simply because he is always so courteous. He leaves us all alone for years—not a letter, not a line—then one makes a timid appearance, only to be received with reproaches! I scarcely ventured to send even my wireless, as I was travelling on an excursion steamer.”

“A very admirable way of travelling,” the Prince declared. “I myself feel that I miss much in the world through my habits of solitude. General, will you do me the pleasure of dining with me one night early next week? Shall we say Tuesday night? As you know, I entertain only on a very small scale. My physician insists that too many agreeable people excite me. I have a young American coming, however, who I think would interest you, and if you are able to join us, it would give me great pleasure.”

If Besserley had had a hundred engagements, he would not have hesitated.

“I should be delighted,” he assented. “About nine?”

“At a quarter to, if you will humour a semi-invalid,” the Prince answered.

Besserley passed on into the bar, which was still crowded, resumed his seat at the table in the bow window and, after giving the matter due consideration, ordered another cocktail. A friend who joined him glanced down the room.

“That’s a good-looking young fellow talking to Merton, the tennis secretary,” he remarked. “Know who he is?”

“I believe,” Besserley replied, “that his name is Miller—Guy Miller.”

“Looks like a polo player. There was a Miller at Meadowbrook.”

“I don’t know much about him,” Besserley observed, finishing his cocktail, “but I

believe that he is supposed to be something of a sportsman.”

As a matter of fact, Besserley was soon to find out. The tennis secretary rose to his feet and, followed by his companion, came down to the table.

“Mr. Miller here has brought me some letters over from New York,” he announced. “From what he says, I gather that he is not a serious tennis player but he likes a game or two every day when he is on holiday. Have you any time to spare, General?”

Besserley looked at the man who was confronting him with a slightly expectant smile upon his lips. Miller was not quite so young as he had seemed at a distance, but he carried himself well, and his features were excellent, although his mouth was a trifle grim.

“I am afraid you would be too good for me,” Besserley remarked good-humouredly.

“We might try,” the other suggested.

“This afternoon at four, if that suits you: tennis or squash, whichever you prefer.”

“Tennis, if it’s all the same to you,” the famous New Yorker answered. “Four o’clock would suit me excellently.”

There was something about the tennis that afternoon which Besserley never altogether forgot. The first two sets were played in sound but somewhat restrained fashion—good second-class stuff, with each giving his opponent the idea that he was keeping a little up his sleeve. In the third set Besserley, from the first, had the best of the luck. Three times he won points—game points too—on a return which trickled into his opponent’s court down the net, having hit the cord hard. Twice Besserley brought off almost impossible shots and his service for one game was untouchable. Suddenly Miller seemed to recognise the fact that he was in danger of defeat. Besserley, who was enjoying the game without attributing any particular importance to it, could not fail to notice the change in the man. Those brilliant, almost over-keen eyes seemed to become like points of fire. His jaw stiffened, his mouth became a hard straight line. He had changed into a Robot-like athlete, like a figure of granite from whom the humanity had suddenly departed. He swept Besserley’s returns into impossible places, served like a man consumed with a silent fury balls which it seemed to Besserley afterwards that no known player could have dealt with. Gradually the game became level, passing to forty-thirty in Miller’s favour and was finished off by a serve which was practically unplayable. Miller stood quite still for a moment. He seemed to be indulging in a sort of welcome relaxation, then he threw his racket a little way into the air, caught it dexterously, lit a cigarette and lightly

jumped the net.

“You have given me all the exercise I want for one day, General,” he remarked.

Besserley smiled, as they strolled off towards the bar together.

“Very good game,” was his laconic comment.

Twice before Besserley had dined at the somewhat appropriately named Château des Nuages, built some thousand years ago by the Seigneur of Peille. Nothing seemed to be changed. There was the same magnificent dining room, the same gold plate, priceless glass, Sèvres china and profusion of drooping orchids. The tapestries which hung upon the wall might have been there for a hundred years. The servants who waited at table, pale-faced and deft-handed, were clad in the livery of the Middle Ages. Prince Martinoff himself wore his usual black velvet dinner coat and black opal links. The food and wine in a château which at times was almost inaccessible to civilisation were, as they had been on previous occasions, marvellous. On Martinoff's right side sat the Baroness, next to her Miller, then Baron Grantz, the trusted secretary of the house, and finally Besserley himself completed the five at the table, reduced to its minimum size. . . . Conversation throughout the meal was chiefly sustained by the American and his host. The former spoke of the moving panorama of great events with intimacy and acumen. Martinoff listened with the air of one interested but remote. He seemed to be all the time brooding over the disclosure which he had resolved to make. As soon as coffee was served, decanters of rare wine and old brandy placed upon the table with cigars and cigarettes within reach, Martinoff appeared to awake.

“It occurs to me,” he announced, “that the moment is now opportune, Mr. Miller, for you to repeat the proposals you have made to me, and which I have been considering during the last few days. I make no excuse for asking you to do so in the presence of others. I am an old man and I do nothing without advice. The Baroness, my niece, is deeply interested. Baron Grantz, my trusted secretary practically throughout my lifetime, is in my entire confidence. General Besserley I have invited because he is a man of the world, with a reputation in these parts for sound judgment and vision. Will you be so kind as to proceed.”

Miller leaned forward in his chair. The air of careless gallantry with which he had carried on his conversation with the Baroness had departed. His features were set and firm, his tone precise.

“The matter is very simple,” he explained. “The Prince, in one of those huge transactions which brought him fame and wealth years ago, thought it well to accept large commissions from various American houses in connection with the purchase of

several battleships. Some friends of his also interested themselves in the matter. In this clean sweep which is now going on in Washington, papers concerning these transactions have come to light. As you may have gathered from the newspapers, the Prince's share in the matter has been adversely commented upon. I have been sent here to request our host, in return for a certain consideration, to hand me the evidence linking up the two other men in these transactions."

There was a brief silence. The Prince nodded his head thoughtfully. The Baroness, with a little sob, suddenly clutched at his arm, slipped from her place and went down on her knees by his side.

"You will not give it to him," she implored. "You know what it will mean. It will cost Augustus the throne which has been promised to him!"

Martinoff permitted his hand, with its long delicate fingers and wonderful signet ring, to rest for a moment on the woman's gold brown hair. He even smoothed it gently. His face, however, was implacable.

"Anna," he said, "one has to decide in these matters according to the greater good of the greater number."

"But it will mean war," she pleaded. "Surely you can see that."

"I love war," Martinoff acknowledged calmly. "I love to be behind the scenes when war is fermenting, to be behind the scenes while it is in progress. Alas, I am too old for that now, but the joy of war is still in my blood."

"In return for the documentary evidence concerning the two people whom we will not name, and the one American who must not be named," Miller went on, "the Department which I represent undertakes to withdraw all charges against you, Prince, and to withdraw the lien upon your assets, which is in the act of being put into force in New York. This alone should make you the richer by something like three million pounds."

"You cannot do this thing!" Anna cried, her arms twined around Martinoff's neck. "You cannot do anything so cruel. My country—I call it mine because I love those who belong to it better than life itself—has made so heroic a struggle. It has won tranquillity, owing to the fine government of the man whom you propose to ruin. In a few months now he will be king, unless you bring this scandal upon him. What was the harm in his working to earn American gold? You did the same. What you earned went into the coffers of your vast fortune. What he earned went back to his country. You promised me those papers. You must let me have them."

"I promised you them for a wedding present," Martinoff reminded her. "If things turn out as you say, there can be no marriage. Besides, at the time I promised, I was not threatened with this ruinous action. Grantz," he added, "I shall require the

opening of Safe K.”

Anna’s shriek rang through the vaulted room. It seemed to linger in agony about the oaken rafters. Besserley leaned across the table. His expression was portentous.

“Prince,” he said, “you have invited me here as a sort of watching consultant. Am I permitted to say one word?”

“You may speak if you wish, General,” Martinoff assented coldly. “I may add, however, that my decision is taken. I have decided to hand over the papers they require to the authorities at Washington.”

“You shall not!” Anna cried, writhing in agony.

The Prince motioned Grantz towards the door. Besserley’s gesture, however, was arresting. He had risen to his feet now, pushed his chair back and was standing with his hand outstretched towards the American.

“No papers which you propose to hand to your guest, Mr. Guy Miller, Prince,” he declared, “will find their way to Washington. Furthermore, he is not in a position to grant you the immunity he offers.”

For a moment there was silence. Grantz, halfway to the door, stood looking back. Anna, the tears streaming down her face, her hair dishevelled, her bosom heaving, stared wildly at Besserley, as though seeking to grasp the meaning of his words. The Prince, too, was looking directly at him, an angry frown upon his forehead. Miller alone in the room seemed to everyone except Besserley himself unchanged. Besserley saw it coming. The man appeared to be turning into ice. He was frozen with that same silent fury which had crept over him during those moments of possible defeat upon the tennis courts.

“Have you lost your senses, General?” his host asked.

“On the contrary,” Besserley replied, “I have been using them to exceedingly good purpose and I have divined the truth. This man Miller has nothing to do with Washington. He has nothing to do with the American Government. He is a very distinguished personage, I admit, and his name very possibly is Guy Miller, but he is better known to police headquarters than to Washington, for the reason that he belongs to the most famous trio of criminals America has ever known, even in its worst days. If you hand him over those papers, Prince, they will be used for blackmail and nothing else. As for you, you will remain where you are without benefit or consideration. . . . A little more to the right, please, Baroness.”

She leaned away. The skill of Besserley’s old days had not deserted him. The black muzzle of his gun pointed straight as a line at Miller’s heart. The latter made no movement. His left hand was upon the table, his right was playing with his wineglass.

“Very dramatic,” he sneered. “However, the Prince has at least had his choice.

Whether those papers are handed over to me,” he went on, and the words seemed to leave his lips so deliberately that they were like crisp and polished things, “as a representative of the American Government or as Guy Miller—one, I admit, of three famous adventurers—make little difference. The only point is that I am here, Prince Martinoff, and I demand possession of those documents.”

“Short of killing us all,” Martinoff demanded, “may I ask how you intend to enforce your will upon us, after General Besserley’s revelations?”

Miller glanced at the thin gold watch which he had drawn from his vest pocket. He replaced it with a smile.

“I am tired of words,” he confessed, with a slight yawn. “Tired too of this brandishing of revolvers and of our friend the General’s threatening gesture—hopelessly old-fashioned and out of date. I did not travel across from the States without making my preparations. There are few secrets concerning your life here, Prince, and your methods, which we had not mastered before I left New York. May we now consider that the curtain has fallen upon one act of this little drama and enjoy a brief pause? I take the liberty, sir, of helping myself to another glass of your amazing sherry. Even my brothers’ cellars, and they are famous, hold nothing so choice.”

He refilled his glass amidst a dead silence. He had turned a little towards his neighbour.

“Baroness,” he begged, “let me help you to regain your chair. After all, you are no worse off than you were. My brothers and I are reasonable people. Blackmail is an ugly word. We will call it a tax. As such, it can be paid. The American Government might have been more difficult to deal with.”

“I have come to the conclusion,” Martinoff, who had recovered his self-possession, said forcibly, “that you are out of your mind, sir.”

“You will change yours before many minutes have passed,” was the placid reply. . . .

Martinoff appeared not to have heard him. He was leaning forward in an attitude of listening.

“Is it my fancy,” he asked, “or is there some strange noise outside? A passing aeroplane, perhaps. Little else disturbs us here.”

They all listened. Without a doubt from somewhere close at hand came the muffled beat of a great engine. The Baroness suddenly called out. She pointed round the room and overhead to the beautifully shaded lights. One by one they were growing fainter. The softened illumination of the banqueting hall had given place to shadows. Grantz, who had been out of the room for a few moments, entered hastily

and hurried to his master's side.

"Your Highness," he announced, "it is impossible to say what is happening. The electric light, as you can see, is fading away. The telephones to the lodge are not working. The bells are not ringing. Outside in the front courtyard there is something which resembles a small tank. One fears almost that the power station is affected."

Besserley flung back the heavy curtains. Outside he could dimly discern the form of some weird-looking vehicle, but probably the greatest shock he had ever received in his life was the fact that between it and the Château the air seemed filled with irregular streams of lightnings, lightnings which were at one moment green and another yellow!

"Come here, Grantz!" he called out. "There is some new form of wireless at work in the courtyard."

Miller tapped a cigarette upon the table cloth.

"There is no need for anyone to disturb themselves," he said coldly. "I know precisely what the machine is doing. I am hoping to sell the rights of it to our host tomorrow morning. I brought it over with me, in case I found any difficulty."

"And may I ask," Prince Martinoff enquired, "what the machine is doing?"

Miller lit the cigarette which he had been holding between his fingers.

"It has by this time," he said, "practically exhausted the accumulated electricity of your power station. To use a crude word, when we bought the rights of it from a Dutchman, we called it a demagnetizer. For some time not a bell in your house will ring, there will be no light except those candles and," he added, with a little bow to the Prince, "the doors of your secret chambers will fly open and the handles of your safes turn of their own accord. You have built up a marvellous scheme of defence here, dependent upon electricity alone, Prince. Electricity has failed you. Your sherry, however, remains marvellous," he concluded, raising his glass to his lips.

"And the practical side of this?" Martinoff asked. "You are one man. I have a dozen armed servants, and there are ourselves."

"A respectable company and no doubt great fighters," Miller observed. "Unfortunately, we outnumber you. My brother, with fifty of his friends from Genoa—some of whom, by-the-way, were engaged in the work upon this place—spent last night at La Turbie. They are now within a dozen yards from the various entrances to the grounds. Twelve against fifty are poor odds. I might add that we possess Maxims and the latest type of bombs. Shall we continue the negotiations?"

There was a blank and dismal silence. The flashes of lightning were growing fewer. The engine seemed to be beating more faintly, but somehow or other, although no definite sounds reached them, they were all conscious of the fact that

men outside were moving silently to and fro. Besserley leaned forward.

"Prince," he pointed out, "we have only Miller's word for this epic of destruction. I propose that Grantz here and myself go below for a moment. Mr. Miller perhaps will accompany us and see what condition your safes are in."

Miller rose at once to his feet.

"It would interest me very much," he confessed.

Martinoff waved his hand and the three men left the room.

Anna, too sick at heart for speech, leaning forward with her head resting upon her arms, seemed to pass into a lethargy of hopeless grief. Martinoff sat upright in his chair, his cold eyes set and expressionless. The minutes passed. . . . Anna lifted her head. She stretched out her hand for her uncle's.

"Do not let the servants be shot to pieces," she begged quietly. "If Miller really has his men here from Genoa and the safes are open, we are in their power."

There was the sound of footsteps outside. The first to enter was Grantz, carrying a black tin box under his arm. After him, very much in the background, came Besserley.

"The destruction is complete," Grantz reported to his master despairingly. "The man told the truth. Every electric device in the house is ruined."

"What have you brought us there?" Martinoff asked, pointing to the box.

"The papers this man Miller is demanding," Grantz replied fearfully. "The agreement signed by the Archduke and—"

Anna rose to her feet with a ringing cry. Martinoff, with a quick glance towards the door, felt in his pocket and produced a key. He unlocked the box and with deliberate fingers drew out several bundles of papers. He found the one he wanted. He held it over the nearest candle. It fluttered away in ashes. Another followed it, and then another. Martinoff sat upright in his high-backed chair, and for the first time for years he laughed.

"That, at any rate, is finished," he exclaimed. "Give me some brandy, Grantz. Relock the box. The rest of the papers are of no particular consequence."

Grantz held the glass of brandy to his master's lips. Martinoff sipped it feebly.

"The man and the country you love are safe, Anna," he told her.

Her arms were around his neck, her soft cheek was pressed to his lined face. Her torrent of words was undistinguishable. He pushed her gently away.

"It is perhaps for the best," he acknowledged. . . . "Besserley! My God, Besserley!"

Besserley came from the shadows to the table. His collar was torn, his tie

hanging down and there was blood upon his face. He held out his hand, while Grantz poured out some brandy. His voice when he spoke was quite firm and there was a gleam almost of humour in his eyes.

“Well, we are through this little bit of trouble,” he announced cheerfully. “I say, this brandy is no good to me. I want Scotch and soda—biggest tumbler you can find.”

Grantz waited upon him fervently. Besserley, with a long sigh of relief, took a huge drink.

“What do you mean by the trouble being finished?” Anna asked him, with set, wondering eyes.

“Oh, I have not been exactly idle the last few days,” Besserley explained. “I got to know about that fellow in Genoa and the men he was sending to La Turbie. The officer in command at Mont Agel there has a whole detachment of Chasseurs Alpains and was good enough to remember that I once saved his life. I convinced him that there was going to be an attack upon this house to-night and the moment those blackguards of Miller’s enter the courtyard, if ever they do, they will find about a hundred armed chasseurs hidden amongst the shrubs—good fighters too!”

“It is not to be believed,” Martinoff faltered. “Where is Miller?”

Besserley smiled apologetically.

“I found that although the electricity had failed, the locks themselves were perfectly sound,” he went on. “Miller seemed to have forgotten that. I got him inside Safe K and closed the door on him, although he put up a pretty good wildcat fight for it. I thought he would be safer there until things had cleared up. Grantz showed me the ventilating dodge and we are giving him just enough to keep him going.”

Martinoff clasped his forehead.

“Tell me again,” he insisted. “Where did you say Miller is?”

“In the safe,” Besserley replied, “where that box came from.”

IX

THE BRIDE OF THE SHINING HOUR

Besserley had just taken the line of his putt and was preparing for action when he became painfully aware of the violent impact of a golf ball on the calf of his leg. He swung round furiously.

“What the—”

Words failed him. Only a few yards from the edge of the green a girl with a brand-new driver in her hand was smiling at him joyously. She was not at all a usual sort of girl. Her hair—she wore no hat—was of the rare and genuine platinum shade. She was most becomingly dressed for the sport in which she was presumably indulging, and she had the largest blue eyes and the sweetest smile he had ever seen. Even as he stood there scowling at her, he realised who she was. Number One in the first row of the most successful galaxy of beauties which a famous theatrical producer, with all New York at his mercy, had been able to select, and bride in the wedding with which the nightly performance at the Sporting Club concluded. Besserley changed the nature of his protest.

“What on earth are you doing, hitting a ball like that when I am on the green?” he demanded.

The smile faded from her lips, her eyes seemed to grow larger and rounder.

“There was no one to play with me,” she explained, “so I bought some sticks and came out alone. The professional told me to practice full shots.”

“But, my God,” Besserley protested, “you don’t play full shots at a man on the green just ahead of you!”

“Don’t you?” she asked innocently. “There was no one to tell me when to play them. You see, Jim told me I must play golf, so I came up and bought these sticks and then the professional was engaged, so I started out alone. I’m terribly ignorant of what I ought to do, I’m afraid.”

General Besserley limped to a seat erected in the vicinity for the convenience of tired golfers and possible apoplectics.

“Your Jim ought to have come and looked after you,” he said, with a note of venom in his tone.

“I’m sorry,” she apologised wistfully. “I didn’t think these little balls would hurt anyone—not a great strong man like you, anyway. Here’s Jim just coming.”

“Good job,” Besserley muttered.

“I don’t think I’ll play any more to-day,” she remarked, lingering a little.

“I shouldn’t,” her victim advised her.

She came across the green to him with that peculiar swinging movement, half a dance and half a walk, which she and her fellow toilers had made very much the fashion. Her heels were the highest he had ever seen and left a distinct impression every time they sank into the green turf. Besserley, who was on the Greens Committee, groaned.

"I'm so sorry," she said, looking down at him. "I didn't know I was doing wrong. Does your leg hurt very much? Would you like me to rub it?"

"You go to—Jim," was the brusque response. "Tell your Jim, too, that he'd better keep you off these links until he buys you a pair of golf shoes."

"You're very horrid to me," she complained. "It isn't as though I knew anything about the game. And what is wrong with my shoes, please?"

She lifted her skirt, giving a liberal display of a marvellously graceful leg and ankle, and black and white suède shoes which were the last word of a famous Parisian *bottier*.

"It isn't your shoes," he pointed out. "It's the heels. Look at those little holes you have made all across the green. How do you suppose anyone is going to putt over those?"

"I could," she declared hopefully. "They wouldn't make a bit of difference to me. Shall I show you?"

He waved her away not discourteously. He had recognised Jim.

Besserley, who had been on the point of retiring for the night, dropped the book which he had been reading from one hand but had presence of mind enough to retain possession of his pipe, which he clutched in the other. He stared blankly across the room at this approaching vision of loveliness. He numbered amongst his acquaintances no young woman likely to possess a rose-coloured chiffon *chemise de nuit* and *negligée* or who would have been likely to understand such a fascinating method of partially concealing her platinum silver hair.

"Here, you're making a mistake," he exclaimed. "Whom are you looking for?"

She recognised him with a sigh of relief.

"Oh, you're the gentleman who got in the way of my golf ball, aren't you?" she cried.

General Besserley swallowed hard.

"Even if I was," he replied, "that does not explain why you should enter my sitting room without knocking at two o'clock in the morning."

"You should not sit up so late, if you mind visitors," she answered. "I had to come somewhere. They're killing one another in my room. Would you mind going

and separating them?”

“Pekes?” he asked scornfully.

“No—men,” she answered.

“Then why the mischief didn’t you ring the bell, send for the manager or the night porter—use your common sense?” he demanded, rising unwillingly to his feet. “What concern is it of mine? I’m just having a last drink before I go to bed and if you have been giving a Hollywood party, I don’t see why I should be called upon to interfere.”

“You are not half so nice as you were this morning,” she complained. “I don’t want anyone to be hurt.”

“Then why don’t you ring up the bureau?” Besserley asked. “I’m not a chucker-out.”

“But I don’t want anyone to be chucked out, either,” she replied. “It’s just that Mr. Copperas is our manager and he is very nearly fed up with Morris Dring already.”

Besserley knocked the ashes from his pipe and pulled his dressing gown round him.

“Which is your room?” he asked, with a sigh of resignation.

“Now isn’t that sweet of you?” she exclaimed gratefully. “Follow me, please.”

She danced away in front of him a few yards down the dimly lit corridor and threw open the door of a room on the other side of the lift. It was a very pleasant sitting room under ordinary circumstances, but its present appearance was rather that of a drawing-room battlefield. The furniture was in disarray, several vases of flowers had been upset, there was water trickling over the carpet, and a young man, whom Besserley recognised as being one of the participants in the nightly show, lay groaning upon his side, with his back against the leg of a table. Standing upon the hearthrug, smoking a cigarette and still wearing his overcoat, was a young man with whom Besserley had some acquaintance—Alan Copperas—the theatrical representative of the *Société*.

“Will you tell me,” Besserley demanded, struggling to repress his annoyance, “what I am dragged in here for at this hour of the night? Why can’t you two go outside and settle your differences, instead of making this unholy mess of a young lady’s sitting room? And what’s it all about, anyhow? I tell you frankly I shall go straight down from here to the management and complain.”

“This is the gentleman, Mr. Copperas, who got in the way of my golf ball,” the girl explained pleasantly.

“Oh, everyone knows General Besserley,” the young man replied. “If you will forgive my asking, though—what is it you want in here, sir?”

Then General Besserley broke loose.

“Want in here be damned,” he exclaimed. “This young lady comes to my private sitting room, tells me there is murder going on here, or something of the sort, and drags me round! You seem to have been having nothing more serious than a drunken scuffle, and if you want any help to arrange it, ring up the reception. I shall have a word or two to say to the management myself.”

The girl clutched his arm. The upturned eyes pleaded with him.

“You must not do anything unkind,” she begged, “and I really didn’t know you were a General when I hit that golf ball. I was really looking for Sadie Marsh’s room, when I saw the light underneath your door.”

Quietly but very firmly Besserley disengaged himself.

“My dear young lady,” he said, “you are the most charming object to look at I ever saw in my life, but you are becoming an intolerable nuisance. Remember, whatever else happens to you in future in this hotel, or anywhere else, kindly leave me out of it.”

Whereupon Besserley, inwardly fuming, left the room, closed the door with exceptional firmness, barricaded himself in his suite and went to bed.

In the morning Monsieur Bloit, one of the directors of the hotel, presented himself at Besserley’s rooms and obtained an interview.

“General,” he apologised, “I am exceedingly annoyed that you were disturbed last night.”

“Cost me an hour’s sleep,” his patron grumbled.

“You see, sir, these are difficult times,” the manager explained. “Mr. Copperas, the theatrical agent, has succeeded in securing for the Sporting Club an amazing collection of beautiful and talented young women, and the place is practically being saved by the enormous crowds who come to see them at dinner and supper time. Mr. Copperas is very clever. He insists upon it that they all stay in the hotel, that they show themselves about the place freely. One hour in the bar, for instance, one hour down at the Country Club, and a certain time in the night restaurant and gambling rooms after the performance. They have made many friends and naturally this has created a little disturbance. Of course our greatest trouble is with the bride.”

“The bride?” Besserley repeated.

“Miss Rosa Helliot,” the manager explained. “She takes the part of the bride in the grand finale.”

“Oh, I know all about her,” Besserley groaned. “It was she who dragged me out of my room last night. She also plays golf, at least she possesses twenty implements

she calls sticks, without the faintest idea what she ought to do with them. I wish the people who give her things would teach her how to use them.”

“A great many young men,” Monsieur Bloit assured him, “have lost their heads over Miss Rosa Helliott. This young man who takes the principal male part, Morris Dring, for instance, is worse than anyone. In the finale, there is, as you know, a great wedding scene. Well, Dring is the bridegroom, and when he has got through with it, he is in such a state of excitement, with that little minx making eyes at him and her little affectionate gestures all the time, that he gets drunk nearly every night, imagines he is really married to her and tries to come up to her rooms. Her manager has to wait up and see him to bed most nights. That was just what happened last night.”

“Well, there’s a certain amount of humour about your explanation, Monsieur Bloit,” General Besserley observed, “but there’s one thing I must ask you. Will you impress upon the bride, or whatever that young lady calls herself, that she must not force her way into the rooms of respectable elderly gentlemen like myself in these hours of peril. Tell her I am out of bounds. Tell her anything you choose, but I cannot have children of her age, with eyes like that, coming weaving spells over me when I want to go to sleep. The girl is a nuisance, and as for allowing her loose on the golf links with those heels and her ignorance—well, the man who started her at that ought to be turned out of the club, even though he is Jim Montessor.”

“I’ll try to see that you are not annoyed again, General,” Monsieur Bloit promised. “The young lady, if you will pardon my saying so, although she is very difficult with most people, seems to have taken an extraordinary fancy to you. She tells everyone that you were so kind to her up at the golf links.”

Besserley failed to find a satisfactory outlet in speech. He threw down his newspaper and rose to his feet. Monsieur Bloit hastened on to his final word of explanation.

“It will be all over directly, anyway, General,” he confided. “You have heard of the real wedding, of course?”

“I heard that Jim Montessor, who is old enough to know better, is going to marry a child of sixteen or seventeen out of the show,” Besserley grunted.

“She is going to be married to him the day after to-morrow at the Cathedral,” the director assented. “She is to have the same girls as bridesmaids, the *Société* are giving the wedding supper and it will be a marvellous show. There will be one final performance at night, for which we are charging two hundred and fifty francs. Every inch of space is taken for dinner and supper. The next morning she leaves as a respectably married woman for her honeymoon.”

“And what becomes of Dring?” Besserley asked.

The director shrugged his shoulders.

“After all, he is of the stage,” he said. “They’re so used to playing at emotions that they mix them up with the real ones. He will probably get drunk again after the last performance, but the bride will be in Italy.”

“An excellent place for her,” Besserley remarked, perhaps under the circumstances a little unkindly.

The bar of the Hôtel de Paris two days afterwards became, a few minutes after the bells had rung out from the church on the hill, full to overflowing with a crowd of perspiring, exhausted, gaily dressed but highly amused habitués of the Principality. Everyone had entered into the spirit of the affair. The church had been packed. The women had worn their gala frocks and many of the men had even dragged out from some discreet hiding place their silk hats. The bridegroom, who had sternly refused to wear uniform, was nevertheless the prototype of the St. George’s, Hanover Square, civilian model. The bride wore the prescribed costume of every night—the same wonderful veil and marvellous wreath of orange blossoms—the latter one of the numerous gifts of the *Établissement*. The bridesmaids looked more elegant and enchanting than ever, and the best man, with excellent taste, had modified a little the ultra flamboyant type of his stage wedding outfit, although he had absolutely refused to part with either his silk hat or his white kid gloves. The whole affair had been pronounced a marvellous success. Nothing had been done to hurt the susceptibilities of the more devout portion of the congregation. The bride had set the fashion, and the bridesmaids had followed her example, of making an ordinary modest entrance without the fascinating little hesitation which they had adopted during the show. The bride herself, everyone had declared, they had never seen more sweet. She looked more childish and more tremulously wistful than ever, and there was perhaps a suspicion of real nervousness which supplied the one superlative touch of her allure.

“Jim is a lucky fellow,” they were all declaring over their cocktails.

“I should say he was,” Copperas agreed a little dolefully. “Rosa is as straight as a line—I can answer for that. She has been most carefully brought up but of course the best thing that can happen to a girl as charming as that is to be married early, especially when she finds a young fellow with heaps of money like Montessor.”

“She has irritated me once or twice lately,” Besserley confessed, “but I never saw a lovelier bride.”

“Looks much more as though it were her first communion than her marriage,” someone else observed truthfully enough. . . .

The hubbub of voices and general confusion in the bar increased. The bridal

party had gone straight from the church to their rooms to change and during their absence everyone talked freely and vociferously.

“I’ll tell you who I thought looked well,” one girl remarked. “That was Morris Dring. Of course, everyone knows that he is madly in love with the bride himself, but he stuck to his guns as best man instead of bridegroom in great style.”

“Is he really in love with her, do you think, or is that only stage pretence?” someone else speculated.

“Not much stage pretence about it, I fancy,” one of the under managers of the show confided. “There have been lots of funny stories about Morris Dring during the last week or so. Every now and then, when he has the odd one, he goes off his head and believes that it was a genuine marriage.”

“Well, I shouldn’t blame him for trying it on,” one of the little group declared. “I don’t believe I could stick it going through that ceremony of marriage and dancing afterwards every night with anyone so exquisite as that child. Almost enough to turn any fellow’s head.”

“Dring is no chicken,” someone else reminded them. “He has been through all that sort of thing before—been divorced twice.”

“That’s all very well,” Copperas chimed in, “but even the oldest and most hardened of actors get the knock sometimes. Personally, I should think Dring is just the sort of man to be attracted by an *ingénue*.”

“Well, anyway,” his understudy observed, “if Dring did get touched a bit, he could never have hoped that anything was likely to come of it. The girl is only between sixteen and seventeen. Besides, she is in love with Jim. Anyone can see that.”

“Well, it’s a queer thing,” one of the young women of the Principality remarked, “to think that a show child like that should come over from New York, make her *début* on the stage here, and carry off Jim, our one eligible young man.”

“Seems rather a drawback to be born amongst the upper circles, doesn’t it?” her girl friend drawled. “Jimmie never was over-fond of his own class in womenkind, though.”

“The girl’s natural enough, at any rate,” Besserley pointed out. “She’s not old enough to be anything else.”

Someone leaned forward from outside the circle.

“What made Jim consent to a last performance to-night?” he asked curiously. “That is what’s been puzzling me.”

“Knowing very little about it,” Besserley observed, “I think he’s made a mistake. I think a reception this afternoon and good-bye to Monte Carlo would have been

the safest and the wisest thing.”

“Why safest?” a girl on his left asked.

Besserley was looking through the walls of the place, revisioning the little wedding group—one of them in particular—as he had seen it from his place of vantage in the church.

“Just an idea,” he replied. “But then, I’m a foolish old man.”

Dring, in a cool grey suit, came wandering in amongst them. He accepted cocktails in every direction.

“Gee, it’s something to get out of those show clothes,” he observed, sinking down upon a stool. “If ever I’m best man again in earnest, it won’t be in that sort of costume. Where are Rosa and Jim and the rest of them?”

“Shouldn’t think they will come in here,” Copperas replied. “It will take them a long time to get out of those glad rags and I should think they’ll want a rest before the show to-night.”

Dring’s face was suddenly dark.

“They’re having a little private celebration, I suppose,” he grumbled. “Don’t see why they left the best man out.”

“What did you mean when you said just now ‘if ever you are best man in earnest’, Dring?” Copperas enquired. “This morning was real enough, wasn’t it?”

Dring swallowed a cocktail before he spoke.

“That,” he scoffed. “That was nothing but a bit of show work.”

Besserley rose from his place and shouldered his way through the crowd to where Copperas was standing. So far as was possible, he drew him on one side.

“Doesn’t it strike you, Copperas,” he suggested, “that Dring is a little overstrung?”

“He’s been like that for weeks,” the manager agreed. “You remember how Rosa had to send for me the other night? He’ll get over it all right, especially now this show is breaking up.”

“There’s a last fling to-night, isn’t there?”

Copperas nodded.

“Great doings,” he assented. “A terrific gala, and then at supper time the clubs are entertaining Rosa and Jim and all the bridesmaids. Rosa is going to cut the wedding cake. You have had an invitation, I know.”

“Yes, I’m going,” Besserley acquiesced. “I can’t help feeling, though, that you ought to keep your eye on Dring. Has he got an understudy?”

“No one of his own class,” Copperas replied gloomily. “Besides, he wouldn’t stick anyone else being put in for a moment. The only thing is that he will probably

be drunk before the evening is halfway through, and then we'll get rid of him."

"If I can be of any assistance," Besserley suggested.

"You are just the man who might be," Copperas answered eagerly. "Say, I'll put you on Rosa's right, two or three places down, because the Grand Duke may be coming, and you'll be right on the spot there, in case I need a hand with him. I have never known Dring really turn ugly; still I agree with you there's nothing like being prepared."

"I'm going to take him away from here now, if I can," Besserley confided.

He leaned over and touched Dring on the shoulder. The latter turned swiftly round.

"Can you come and have luncheon with me, Dring?"

"Much obliged, General," was the dubious reply. "I want to get over to Nice some time this afternoon, though."

"I'm going to Nice myself after luncheon, as it happens. We can go to the Réserve at Beaulieu, call at Nice afterwards and come back by the middle road. Come along, let's get out of this mob."

Dring, a little stupid with the cocktails he had drunk and the smoky atmosphere, suffered himself to be led outside. Besserley placed him in the front seat of his Rolls-Royce and drove rapidly off. It was Besserley's day of self-sacrifice, for Dring, refreshed by the air and the sunlight, became talkative, and when he talked, the subject of conversation was usually himself. Over luncheon he recounted many of his old triumphs. On the way to Nice, however, although he had drunk the best part of a bottle of old Burgundy, he became gloomy again.

"I want to go to the gunmakers," he announced, "Boulestin in the Rue de France."

"Good place," Besserley remarked. "I go there myself."

"Do any shooting round here?"

"Not much. I always carry a revolver, though—especially at night."

"The devil you do! I thought I was the only man who had sense enough to do that."

Besserley smiled.

"I have never driven home by the upper road from Cannes or Nice in my life, without having a gun of some sort handy," he confided. "I have used it more than once, too."

Arrived at their destination, Dring, whose French it appeared was negligible, purchased with his companion's help a Belgian revolver of ordinary type and a few clips of cartridges. Besserley, too, made some purchases at the further end of the

shop. Halfway back on the Moyenne Corniche, Besserley pulled up.

“Let’s have a look at your weapon,” he said.

Dring handed it over. Besserley sighted it and shook his head.

“Ugly thing,” he declared. “I don’t think I could hit a haystack with it. Look here, do you really want a gun, Dring?”

“I should say so. What do you suppose I bought one for?” was the somewhat surly reply.

“I’ll make you a little present,” Besserley promised. “I have been a bit of a collector and I have one or two half that size that would almost fit your waistcoat pocket and would do just as much mischief with less fuss.”

“Very good of you,” Dring said slowly. “I don’t suppose I shall ever want to use it. You can’t tell, though,” he went on. “Monte Carlo is a queer place.”

“Just so,” Besserley agreed. “Anyway, come down to my rooms and I’ll show you what I have.”

Dring lost all confidence in his own inferior weapon when he had inspected Besserley’s armoury. The latter selected one particular six-shooter—small and flat in shape, but of exceedingly sinister appearance.

“This is one of the latest models that Wilkinsons are turning out,” he confided. “There’s no one much in this part of the hotel. We’ll run a risk.”

He opened the door of the bathroom and placed half a sheet of notepaper in a secure place. The first three bullets were within half an inch of each other, through the middle of the sheet. Dring, enraptured, refused to display his own lack of skill but joyfully accepted the gift.

“That’s a little present,” Besserley told him, “because I have enjoyed your shows here very much and because I should hate to see a man carrying about a blunderbuss like yours. I’ll charge it up for you,” he added, extracting the remaining cartridges and filling it up from a fresh box. “There you are. There’s the safety catch. Just close up the breech. Put your thumb on there, when you want to go into action, and you’re a killer. What’s more, there’s no one can see that in your pocket.”

Dring wrung the other’s hand.

“I’ll value this, General,” he said.

“I would leave the Belgian one here, if I were you,” Besserley suggested.

“You can chuck it away, if you like,” was the careless reply. “I don’t want it.”

“And Dring,” the General concluded, as he led him towards the lift, “we are all going to be very sorry to lose the little lady, but after all, she is only a child and the stage is not much good for the young ’uns. She’s got her chance and I should think she deserves it.”

There was a momentary return of that wild look in the man's eyes. He opened his lips and closed them again. His tone when he spoke was insincere.

"I expect you're right, General," he agreed.

There had been many nights during the last decade which stood out in the memories of the habitués of Monte Carlo, but never quite such a one as the night of the wedding feast. Every supper table was occupied to more than its capacity, except the long one reaching almost the length of the room, reserved for the bridal party and a few special guests. At the end of it was placed the most enormous cake, in front of which were two chairs of honour for the bride and bridegroom. It had been one of the most successful variety shows which the Principality had ever offered, and visitors from all parts of the Riviera had crowded there to see the somewhat unique close to the season's entertainment. There was a tremendous stir when from the distance the sounds of the wedding march were heard. Everybody rose to their feet and clapped as the procession entered. The bride and bridegroom led the way. The best man with the first bridesmaid were close behind, and the others came in due order, followed by some of the principal guests of the evening. The applause was almost deafening when the two arrived at their chairs and stood hand in hand for a moment, doing their best to respond to the storm of greetings. Rosa was wearing the wedding dress she had worn night after night, but with its new significance something different seemed to have stolen into her expression. The wide-open eyes and tremulous lips were still indications of youth and a slight nervousness, but there was a glow of happiness shining out of the girl's face which seemed to have brought with it a touch of dignity. Old Lord Craigsweil, the reformed roué of former days, delivered his judgment deliberately and firmly.

"That," he declared, "is the most beautiful child, and she will become the most beautiful young woman, whom I—who have seen every famous beauty in France, Vienna and England for sixty years—have ever looked upon."

There was a huge popping of corks. By an excellent piece of staff work, wine seemed to flow into every glass at the same time. The healths of the bride and bridegroom were proposed in a few words by a deputy chosen by the *Société*. Hand in hand the bride and bridegroom between them stammered a few words of thanks. Then there was more drinking, more thunders of applause. The best man was called upon to perform his office. The business of cutting the cake had arrived. Drink rose to his feet. For a moment or two he was his old self. He held the knife in his left hand, but his right hand was straying about his pocket. He smiled towards Rosa. He smiled towards her husband. Then, in a matter of seconds, his face was transformed. He was like a wild animal. The glitter from the electric lights flashed

upon the weapon he suddenly held in his hand, outstretched towards Rosa. There was a loud explosion. She fell back in her chair, hanging over the side. A second and Jim, who had sprung forward to cover her, fell across the table. Then for a moment there was pandemonium. No one could hear anybody. Dring, thrown on to the floor by Besserley, was held by half a dozen hands.

“He’s mad, remember,” Besserley shouted. “Don’t kill him. Tie him up.”

A small crowd was leaning over the bride and bridegroom. Besserley stood up on a chair with upraised hands. His voice thundered through the room. Every one of his words was audible even in that hubbub.

“There’s no occasion for alarm,” he assured everybody. “The cartridges from the revolver which has just been fired were blank. Neither Miss Rosa nor her husband are in any way hurt.”

By this time Jim had staggered to his feet. Rosa had fainted, but a moment later she opened her eyes. Her husband lifted her in his arms. Dring, shouting and raving, was carried from the room. The commotion subsided a little. A representative of the Sporting Club banged on the table for silence. The hubbub died away.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced, “there need be no alarm. A friend, whose name we shall have occasion to bless all our lives, became suspicious this afternoon of Dring’s sanity and he exchanged the revolver he found the man was carrying for one containing blank cartridges. No harm has been done. The man Dring is under restraint. We all beg you to drink a glass of wine, this time in thankfulness that our two precious guests have escaped a great danger, and that this bright and shining hour will carry with it no disastrous memories.”

There were statistics as to the number of bottles of champagne that were drunk that night, the number of handshakes that were exchanged, of kisses that were freely given, but these have not been preserved. Acquiescing in a very wise suggestion, the company, who remained in their places until an unheard-of hour on the following morning, were merciful enough to do even more than speed their two parting guests. In an hour’s time a great car was stealing along the dark road across the frontier and on towards San Remo. Rosa, with still damp eyes, was resting happily in her husband’s arms. Behind them in that tumultuous supper room, a huge man rose to his feet with a magnum of champagne in his hand.

“A toast,” he shouted, “to the man who has saved us from the most hateful tragedy we could any of us ever have witnessed. To Besserley!”

Fantastic stories were told afterwards of the number of glasses that were broken and rafters that were splintered after the shouting had died away, but then, anyhow, that was a night of fantasies.

BOOKS BY E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Mr. Oppenheim's published books, including the three omnibus volumes, total 133. Some of them have never been published in the United States. All those which have been issued here (by Little, Brown, and Company) are starred. Titles now in print in the United States, either in the regular editions or cheap editions, are double-starred. Some others are available in English editions. Dates refer to *first* publication in book form, whether in England or the United States.

NOVELS

Mr. Oppenheim has published in all 97 novels, of which 10 have not been published in the United States (unless in pirated editions). Five of his novels appeared under the pseudonym "Anthony Partridge"; these are marked †.

EXPIATION. 1887

A MONK OF CRUTA. 1894

THE PEER AND THE WOMAN. 1895

*A DAUGHTER OF THE MARIONIS. 1895

FALSE EVIDENCE. 1896

A MODERN PROMETHEUS. 1896

*THE MYSTERY OF MR. BERNARD BROWN. 1896

THE WOOING OF FORTUNE. 1896

THE POSTMASTER OF MARKET DEIGHTON. 1897

THE AMAZING JUDGMENT. 1897

*MYSTERIOUS MR. SABIN. 1898

A DAUGHTER OF ASTREA. 1898

*AS A MAN LIVES. 1898

*MR. MARX'S SECRET. 1899

*THE MAN AND HIS KINGDOM. 1899

*THE WORLD'S GREAT SNARE. 1900

*A MILLIONAIRE OF YESTERDAY. 1900

*THE SURVIVOR. 1901

*ENOCH STRONE. 1901 (English title A MASTER OF MEN.)

*A SLEEPING MEMORY. 1902 (English title THE GREAT AWAKENING.)

*THE TRAITORS. 1902

*A PRINCE OF SINNERS. 1903

*THE YELLOW CRAYON. 1903

*THE BETRAYAL. 1904

*ANNA THE ADVENTURESS. 1904

*A MAKER OF HISTORY. 1905

*THE MASTER MUMMER. 1905

*A LOST LEADER. 1906

THE TRAGEDY OF ANDREA. 1906

*THE MALEFACTOR. 1906 (English title MR. WINGRAVE, MILLIONAIRE.)

*BERENICE. 1907

*THE AVENGER. 1907 (English title THE CONSPIRATORS.)

*THE GREAT SECRET. 1908 (English title THE SECRET.)

*THE GOVERNORS. 1908

†THE DISTRIBUTORS. 1908 (English title GHOSTS OF SOCIETY.)

*THE MISSIONER. 1908

*†THE KINGDOM OF EARTH. 1909 (English title THE BLACK WATCHER.)

*JEANNE OF THE MARSHES. 1909

*THE ILLUSTRIOUS PRINCE. 1910

*†PASSERS BY. 1910

*THE LOST AMBASSADOR. 1910 (English title THE MISSING DELORA.)

*†THE GOLDEN WEB. 1911

*THE MOVING FINGER. 1911 (English title A FALLING STAR.)

*HAVOC. 1911

*†THE COURT OF ST. SIMON. 1912

*THE LIGHTED WAY. 1912

*THE TEMPTING OF TAVERNAKE. 1912

*THE MISCHIEF MAKER. 1913

*THE DOUBLE LIFE OF MR. ALFRED BURTON. 1913

*THE WAY OF THESE WOMEN. 1914

*A PEOPLE'S MAN. 1914

**THE VANISHED MESSENGER. 1914

THE BLACK BOX. 1915 (Novelization of photoplay, published by Grosset & Dunlap.)

**THE DOUBLE TRAITOR. 1915

**MR. GREX OF MONTE CARLO. 1915

**THE KINGDOM OF THE BLIND. 1916

*THE HILLMAN. 1917

*THE CINEMA MURDER. 1917 (English title THE OTHER ROMILLY.)

**THE PAWNS COUNT. 1918

- **THE ZEPPELIN'S PASSENGER. 1918 (English title MR. LESSINGHAM GOES HOME.)
- **THE WICKED MARQUIS. 1919
- **THE BOX WITH BROKEN SEALS. 1919 (English title THE STRANGE CASE OF MR. JOCELYN THEW.)
- **THE CURIOUS QUEST. 1919 (English title THE AMAZING QUEST OF MR. ERNEST BLISS.)
- **THE GREAT IMPERSONATION. 1920
- **THE DEVIL'S PAW. 1920
- **THE PROFITEERS. 1921
- *JACOB'S LADDER. 1921
- **NOBODY'S MAN. 1921
- **THE EVIL SHEPHERD. 1922
- **THE GREAT PRINCE SHAN. 1922
- **THE MYSTERY ROAD. 1923
- **THE WRATH TO COME. 1924
- **THE PASSIONATE QUEST. 1924
- **STOLEN IDOLS. 1925
- **GABRIEL SAMARA, PEACEMAKER. 1925
- **THE GOLDEN BEAST. 1926
- **PRODIGALS OF MONTE CARLO. 1926
- **HARVEY GARRARD'S CRIME. 1926
- **THE INTERLOPER. 1927 (English title THE EX-DUKE.)
- **MISS BROWN OF X. Y. O. 1927
- **THE LIGHT BEYOND. 1928
- **THE FORTUNATE WAYFARER. 1928
- **MATORNI'S VINEYARD. 1928
- **THE TREASURE HOUSE OF MARTIN HEWS. 1929
- **THE GLENLITTEN MURDER. 1929
- **THE MILLION POUND DEPOSIT. 1930
- **THE LION AND THE LAMB. 1930
- **UP THE LADDER OF GOLD. 1931
- **SIMPLE PETER CRADD. 1931
- **THE MAN FROM SING SING. 1932 (English title MORAN CHAMBERS SMILED.)
- **THE OSTREKOFF JEWELS. 1932
- **MURDER AT MONTE CARLO. 1933
- **JEREMIAH AND THE PRINCESS. 1933
- **THE GALLOWS OF CHANCE. 1934
- **THE MAN WITHOUT NERVES. 1934 (English title THE BANK MANAGER.)

**THE STRANGE BOARDERS OF PALACE CRESCENT. 1934

**THE SPY PARAMOUNT. 1934

SHORT-STORY COLLECTIONS

Of these 32 collections of short stories, 21 of which have been issued in book form in the United States, most of the volumes are series with sustained interest in which one group of characters appear throughout the various stories.

*THE LONG ARM OF MANNISTER. 1908 (English title THE LONG ARM.)

**PETER RUFF AND THE DOUBLE-FOUR. 1912 (English title THE DOUBLE-FOUR.)

FOR THE QUEEN. 1912

*THOSE OTHER DAYS. 1912

MR. LAXWORTHY'S ADVENTURES. 1913

THE AMAZING PARTNERSHIP. 1914

*AN AMIABLE CHARLATAN. 1915 (English title THE GAME OF LIBERTY.)

MYSTERIES OF THE RIVIERA. 1916

AARON RODD, DIVINER. 1920

AMBROSE LAVENDALE, DIPLOMAT. 1920

HON. ALGERNON KNOX, DETECTIVE. 1920

*THE SEVEN CONUNDRUMS. 1923

**MICHAEL'S EVIL DEEDS. 1923

**THE INEVITABLE MILLIONAIRES. 1923

*THE TERRIBLE HOBBY OF SIR JOSEPH LONDE. 1924

*THE ADVENTURES OF MR. JOSEPH P. CRAY. 1925

THE LITTLE GENTLEMAN FROM OKEHAMPSTEAD. 1926

*THE CHANNAY SYNDICATE. 1927

**MR. BILLINGHAM, THE MARQUIS AND MADELON. 1927

*MADAME AND HER TWELVE VIRGINS. 1927

**NICHOLAS GOADE, DETECTIVE. 1927

THE EXPLOITS OF PUDGY PETE. 1928

CHRONICLES OF MELHAMPTON. 1928

THE HUMAN CHASE. 1929

JENNERTON & Co. 1929

**WHAT HAPPENED TO FORESTER. 1929

**SLANE'S LONG SHOTS. 1930.

**GANGSTER'S GLORY. 1931 (English title INSPECTOR DICKENS RETIRES.)

**SINNERS BEWARE. 1931

****CROOKS IN THE SUNSHINE. 1932**

****THE EX-DETECTIVE. 1933**

****GENERAL BESSERLEY'S PUZZLE BOX. 1935**

OMNIBUS VOLUMES

****CLOWNS AND CRIMINALS: The Oppenheim Omnibus. 1931**
containing

MICHAEL'S EVIL DEEDS

PETER RUFF AND THE DOUBLE-FOUR

RECALLED BY THE DOUBLE-FOUR

JENNERTON & Co.

AARON RODD, DIVINER

[The cheap edition contains only the first four books]

(English title THE OPPENHEIM OMNIBUS: Forty-one Stories
containing

MICHAEL'S EVIL DEEDS

THE DOUBLE-FOUR

MR. BILLINGHAM, THE MARQUIS AND MADELON

AARON RODD, DIVINER)

****SHUDDERS AND THRILLS: The Second Oppenheim Omnibus. 1932**
containing

THE EVIL SHEPHERD

GHOSTS OF SOCIETY

THE AMAZING PARTNERSHIP

THE CHANNAY SYNDICATE

THE HUMAN CHASE

SECRET SERVICE OMNIBUS. 1932
containing

MISS BROWN OF X. Y. O.

THE WRATH TO COME

MATORNI'S VINEYARD

THE GREAT IMPERSONATION

GABRIEL SAMARA

TRAVEL

**THE QUEST FOR WINTER SUNSHINE. 1927

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *General Besserley's Puzzle Box* by E. Phillips (Edward Phillips) Oppenheim]