

JEREMIAH

AND THE

PRINCESS

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E.  
PHILLIPS  
OPPENHEIM



E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

LITTLE,  
BROWN  
AND  
COMPANY

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*Title:* Jeremiah and the Princess

*Date of first publication:* 1933

*Author:* E. Phillips (Edward Phillips) Oppenheim (1866-1946)

*Date first posted:* Sep. 13, 2018

*Date last updated:* Sep. 13, 2018

Faded Page eBook #20180921

This ebook was produced by: Al Haines, Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

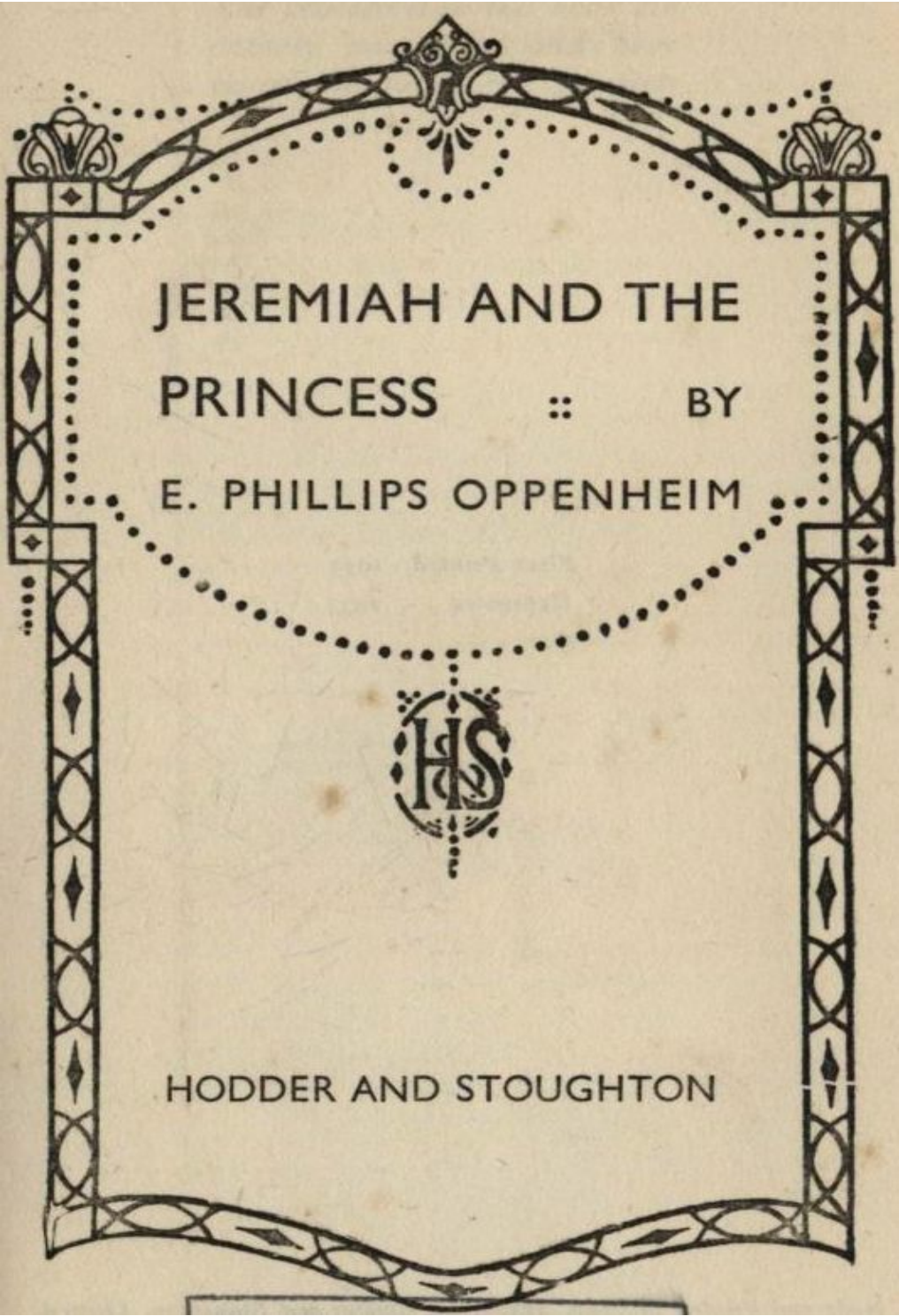
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JEREMIAH AND THE  
PRINCESS :: BY  
E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM



HODDER AND STOUGHTON

*First Printed 1933*  
*Reprinted 1933*

*Made and Printed in Great Britain for Hodder and Stoughton, Limited, by Ebenezer Baylis and Son, Ltd., The Trinity Press, Worcester, and London.*

*The characters in this book are entirely imaginary, and have no relation to any living person*



## CHAPTER I

From the moment of his arrival at the Hansard place on Long Island, even before he had turned in at the pillared gates, disfigured by their leering gryphons, Jere Strole had been haunted by a quaint but persistent idea that this was to be unlike any other country house visit he had ever before paid. Perhaps the sequel to his presentiment was conveyed in that question he overheard whilst lounging on the terrace a few minutes after his arrival. The soft, drawling voice which came to him from the room a few feet behind was intriguing, not only because of its slightly drawn-out quality but also because of its distinctly foreign accent.

“You seem to have collected a wonderful party of young men here, Alice. Are they all as incredibly rich as they appear to be?”

His hostess’ high-pitched voice with its faintly apologetic note sounded to Jere for the first time in his life a little strident.

“This is not Europe, you must remember, Marya. Here one has to be rich in order to do anything at all.”

“And who of all of them has the most money?”

“Jere Strole, I should say.”

“What strange name was that?”

“Jere Strole, my dear. Jeremiah Vavasour Strole he was christened, but you won’t hear him called anything but ‘Jere’ round here.”

“I do not remember him.”

“You have not met him yet. He has only just arrived. I expect he is somewhere about on the terrace.”

Jere, being a young man with a fine sense of punctilio, rose promptly to his feet and disclosed himself upon the threshold of the long suite of rooms which led out on to the terrace. Alice Hansard, his hostess, a fluffy-haired, elegant little matron still in the early twenties, was talking to a girl who was a stranger to him. There had been ready words of greeting upon his lips, which somehow or other never found form. For a few moments he was absorbed, his momentary irritation evaporated. The question had seemed to him sordid, but there was nothing sordid about the appearance of the girl who had asked it. His first impressions of her were too vivid to be anything but slightly confused. He only realised that she was inclined to be small, that her figure was still immature, that she had the flawless ivory complexion and silky lashes of Eastern Europe and soft brown eyes of unusual size. As to her expression, at that particular moment he was not sure that it pleased him. She had an air of almost too great reserve, and the mouth was a trifle over-supercilious.

“Say, you’re talking some, aren’t you, Alice?” he protested in his full, pleasant voice. “If you only knew the truth, I had to borrow the petrol to bring me down here! Where’s the rest of the crowd?”

“My dear Jere,” was the remorseful reply, “I am so terribly sorry. I forgot that everyone had gone sailing to-day. Too hot for tennis, they said. However, there are compensations for you. Behold the man arriving with cool drinks for the exhausted traveller, and I want to present you to a school friend of mine. Mr. Jeremiah Strole—the Princess Marya of Pletz.”

The girl held out her hand. She was entirely unembarrassed.

“Is it possible that you heard my very stupid question?”

“Sure. I heard Alice’s reply too. You can always depend upon her for false information. She is far too sweet and frivolous ever to know what she’s talking about.”

An elderly lady, inclined to be stout, with aristocratic features but with masses of ill-arranged and unfortunately yellow hair, emerged from one of the further rooms and, walking with the help of a black ebony stick, approached them. She, too, spoke with a distinctly foreign accent, although it differed a great deal from the Princess’ inasmuch as it was guttural rather than Latin.

“I hear voices,” she declared. “I hear also the chink of that delightful ice. I awake from my sleep and I come to join you. Another young man, I see. Dear me, it reminds me, this, of my younger days in Vienna!”

“Jere, let me present you to the Baroness,” his hostess said. “Mr. Jeremiah Strole—the Baroness de Sturگیwil.”

Jere acknowledged the introduction suitably.

“I have met your husband, I believe, Baroness,” he said. “He dined with my father in New York one night. They were talking pictures half the evening.”

“Ach!” she exclaimed with interest. “It is your father then who has that very marvellous private collection. Yes, I have heard my husband speak of that visit. Your father promised to call when he came to Washington, but I do not remember that he has done so.”

“My father seldom leaves New York now,” Jere confided. “We have a small place near here where we used to spend the summers, but it gets more difficult every year to induce him to leave the city, even for a night.”

“Come along, everybody,” Alice Hansard called out. “You must be thirsty after your drive down, Jere.”

They sauntered out on to the most wonderful terrace ever built, with a great circular front overlooking the flower gardens and the sea.

“Say what you want, you people,” their hostess begged. “Jere will take a highball, I know, and I am sure you will have orange juice, Marya. What about you, Baroness?”

“Orange juice, that I will not,” the latter declared, sinking into an easy-chair and producing a fan from her very capacious bag. “I shall take the special cocktail that your good *maître d’hôtel* prepares for me. Where are all your guests, my dear Mrs. Hansard?”

“Some of them are playing golf, but the others are all sailing somewhere. They decided that it was too hot for tennis. We shall get our evening breeze in a minute or two, though. It comes always from the water about this time.”

“Ach, I feel it already,” the Baroness declared contentedly. “Soon I shall need my fan no longer. This is the one country house in America, my dear Mrs. Hansard, which I love. You have defeated the mosquitoes, you have pleasant guests and you understand what the Baron calls the art of moderation. I am of the old school, but I am also modern. I have lived in too many different capitals not to understand that there is no universal code or view of life. At the same time I am thankful to say that I can still be sometimes shocked. Here I am not.”

“It is that dear old Tom of mine,” Alice Hansard murmured. “He puts the brake on whenever he thinks things are getting too rapid. All the same, young people are rather a problem to their poor mothers these days.”

“Gwen is not giving you any trouble, I hope?” Jere inquired anxiously.

“Even in this country,” Alice laughed, “at the age of one year and one month our children trouble their nurses more than their chaperones.”

The Princess leaned a little forward.

“I do not get enough of your delicious breeze,” she complained.

“Take her on to the wharf, Jere,” his hostess suggested. “You will get all of it you want there, and you can watch the others come in.”

Jere rose promptly to his feet.

“Would you care to come, Princess?” he invited. “It is only a hundred yards or so.”

She hesitated for a moment and Jere felt that he would have given a great deal to have known the real reason for that hesitation. Nevertheless, in the end she rose.

“I should like very much to visit the wharf,” she decided, “if Mr. Strole would be so kind. . . .”

The Baroness looked after the two young people through her very powerful lorgnettes.

“A young man of good manners,” she declared. “Good looking, too. He carries himself like our officers did in the old days. Most American young men are good looking enough, but they are too large. I like them of finer mould. Your Mr. Strole pleases me. Tell me about him.”

“There’s not much to tell, I am afraid,” Alice Hansard replied, as she lit a cigarette. “The Stroles are one of our oldest families, and his father is still

nominally head of the famous bank—Vavasour Strole, Incorporated. He has spent most of his youth and middle age in Italy, though, and I do not think he ever goes near Wall Street now. Jere did the usual things at College—nothing brilliant that I ever heard of. He is going in for diplomacy, I believe.”

“Not the banking?” the Baroness queried.

Alice shook her head.

“There is too much money already,” she yawned. “Jere startled everyone in his younger days by a remarkable capacity for languages. I remember when we were children together at Biarritz he used to chatter away just like a native.”

“Is he attached anywhere at present?”

“Not for the moment. He has had two of those trying-out jobs down in South America, and he’s waiting now for something in Europe.”

“I like his type,” the Baroness declared. “He pleases me. I like his soft voice. I should like him next me at dinner.”

“Can’t be managed to-night,” her hostess regretted. “De Brett, the Belgian Ambassador, you know, an old friend of your husband’s, I believe, is dining—coming over from Joe Dimsdale’s place with some others. I’ve worn myself out with the name cards. I can manage the domestic article, but it is so difficult with you distinguished foreigners. To-morrow night you can have him with pleasure.”

“My dear, that will do excellently,” the Baroness agreed. “It will give me pleasure to improve my acquaintance with the young man. Christian, too, will be interested to hear of him. He spoke of his father as a very remarkable old gentleman, and Christian, as you know, is sometimes a trifle difficult on this side of the Atlantic.”

“Everyone who has artistic tastes like the Baron loves Vavasour Strole,” Alice Hansard remarked. “I’m rather afraid of him myself. I know he looks upon me as a little ignoramus, but it can’t be helped. I love life just as we have it out here. Something doing all the time—golf, picnics, sailing, tennis, dancing. I love it when one hasn’t a moment to spare. I have no time for abstractions.”

The Baroness smiled. The breeze was delicious and she was feeling very content.

“The least troublesome part of the world is like you, my dear,” she murmured.

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“So you are in diplomacy?” Marya asked her companion, as she picked her delicate and tentative way in impossible shoes along the gravel path.

“A beginner,” he confessed, with a deprecatory gesture.

“And it is your father who is the famous banker?”

“Sure. Dad’s the head of Vavasour Strole,” he assented. “I fancy he knows

more about pictures than money making, though.”

“But he is very rich?”

“Well, you see,” Jere explained, “it was my grandfather who made the money—he and his father before him.”

“That is more the way things happen in England, is it not?”

“I suppose so,” he admitted.

“In this country it interests me more to meet the men who have themselves achieved something,” she confided.

“I’m afraid that puts me off the map,” he sighed.

She paused for a moment at a turn in the path, and looked at him speculatively. Jere had as much aplomb as most young men of his years, but he felt slightly uncomfortable at her steady, appraising scrutiny.

“You are quite young,” she observed.

“I am twenty-four. That’s getting on for being middle-aged in New York.”

She smiled—flaming red lips which parted slowly, a splash of soft, but vivid colour untouched by the hideous weapons of the beauty parlour, a fascinating contrast to the lustrous pallor of her cheeks.

“Twenty-four is not very old,” she reflected. “If you had been following the fortunes of your family business you might soon have become famous. A diplomat has to achieve age and dignity before he counts for very much in the world.”

Jere was inclined to be irritated. For some incomprehensible reason he felt that he was being disapproved of.

“You don’t think much of diplomacy as a career, then?”

“It has been the greatest of all careers,” she acknowledged. “It may become so again. At present—no. In this new world which has arrived since the war it is only money that counts.”

“You depress me,” he confided, with a note of sarcasm in his tone.

She glanced at him and he felt himself rebuked. For a few moments he was also ignored. They had reached the wharf and she looked away to where a tall-masted yacht, still some distance out, was heeling over to catch the wind. The boards under their feet were hot, the breeze only fitful. The voices of the passengers on the in-coming boat travelled loud and strident to their ears. The Princess turned round and pointed to a thatched summer-house on the grassy slope which led to the tennis lawns.

“We will go there,” she said to Jere. “These friends of Alice’s are charming but very noisy. We can watch them disembark and reach the house the other way.”

He turned to follow, vaguely flattered by the selective preference which excluded him from the little gathering who had failed to please. He watched the effortless grace of her movements as she climbed, caught her flash of

something unexpectedly provocative in the eyes as she glanced over her shoulder, and set his teeth. This thing, the threat of which he had felt in the first few seconds of their meeting, should not happen. He dragged into the foreground of his memory that illuminating query, the first words he had heard from her lips, so callous, so calculating:

“Who of all of them has the most money?”

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They pushed their way through the clustering bougainvillea twined around sweet-smelling ramblers, and found two basket chairs which Jere dragged out on to the loggia. The breeze came now with a salt tang from the Atlantic. She closed her parasol and sat for a moment with half-closed eyes.

“Why do you think so much of money?” he asked bluntly.

“I suppose because in my country we have so little of it.”

“I never realised,” he observed, “that Jakovia was a specially poor kingdom.”

“Then it is very apparent that you know nothing about Jakovia,” she told him crushingly.

She watched with lazy interest the drawing nearer of the yacht with its scattered company of white-flannelled passengers. Jere sat frowning and ignored by her side. Again he was conscious of the fact that he had blundered.

“I’m afraid I don’t know much about Jakovia,” he confessed, after a pause. “Must I go and dig up an encyclopædia or won’t you tell me something about the place?”

“Why should I?” she asked. “You cannot possibly be interested.”

“At the present moment,” he assured her fervently, “there is nothing in the world which interests me so much as the well-being of Jakovia.”

She unbent slightly, but there was still coldness in her dangerous monosyllable.

“Why?”

“Because Jakovia is your country.”

Her forehead was slightly wrinkled with the slow uplifting of her eyebrows.

“Are you not a trifle obvious?” she inquired tonelessly.

“The truth is generally obvious. I have developed a sincere interest in Jakovia. I should like to know why it is a poor country.”

“It is easily understood,” she told him. “Upon the land and under the land there is great wealth—a vast treasure. Alas, it lies there undisturbed. Jakovia has not the money to sink oil-wells, to buy the machinery for mining, to build sawmills and turn its forests into timber by modern means. Therefore the peasants are almost starving and the cities are only half populated.”

“The King is rather a bad lad, too, isn’t he?” Jere asked.

She flashed a quick glance of disapproval at him.

"You must remember, if you please," she said stiffly, "that King Phillip is my cousin."

"I beg your pardon," Jere apologised. "How was I to know?"

"I forgot that I was in America," she conceded. "In Europe one knows those things in one's own circle as a matter of course. I will admit that Phillip is not a good king. He thinks too much of himself and his pleasures and too little of the grievous condition of his people. For that he may some day have to pay."

"You live in the country?" he asked.

"No one who was born in Jakovia," she replied, "could ever live anywhere else unless their duties necessitated it. I have a palace there, but I have not been able to occupy it during the last few months."

"Is it permitted to ask why not?"

"There have been political troubles in my country," she confided sadly, "the nature of which I cannot explain. You may have read something of them in the journals. It seemed wiser for me to keep aloof for a time. Besides, I wished very much to come to the United States. New York, they tell me, has become the world's storehouse of gold. I wanted to meet some of these merchant princes whom I have read about."

Jere was frankly intrigued. He had travelled in Italy and on the French Riviera, and he had spent several seasons in London. Titles had lost their glamour for him, but a princess whose presence or absence from the capital city of her birth was a matter of moment seemed to him in these days a very picturesque anachronism. Marya herself too, notwithstanding her grave demureness, which had its own peculiar charm, seemed little more than a grown-up child.

"How old are you?" he asked.

It was not Jere's good day. Again he saw the drawing together of those silky eyebrows and detected the note of resentment in her stiff reply.

"It is not customary to ask such direct questions in Europe. If one is curious there are books which gratify one's curiosity. . . . I see that our fellow guests are landing."

The yacht had reached its moorings, and its occupants, some ten or twelve in number, had arrived at the wharf in a very beautiful motor boat and were now disembarking. The Princess and Jere watched them, at first indifferently enough.

"The same old bunch," Jere murmured. "The Van Heyden twins, Stella Seabright, John and Charlie Boyd, Tom and——"

"The good God!"

Jere broke off suddenly, startled, almost terrified, by the cry which had

escaped his companion's lips. It was an exclamation not only of surprise but of fear, not only of fear but of terror. He turned towards her in amazement. Her lips were parted, her wide-opened eyes fixed upon the wharf were luminous with a curious mixture of emotions. She had the air of one who looks on unpropitious things.

"What is it, Princess?" he asked breathlessly.

She pointed downwards. Her voice sounded like a dead force.

"Who are those people in the dinghy just landing?" she asked. "They came from the yacht too."

Jere, who had been intent upon recognising his friends, noticed the others for the first time.

"Why, that's De Brett," he exclaimed. "Count de Brett, the Belgian Ambassador, who is dining here to-night."

"They are not staying in the house."

"I'll tell you what must have happened," he explained. "Our crowd put in at the Dimsdales' place for a drink and brought over the men who are dining. There is another small motor boat behind, you see, with two servants and suit cases."

She continued, speaking half to herself.

"That man who is stepping on to the wharf now! It is—Michael!"

"He's a stranger to me," Jere confessed, shading his eyes with his hand. "No, he isn't, though; he was with Joe at the Racquets Club yesterday afternoon. A fellow named Grovner or Grogner; I didn't get the name very clearly. Played quite a decent game of squash. A foreigner of some sort."

Marya seemed scarcely to be listening. Her eyes were fixed upon that one particular person below. He had joined the rest of the party now and was talking to one of the Van Heyden twins, a slim, distinguished figure in his well-cut yachting clothes—very pale compared to the sunburnt crowd by whom he was surrounded—with an immovable monocle in his eye and an unmistakable military carriage about his movements.

"How dared he?" Marya muttered, and this time it was anger which predominated in her tone.

"Someone you know?" Jere ventured.

She rose to her feet.

"The way to the house—by the tennis courts?" she asked. "Is it quicker than the other?"

"Half the distance," Jere assured her.

"Let us go then, please," she begged. "I should like to reach the house before the others. I must talk to my aunt."

Jere fell into step by her side. The precise state of his feelings at that moment should have been illuminating to him if he had been given to self-



analysis. The slight tremble of her lips as she had risen had done the mischief. He was filled with an insane desire to throw this intruding foreigner into the Sound!

“Princess,” he appealed to her earnestly, “you will forgive me, but is there anything I can do?”

She shook her head.

“Nothing. I am unduly distressed perhaps at the coming of this man. He is an enemy.”

“I would not care what he was,” Jere persisted. “I will get up a row with him if you like after dinner—fix it so that we both have to leave.”

“But you must not think of doing that,” she cried in alarm. “That is just what would please him. He is a wonderful swordsman and a deadly shot. He killed his greatest friend in a duel. He would have had to leave the army when he was a young man if he had been anyone else’s son.”

Despite himself Jere grinned. The idea of a duel at the Hansard place on Long Island on one of the lawns or down on the shore appealed irresistibly to his sense of humour.

“He couldn’t get away with that stuff here. We might show him a new form of fighting, though,” Jere added hopefully. “We don’t understand duelling any more than we do cock-fighting, but we can take care of ourselves if there is anyone about who means mischief.”

She almost smiled as she looked up at him. His complete and utter confidence seemed somehow reassuring.

“Do not think of quarrelling with him on my account, please,” she begged. “He is a very dangerous man.”

“I’m not going to have you bothered,” Jere declared doggedly.

This time the smile really broke from her lips. They were near the house, behind the shelter of its southern wing, and she slackened her speed.

“You need have no fear,” she assured him. “He will not presume to approach me unless I give him permission. The evil which he does is always in the background. I feel that there is something poisonous in the atmosphere when he is near at hand. And behind all that,” she went on, the smile fading from her face, “he is one of the figures in a great tragedy which might bring destruction upon my country at any moment. You will forgive me that I hurry away,” she concluded, as they reached one of the long French windows leading into the house.

“Sure,” he answered. “Can’t you promise, though, that you will tell me more about Jakovia some time this evening?”

There was a shadow of evasion in her gesture.

“Perhaps,” she murmured. “Perhaps not. There is a great deal which might interest you. The trouble is, though, that there are parts of her underground

history which keep us all shivering and yet they can never be told to anyone.”

## CHAPTER II

By chance Jere witnessed the greeting between the Princess and the man whose arrival seemed to have so greatly upset her. He was a few minutes late in descending, and most of the guests had already assembled in the lounge when he made his appearance. Joe Dimsdale, whose father was a director of the Strole Bank, called to him.

“Hello, Jere. Come and join us,” he invited. “You’re staying in the house, of course, so you don’t have to go rushing after Alice. You remember Colonel Grogner?”

“Sure,” Jere answered. “Met him with you at the Racquets Club the other day, didn’t I? A very nice game you played too, Colonel.”

“Very good of you to say so,” was the pleasantly spoken reply. “In games, however, as I have found to my cost, we foreigners are usually at a disadvantage with you.”

A footman handed them cocktails and there was a moment’s pause. Jere took advantage of the opportunity to study his new acquaintance carefully. Grogner was a man of slightly over medium height, with a good figure and excellent, if somewhat stiff, carriage. He was older than he had seemed in the distance. His face was oval in shape, and the fixed monocle served at any rate as a disguise for his natural expression. His brown hair, sprinkled with grey and brushed straight back from his forehead, was skimpy in places, but it remained the only positive indication of his age. The lines at the corners of his lips took the upward turn of cruelty, otherwise, Jere decided, his appearance was harmless enough. He spoke English perfectly and with only the slightest accent.

“How do you mean, at a disadvantage?” Jere asked.

“Well, for one thing, I do not think that we possess your aptitude for games,” Grogner explained. “And for another, our military service interferes a good deal with our pursuit of them. All the spare time of our young men for two or three years goes to their training.”

“A rotten waste of time,” Joe Dimsdale observed.

“If you had frontiers to defend you might not think so,” Grogner reminded him. “I believe that during a certain period of the war our townsmen of Pletz slept in greater security when they remembered the training of the lads who were up in the mountains to defend them.”

There was a certain amount of commotion at the further end of the room. The Baroness had made her appearance with Marya, and Alice Hansard, who had been awaiting her, hurried forward with Count de Brett by her side. Joe

Dimsdale and Colonel Grogner, the only other guests from outside who were dining, followed in their train. De Brett was greeted as an old friend, Dimsdale as a neighbour and intimate of their hostess. Alice turned to Grogner.

“You probably know Colonel Grogner,” she said, “as he comes from your part of the world, Marya.”

Grogner clicked his heels and bowed from a few feet away. The Princess watched him with unchanging expression. When he approached she held her hand so high that he had scarcely to bend his head to touch it with his lips.

“We are a long way from home, Princess,” he said. “Nevertheless it is a great pleasure to greet you here.”

“I see you in Pletz so seldom,” Marya replied coldly, “that I was not sure whether you still considered it your home.”

“Surely, Princess! I was born there and I have fought with the Jakovian army. I only retired at the King’s urgent request to take up the post of Chief of the Police.”

“One forgets,” the Princess murmured without change of countenance.

Grogner turned to the Baroness, whose reception was somewhat more gracious, and Marya at once moved on. For a single moment Jere believed that she was coming to him. Words of greeting were already upon his lips, but without even a smile or a glance she passed on and joined a little group in the background. Joe Dimsdale strolled up to Jere.

“Say, they must live in a funny way over in those Eastern European countries,” he observed. “I thought two people coming from a one-horse State like Jakovia would have fallen upon one another’s necks, meeting right away out here. Seemed more like a question of daggers with the little Princess.”

“Princesses have their fancies, I suppose,” Jere remarked.

“Grogner evidently isn’t one of them! I’ll hand it to him, though, he went through it without flinching. I expect his father doesn’t quite come up to the social standard of court circles.”

Alice Hansard, a flush of annoyance upon her face, came hurrying up and drew Jere on one side.

“Such a nuisance, my dear Jere,” she exclaimed. “You didn’t have any trouble with Marya, did you?”

“Not that I know of,” he replied, with a sinking heart.

“Well, it isn’t like her to upset things at the last moment. This is only a house-party, you know, and absolutely informal, so I put you next her.”

“And she objects?” Jere asked quickly.

Alice hesitated.

“Something like it,” she admitted. “Anyway, you’ll have to have the Van Heydens—you’re fond of them I know. Sorry. It’s upset my whole table and I must go and warn some of the others.”

Jere lit a cigarette and strolled out on to the terrace. He had a sick longing to hurry over to the garage, take out his Packard and drive off to a little bachelor fishing place he possessed sixty miles away. The thought of the noisy Van Heyden girls, whom he had always previously found amusing enough, was suddenly repugnant. His eyes dwelt longingly upon the long, low front of the garage. Suddenly he realised the impossibility of it. In the background he heard the butler announcing dinner.

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The meal, served on the southernmost of the wide sweeping terraces, was certainly a gay and festive one. The table itself was a dream of flowers and hidden lights, and fairy lanterns were hanging all around in the pillared spaces. A small orchestra, the most popular in New York at the moment, was playing behind a screen of flowering shrubs, and dancing between the courses began almost as soon as the cold lobster soup was served. Everybody was gay, and Jere, after an abstracted few moments, set his teeth and developed the party-spirit to his hostess' complete satisfaction. He danced with nearly every one at the table, but towards Marya, who danced only once with her host, he scarcely glanced at all. In the middle of a tango he asked a question of Alice Hansard.

"Tell me," he begged, "why do you suppose the Princess asked you who was the richest young man here?"

"I should imagine from the idlest curiosity," she replied. "I don't see what else it could have been. If it had been any other girl, of course, one might have had a guess, but Marya is terribly proud and, for what it is worth, she would succeed King Phillip if he died without any children. A wretched life, I should think, but there you are."

Jere gritted his teeth and went for it. Alice, after all, was an old pal and one of the best.

"You don't suppose then that she'd marry a commoner?"

Alice shook her head firmly.

"Cut it out, my dear Jere," she advised. "I know Marya and I know how sweet she is, but she's perfectly icy about some things. Did you see the way she received Grogner?"

"I'll say I did," Jere agreed. "So did everyone else. What's wrong with him, I wonder?"

"How can one guess? His father is Prime Minister of Jakovia, her own country, and they tell me that this young man was a very distinguished soldier, and could have been Commander-in-Chief if he had chosen. Not that the Jakovian army amounts to anything, I suppose, but still—there you are. Jakovia is Marya's pet hobby."

They paused for a moment as the music died away. Mrs. Hansard cast a hostess' glance towards the table, and finding that everything was well, led

Jere to the end of the terrace.

“You’re such a man of the world, Jere, with your life at Washington and your little spurt into diplomacy and all that—you can’t think of anything you could have said to upset Marya, can you?”

“Not a thing,” he declared gloomily. “She didn’t seem to be particularly what one might call sympathetic—not compared with our kids at any rate—but we got on fairly well until she saw that fellow Grogner arrive. After that she seemed to pass away from me into another world.”

“And you’ve really fallen for her?”

“Sure,” he confessed. “All the same, what’s the use of it? When a girl takes the trouble to get her place at dinner changed rather than sit next you, it doesn’t seem very encouraging, does it?”

Alice shook her pretty head. She was a very sympathetic person.

“I should cut it out, Jere,” she advised him. “There’s obviously something wrong between you, and in any case what would be the good of it unless you’re just out for a few days’ flirtation?”

“People of royal birth have married commoners,” he ventured.

“Not quite commoners, my dear. And in any case Marya isn’t one of that sort. She’s as beautiful as a picture, and she has temperament and all that kind of thing—there’s gipsy blood in the royal family of Jakovia, you know—but she’s as proud as Lucifer himself.”

“It’s the wrong sort of pride,” Jere said sternly.

Alice patted his hand.

“Try and persuade her so, then,” she suggested, leading him back to the table. “I warn you, though, you’ll only be asking for trouble.”

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The festivities continued until a late hour. There was dancing on the terrace, billiards indoors, flirting in the gardens, and cool drinks in abundance everywhere. But no Marya. Jere, in despair, sought out his hostess.

“I’m not getting a chance,” he complained. “What have you done with the Princess?”

Alice shook her head at him helplessly.

“Why can’t you flirt with me or one of those nice Van Heyden twins, you silly boy?” she demanded. “I wish I hadn’t asked Marya here at all. I don’t think I should have thought of it, only I heard that she was coming to stay with her aunt, and the Baroness—although she is a royalist all right—is no extremist. She never gives any trouble.”

“But where is the Princess?” Jere persisted.

“My dear,” his hostess told him, “she went to her room two hours ago. She was most punctilious. She had that one dance with Tom and after dinner one with Count de Brett. Directly afterwards she went to her room, and if you ask

me why, I believe it was to avoid dancing with any of the others.”

“She’ll dance with me before I go,” Jere said grimly.

“Well, I wish you luck,” Alice declared. “In the meantime, as Marya is probably by this time asleep, hadn’t you better cut in on Stella and Tom? Stella hates dancing with a married man—wearing out shoe leather for nothing, as she told Tom before they started.”

Jere accepted the hint and did his duty. The arrival of a carloadful of young men, however, week-ending at a neighbouring Country Club, soon set him free again. He pulled a basket chair up to the edge of the balcony looking down upon the sea. Here, in the midst of all the gaiety, he seemed to have found complete seclusion. He was round the corner from the bar and just outside the compass of the dance music, and the young people who were in a more flirtatious mood seemed to have sought the greater privacy of the grounds. There were two even, as he saw, leaning back in his chair, climbing the grassy slope to the thatched summer-house overlooking the Sound. The man paused for a moment—it might have been to light a cigarette—the two fell out of line. Jere felt his heart give a sudden jump. He leaned forward, his hands gripping the edge of the stone balcony. The girl was standing almost in the path of the moonlight. Surely there wasn’t anyone else so slim, so youthful, amongst the guests! He recognised the man—a cousin of Tom Hansard’s—and his forehead suddenly went damp. They were going into the summer-house—Sidney Hansard, whom even his sister-in-law called a roué, and——

He heard the sound of light footsteps behind, but he was too absorbed to notice them. He was conscious of the perfume of lilies, but even that was powerless to disturb his moment of agony. Then he heard a voice and he turned slowly round. Marya was standing by his side.

“I came to see whether you would care to dance with me,” she asked him.

For a moment his poise had gone. He stared at her blankly. Then he remembered that other carload of young people—a girl, not yet even a debutante, about whom everyone was talking—and once more the blood went singing through his veins. Those few seconds had taught him something, however. It was no longer possible to deceive himself. Something in life was fixed. It was the impossible for him or nothing.

“I should like to dance with you better than anything in the world,” he assured her.

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It was half an hour before they returned to the same place, Jere bringing an extra chair and two long tumblers in which the ice tinkled as he walked. He arranged the latter on the edge of the balcony and drew the chairs into the shadow.

“You are the best dancer I have ever known,” she told him graciously.

“And I have realised the greatest pleasure in dancing I have ever felt.”

She listened to the distant music, to the chirping of the insects in the gardens beneath, she looked at the red tips of the cigarettes dotted like stationary fireflies at every corner, and she sighed.

“Life out here seems very gay and easy,” she reflected.

“Then why won’t you try it?” he asked.

She looked at him questioningly. Jere kept his head.

“I mean,” he explained, “if your aunt decides not to go to Europe, why don’t you stay here for a few months?”

She shook her head.

“Whatever happens, I must return to Europe myself,” she said. “I have important affairs to look after.”

“You are very young,” he ventured, “to take your responsibilities so seriously.”

“The sense of responsibility,” she confided, “has been with nearly every member of my family for many generations. It is in our hearts and our blood. We cannot escape from it if we would. We have to follow where it leads. I can understand,” she went on, “out here, where life is entirely different, it must be hard to appreciate this business of hereditary succession. You must find it hard to understand the influence of an ancestry of a thousand years. Nevertheless, you are all so cultivated and appreciative that I think you can almost visualise it for others.”

“I don’t want to appreciate it and I don’t want to visualise it,” Jere declared stubbornly. “If I were a prince I would be quite reconciled to your being a princess. As I am only an ordinary person—well, I wish that you were only an ordinary person, too.”

“But you are not an ordinary person,” she objected. “You have great wealth and that means that you have great power. You have also culture and understanding. You could do great things if you had the necessary ambition.”

“Could I become a prince?”

“Am I a fairy?” she smiled.

“I think that you must be,” he told her. “You seem to have changed everything in my life so easily and yet so irretrievably.”

He turned to look at her, leaning back in her chair, only half to be seen in the partially obscured moonlight, so perfect in her posture, so slim and elegant in her outline, so like an opening flower in the freshness and sweetness of her. Her fingers were resting upon the arm of the chair. He conquered the temptation to hold them, however tenderly, with a prodigious effort.

“Is it my fancy,” she asked, breaking that—to him—dangerous pause, “or are we inclined to talk foolishly?”

He struggled against the swimming of his senses. There would be other



nights, he told himself. Everything, he knew, was to be lost by a single false gesture.

“Let us come down to earth then, if you insist,” he proposed. “Tell me why you changed your place at table.”

“It pleased me to do it,” she answered somewhat coldly.

“But why didn’t you wish to sit next me?” he persisted.

It seemed to him that she receded even further away.

“If you wish to continue on terms of friendship with me,” she said, “you must not ask so many questions. I am not accustomed to them. I do what I think well and what pleases me.”

He remained silent. He was in reality a very spoiled young man himself and he was undergoing an entirely new experience. She looked at his face and laughed softly.

“You are in a bad temper,” she declared. “You had better go away and find one of those other young ladies who are tired of dancing and who would like to wander in the garden.”

“I don’t want to do anything of the sort,” he replied. “You must admit, though,” he went on, “that you are rather a hard hitter. Let me down gently, please.”

“Very well,” she agreed. “I will spoil you for once. I will answer your question. I did not wish that Colonel Grogner, who had already seen us together on the way up from the summer-house, should imagine that we were on particularly friendly terms. To have had you seated next me would have been unusual and might have indicated something of the sort.”

“And what business is it of Colonel Grogner’s?” Jere demanded.

“You have had all the explanation you are going to have,” she told him. “In two minutes I am going inside. How long are you staying?”

“As long as you are.”

She accepted the reply literally.

“I shall stay for three days. After that my aunt and I are going back for a time to Washington. In the autumn I am hoping that she will come with me to Europe. If I like you as much on the last evening of my visit, and if you humour what I daresay you consider in your own mind to be only my prejudices, I will take you a little way into my confidence on a certain matter.”

“Must you wait until the end of the visit?” he sighed.

She rose to her feet with scarcely a visible effort and gave him her upraised hand.

“It will be best so, I think,” she said. “There is one other thing I must say to you—if between now and then you see anything of Colonel Grogner or receive any messages from him, I beg that you will let me know at once.”

“He is going back to New York to-morrow morning,” Jere confided.

“So he announced,” she replied. “There is nothing, however, to prevent him changing his mind.”

## CHAPTER III

On the last evening of his visit Jere mounted to his rooms to change for dinner, at the accustomed hour, to find his clothes not yet laid out, and Sam Clowes, his valet, in a state of considerable perturbation.

“What’s wrong, Sam?” Jere asked him quickly.

The man stepped behind his master and closed the door. His good-natured, freckled face was damp with perspiration.

“Someone has been through all your things, sir,” he confided. “Must have been since four o’clock. Although you told me I could have the afternoon off I didn’t leave till then.”

“What have they got away with?”

The man looked more puzzled than ever.

“That’s what gets me, sir. Every article of clothing you possess has been out and replaced. Your toilet things have all been ransacked. Although I was only away an hour or so and I have all the keys here in my pocket, your despatch box has been opened, the mattress has been lifted from the bed, the carpets have been lifted and put down again.”

“But what’s missing?” Jere demanded.

“Not a thing, sir, that I’ve been able to discover,” the man acknowledged. “It don’t seem natural somehow. Your jewellery case has been opened, the secret shelf has been looked at, and not a thing taken. Your black pearls and the diamond and onyx studs you bought last time you were in Paris are both there. Everything has been disturbed, but nothing taken away. Of course, I can’t tell about the despatch box.”

Jere drew the green leather case towards him and glanced through its contents. They consisted mostly of writing materials and a few books, but on the top was nearly a thousand dollars in notes.

“Not a thing gone, Sam. A thousand dollars here untouched.”

“Well, what do you know about that?” Sam Clowes demanded, his mouth open and his expression one of blank bewilderment. “I never knew a sneak thief turn down a thousand dollars before.”

Jere grinned good-naturedly.

“Sam,” he inquired, “are you of an adventurous disposition?”

The man responded to his master’s humour.

“I don’t mind a rough-house now and then, sir,” he said, “but I like to understand what’s doing. A robbery that isn’t a robbery at all, kind of leaves one on the mat.”

“I have a conviction,” Jere declared, “that we are coming in for a good deal

of this sort of thing. I felt it on the way down. I felt it as I turned in at the gate.”

“Well, nothing much seems to have happened up till now, sir,” the man remarked, “and I understand that we’re leaving to-morrow.”

“You are quite right, Sam,” his master assented. “We are leaving to-morrow. As to nothing having happened since we arrived here, that is not—strictly speaking—accurate. Furthermore, there remains another night. The night is the time for adventure. Did you pack me a revolver, Sam?”

“Never thought of it, sir,” the man replied. “What would you be wanting with a revolver in a house like this?”

Jere pointed to the dismantled room.

“What about this?”

The man’s face had never quite lost its expression of stupefaction. He shook his head.

“That’s right, sir,” he admitted. “A sneak thief who had nothing to say to a thousand dollars in cash or fifty thousand bucks’ worth of jewellery might have been an ugly customer to deal with. What’s got me beaten, sir, is what was he after if what we had wasn’t good enough for him?”

The dressing bell rang and Jere started.

“Get a move on, Sam,” he ordered. “My bath—quick—and out with my clothes. Short jacket to-night and the opal studs for luck.”

Sam went about his duties with a grimace. He preferred bachelor masters.

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Jere saw no reason for concealing what had happened from his host and hostess. They were naturally bewildered, and Tom Hansard even mounted the stairs and interviewed Sam himself. When he returned he was still more puzzled.

“Say, I can’t get a line on this at all,” he acknowledged. “Some real swell jewellery there—some I’d have lifted myself if I could have done it without being found out—and a thousand dollars in cash! None of ’em good enough for our Raffles. Do you think anyone’s having a joke with you, Jere?”

“Haven’t an idea,” the latter confessed. “The opening of my despatch box is what gets me. It’s some lock that, and the keys have never left my pocket.”

“What about Sam?”

“Safe as the bank,” Jere declared. “Been with us since I was a kid.”

“Do you want me to send for the police?”

“How the mischief can you? There isn’t even a pair of sock suspenders missing! That’s the queer part of it.”

“Queer in more ways than one,” Tom Hansard meditated. “The bloke, whoever he was, knew that he couldn’t be pinched if he didn’t take anything. What do you carry about with you, young fellow, worth more than a thousand

dollars or a set of black pearls?"

"Ask me another," Jere begged, as he listened anxiously to the sound of the dinner gong. . . .

Alice came hurrying over to them from a distant corner of the room. There was a gleam of sympathy in her eyes as she turned to Jere.

"A bad evening for you, I'm afraid, Jere dear," she warned him. "First of all this mysterious raid on your belongings, and now a message from Marya asking to be excused from dining this evening. Stupid headache or something. Your last evening too, isn't it, and hers?"

"Do you mean that she's not coming down to dinner at all?" Jere demanded incredulously.

"I'm afraid that's so. Don't look so furious. You have monopolised her pretty well, you know, up till now. You shall come and sit on my left instead. We are almost alone to-night. I'm rather glad of it for a change."

"You say so," Jere smiled, as he tucked her arm through his, "but you're rushing up to New York to-morrow for the opera, you're going to the Hotwood ball the next night and you're having a hundred people down here next week-end I hear!"

Alice indulged in the wail of all hostesses.

"My dear," she lamented, "these things are forced upon us. . . ."

They were a small company for dinner, and Alice, in the intervals of making conversation with her right-hand neighbour, an elderly judge of solemn deportment and of profound gastronomic devotion, found time to give Jere some good advice.

"Jere," she said, "we've been good pals, haven't we, since we were children? I always liked you. You're a year younger than I am, but I should have married you if you'd asked me during my first year out."

"It isn't fair to tell me that now," Jere complained.

"I don't care," she laughed. "You had your chance, but Tom came along and he did just as well. That's the worst about husbands—they're so terribly alike. I wasn't going to talk about husbands, though. I wanted to talk about you and Marya."

"Well?"

"Any progress?"

"That depends on what you mean by progress," he fenced.

"You know what I mean. Have you stepped over a single obstacle? In plain words—well, you know how it would have been with us girls round here. I won't try you too high. Have you even held her hand?"

"No," Jere admitted.

Alice shook her head in melancholy fashion.

"Such a dear," she murmured, "but such a little icicle. It's all on the surface

too. She isn't really, you know. I wonder you stand for it, Jere."

"I'm fond of her," he declared doggedly. "I never found much fun in this kissing and hugging game with girls just because they were girls."

"You've kissed me," she reminded him.

"I'd do it again if I had the chance," he assured her.

"And Tom only the width of this table away," she sighed. "How dare you say such a thing?"

"Tom wouldn't mind."

"That isn't very flattering for one of us—I'm not sure which! But seriously, Jere, give it up. I tell you that Marya is as likely to form a serious attachment for you or any of our crowd as she is to take the veil, which she once threatened to do."

"I am too deep in," he confessed. "I shall have to go the whole way and take my knock when it comes."

Alice sighed.

"And to think how happy you could make any one of my flock of debutantes!"

"I shall either marry Marya," he announced, "or wait until you are a widow."

"My dear," she confided, "that is ridiculous. Tom is the most marvellously healthy person. He drinks less than any man I know, he does physical jerks in the morning even when we're in New York, he simply glows with health. As for Marya—she has an earthly religion which is stronger than most people's spiritual one. To our way of thinking the rules may seem to be moth-eaten and the whole thing rubbish, but she'll stick to it."

"I think she's afraid of me," Jere declared vaingloriously. "I think that's why she didn't come down to-night."

"Idiot!" his hostess laughed. "She probably didn't wish to administer your *coup de grâce*."

"You're a depressing little pig," Jere told her. "Talk to the judge. He's panting between courses."

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Jere, as he sank into a secluded chair on the balcony, found it hard to feel anything but depressed at the thought of his progress during the last two days. Marya had been only guardedly gracious to him, and but for the exception of that single evening's dancing she had shown him no more favour than the other young men of the party. She played no games, but she had ridden with him once, displaying thereby horsemanship which had won everyone's admiration. She had allowed him to take her for a motor ride, but on that occasion her maid had occupied the coupé. He had taken her sailing and, although she had only accepted charge of the tiller at necessary moments, she

had shown a knowledge of the pastime equal to his own. She had sat with him on the terrace in the evening and had talked pleasantly enough of her own country and its charm, of Paris and Florence, and other of her favourite places, but at the least attempt on his part to introduce a more personal note into the conversation she had become suddenly taciturn. Alice was right, he supposed. He had better do like the other young men, who had no time for such nonsense and who quietly but definitely left her alone. She was utterly out of place here and in this environment. These people were not her people nor their ways hers. Her failure to join the party to-night, her wish to remain isolated in her room, was in itself an admission of her inability to adapt herself to her surroundings and a proof of her lack of interest in him. The Baroness had laughed at the idea of there being anything the matter with her. "Marya must have her whims," had been her sole reply to the many murmurs of disappointment. Jere tried to work himself into a state of indignation. Why should she be allowed to have whims any more than any other girl of her age? And why should she be treated as though she were something apart from other women because she was born a princess of the royal family of a tottering kingdom with no institutions, scanty government and an ignorant peasantry? One wave of the coming spirit of republicanism, and Jakovia as a kingdom would be swept from the face of the earth. It was near at hand too, muttering over the Balkans, growling across the sea. . . .

One of Alice's army of white-lined footmen issued through the French windows of the house and approached Jere. He presented a salver upon which reposed a note. With a thrill of anticipation Jere tore open the envelope and read the few lines in thin, spidery hand-writing.

*Dear Mr. Strole,*

*I have not forgotten my promise, and if you would care to see me again before the breaking up of our pleasant little party I will receive you for a short time in my salon about half-past nine.*

*Sincerely,*

*Marya Pia Jakovia.*

"Tell Her Highness that I will be there," Jere directed.

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Jere came upon his host in the lounge as he was strolling about with one eye always upon the clock.

"What about a highball, young fellow?" the latter suggested.

"Too early if you don't mind, Tom."

"I've been up to your room again. Damned if I can understand it at all. I found your man there, and he showed me the sort of skeleton key that must

have been used upon your Brahma lock. The whole thing seems to me to be pretty mysterious.”

“Beats me entirely,” Jere, who had forgotten all about the affair, confessed.

“By the way, you are still attached to the Foreign Department, I suppose?”

“Waiting for a job,” Jere acknowledged. “They talked about some more South America, but I’ve done my stunt there. It’s Europe or nowhere for me this time.”

“If you’re only waiting for a job,” Hansard meditated, “you hadn’t any secret treaties or papers or anything of that sort with you?”

“They don’t trust us juniors with much of that sort of stuff,” Jere replied, “apart from the fact that I am not attached anywhere at the present moment. No, I hadn’t got a darn thing, Tom. What licks me is—what could anyone imagine my carrying about more valuable than fifty thousand dollars’ worth of jewellery and a thousand dollar wad?”

Hansard shook his head in dazed fashion, and made his way towards the billiard-room. Jere proceeded on his errand of Fate.



## CHAPTER IV

Marya greeted her visitor with her usual cold cordiality. The Baroness, who was writing at the open secretaire, waved her hand to him.

“Keep away from me, my dear boy,” she begged. “I am plagued with a letter to write which perturbs me. Soon I shall have finished and then I shall go to bed. Marya has things to say to you. At her age I should have preferred to have said them in the garden!”

“You are over-sentimental, dear Aunt,” Marya remarked. “That is your Austrian blood and associations, I am sure. What I have to say to Mr. Strole, if he cares to listen to it, would be better said within these walls.”

The Baroness finished her letter with a great spluttering of the pen and stuck down the envelope with a formidable bang.

“Generally the world is right,” she said. “Sometimes it is wrong. We Austrians are proud of being considered a sentimental nation. There is too little sentiment in the world. There is too much selfishness. I wish you good night, Mr. Strole. Marya, as usual, you will pay me your little visit before you retire. Adieu, my children.”

Jere was quick on his feet and he was in time to help the Baroness from her chair and place her stick in her hand. He threw open the door. She looked at him kindly.

“Remember,” she warned him, pausing upon the threshold, “Marya is not like others. The boy and girl game with her, it does not go.”

Jere bowed silently and returned to his place.

“Your aunt is quite right,” he acknowledged. “There is not enough sentiment in the world. Just where you are sitting now the moonlight softens your face divinely, but I am beginning to realise how hard your heart is.”

“You know nothing about my heart,” she objected. “I do not think anyone will ever know. Certainly it is not to discuss my heart that I invited you here. Do you wish me to speak?”

“I feel it a great honour that you have received me this evening,” he replied, “and I am only too anxious to hear what you have to say.”

She looked at him for a moment in contemplative silence. The simply made black frock which she was wearing was a marvellously effective background to the dazzling purity of her complexion, her white neck and throat and shapely arms. Her eyes, which seemed to be asking for his sympathy, were luminous. The appeal, although it was an appeal only for understanding, had softened them. There were possibilities even about her mouth.

“You thought it strange,” she began, “that I asked on that first day we met

who was the richest young man of the party. I will tell you. I am not a dreamer but I have had dreams. Chief amongst these has been the passionate hope that some day there would come to Jakovia the modern knight of the new romance, the one who should set my country free. Fighting cannot do it. Jakovia fought bravely in the Great War but lost at Versailles. Fighting has been useless for us. Wealth alone will set us free.”

“But surely,” he ventured, “the wealth of any one man, unless he were a Rockefeller or a Henry Ford, could not go far towards paying a nation’s debts.”

“Jakovia owes no money,” she replied. “Every attempt at a foreign loan has been a failure. No one trusts our King, they trust less our Prime Minister. I do not blame them. Here we come to the secret of which I, with two others, have become the inheritor. Properly used it would spell salvation for my country, but to use it properly is very, very difficult. Colonel Grogner’s father is one of the three. That is why I am never allowed to move without being spied upon. The King himself is the third. But of the three of us I am the only one who is in a position to make any practical use of it.”

She paused, and he found his attention wandering into strange places. He admired the shapeliness of her patent shoes and the lustre of her diamond buckles, the gleam of white silk stockings.

“You’d like me to continue?” she asked. “It is not what you expected—to hear me talk like this? It is very difficult, it is very mysterious, and it is a situation which could never have occurred before in the history of Europe.”

“Of course I want you to continue,” he answered energetically. “I do not interrupt because it seems foolish. What I have to say will come later.”

“How and when to use my power,” she went on, “that is what troubles me, for I have no confidant. Even my aunt does not know. Only the time cannot be delayed. There is dissatisfaction throughout the country. No taxes are collected, no public works are attempted, the remnants of the army are without their pay, and all the time there is oil enough under the ground, untouched timber and uncultivated cornfields enough to turn Jakovia into a prosperous and contented country.”

Jere nodded sympathetically.

“I’m not much up in the banking business,” he admitted, “but I do know just enough to be able to understand that a Jakovian loan might be difficult. Why can’t the Government, though, lease some of the timber lands and oil fields to a foreign syndicate and accept a royalty?”

“The great difficulty is the King,” she confided. “He has behaved badly before. His word is not trusted.”

“But surely even in a monarchy,” Jere ventured, “the King can’t interfere in a deal like this.”

“The King claims the right,” she replied. “He claims that a million acres of marvellous timber woods and nearly the whole of the oil-bearing territory are Crown lands. A great English and American syndicate a short time ago came together and the King himself entertained them. They approved of the possibilities, but they refused to deal with the King. They would have dealt with any constituted authority. They were quite right. They would probably have lost their money.”

“Some sort of a tangle, isn’t it?” Jere observed.

“There is a way out,” she said quietly. “It is connected with the secret. If I could find some honourable person, someone trustworthy, who could also be induced to trust, who would come to Jakovia with the command of, say, twenty million dollars in American money, it would be enough to make a start in opening up the country.”

“But how about the King?” Jere asked. “If he wanted to grab the lot, I don’t see that the country would be any better off.”

She moved her head in slow approval.

“I am glad to realise that you are at least clear-headed,” she approved. “It is true. I, however, have means of curbing Phillip’s rapacity. I am next in succession to the throne of Jakovia, and I have an interest in the Crown lands. You see, it comes to this, Jeremiah Strole. What my country needs is the loan or investment of money to the extent I have spoken of—not from a syndicate or company of men with terms and particulars to be printed upon a paper, but from someone who is willing to trust me until the time comes when it is no longer necessary.”

Jere smiled cheerfully.

“There are some details I don’t quite understand,” he admitted, “but as the trust in you goes, I don’t see that they matter very much. I believe I am worth, roughly speaking, about twenty-five million dollars. Put five millions on one side for a rainy day, and that leaves me with twenty.”

He hesitated. She was listening to him intently, and beneath the filmy black lace of her frock he could see the rise and fall of her small bosom.

“Twenty millions would be the sum you spoke of,” he went on slowly. “There it is. It’s all I have to offer beside myself and the fact that I love you more than anyone else in this world could ever love you. If you could marry me, we’d pull your old country round somehow, and I should be the happiest and proudest man in the world.”

He caught his breath as he finished. His arm was on the back of her chair. He was leaning towards her. His heart was thumping. It seemed as though the world stood still. His eyes were fixed hungrily upon hers, waiting for that one quiver of yielding. She was trembling, but in her eyes there was a light which reminded him of a time he had gone trapping too successfully as a boy in

Canada.

"I love you so much, Marya," he murmured. "Won't you——?"

The moment had passed. He always fancied, even in his most dejected moments afterwards, that she had felt its tensivity even to the very borderland of indecision. She laid her fingers quietly upon his arm and pushed it away from her chair.

"That would not be possible," she said gravely. "I am sorry. I was afraid—yes, I was afraid that something like that might come into your mind. I have tried to make you see that it was not possible."

He stepped backwards and she drew a breath of relief.

"You don't care for me at all then?" he asked.

"I like you very much," she said. "I have very pleasant feelings for you. Marriage, however, would be impossible."

"Why impossible?" he demanded, his voice hardening. "According to you, then, marriage must always be a bargain. You barter your rank for another man's rank. You add up your grandfathers and grandmothers to see that they come out level, and you're content to give yourself to a man you probably don't care a bit about and who very likely doesn't care for you, just for the sake of—posterity!"

"Don't!" she cried.

There was a flame in her eyes, a passion in her monosyllable which dried up the words upon his lips.

"Well," he went on, "we'll leave that. I simply say that mine is just as good a bargain. I offer you my share of the fortune which my father and grandfather have made, and more of it to come, for the restoration of your country. You can use the money as you will. All I want is you. Ours wouldn't be such a one-sided bargain, after all, because one of us would love and perhaps in time the other."

"I daresay that might happen," she admitted. "Believe me, Jeremiah Strole, I like you very much indeed. I will even permit myself to say—do not move, please—that I should be very happy if what you suggest were possible, but it is not. With these others in Europe who have made morganatic marriages, the succession was not near. With me it is very near indeed, and though I know that you must be gently born, that is not enough to enable a son of yours to sit with dignity upon the throne."

"But are you likely ever to succeed?" he asked. "The King is a young man. He may marry at any moment."

"I do not believe," she said, "that there is one of the eleven available princesses of Europe who would marry Phillip. I shall ask you to believe me when I tell you that I am not an *intriguante*. I do not wish for the throne of Jakovia for my own personal sake, but it would break my heart if the socialists

were to triumph and Jakovia were to become a republic. You must already have read of the discontent in the capital. If things get no better, the one thing which we fear is that King Phillip will be forced to abdicate and be banished from the country. If that should happen I should succeed at once unless I had forfeited my right to do so.”

“By marrying me?”

“By having married anyone not of royal blood. You see, it would be Parliament at the instigation of the people who would insist upon Phillip’s abdication, and if I were not there in the minds and hearts of my people they would most certainly set up a republic.”

There followed a silence. It seemed to Jere that everything had been said that could be said. The issue was plain enough. She had made her meaning almost brutally clear. Yet, for some unaccountable reason, he was not so depressed as he had feared. Her shiver, something which seemed to lie almost behind her eyes, an atmosphere which had existed only for seconds, kept hope alive.

“I looked for that book,” he told her. “They haven’t one here. Won’t you please tell me—how old are you?”

“I am twenty-one.”

He rose to his feet.

“That is young,” he said, “very young to be making up your mind upon matters as important as this. Much too young to rule over a wild country like Jakovia without a strong man by the side of you.”

She smiled.

“But to me it is not a wild country,” she reminded him. “They are my people and I love them. I think too that they love me. Do you know why I am not there all the time? Of course you do not. I will tell you. Whenever anything happens, whenever Phillip has done something to displease the people, they come and cheer outside my palace, they come and bring flowers and fire sham salutes on fête days. The real palace, King Phillip’s, they never go near. That is not right, of course. I do not encourage it. On national days I visit my cousin and I come out with him to greet the people, or else there would be no people there.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised from what I’ve heard of the fellow,” Jere muttered.

There was a touch of the old manner in her tone.

“Would you please remember,” she begged, “that Phillip is the sovereign of my country and is my cousin. . . . Now, I think it is time that you went.”

“May I call on you in New York?” he asked.

“Do you think it is wise—for your sake, I mean?”

“Certainly I do. The more we see of one another the better. Besides, we

shall probably be crossing on the same boat anyway.”

“Crossing where?” she asked breathlessly.

“Why, to Europe, of course—en route to Jakovia.”

“You’re not going to Jakovia!”

“I certainly am,” he assured her. “You know,” he went on earnestly, “it wasn’t altogether a bargain I was proposing to you, Princess. I’d like to make you happy if I could—my own way. If I can’t do that, I’d still like to do anything that brought you happiness. I’m going to look your country over. It’s just the time, from the banker’s point of view, to put money into new enterprises. The old ones have all been over capitalised and worn out.”

“You are very generous,” she sighed.

“I shouldn’t say so,” he replied. “I am very stubborn.”

“But what can I do for you?” she asked. “Supposing you do great things for my country, how could I reward you?”

“Couldn’t you make me a prince or something?”

“We don’t do that in Jakovia,” she answered, with a tinge of scorn in her tone. “New titles are never granted.”

“There is that morganatic business,” he reminded her.

She gave him her hand.

“You are inclined to be a little too frivolous about serious things,” she complained.

“My volatile temperament,” he assured her, “not my lack of reverence. You see,” he went on, looking at her earnestly out of his steady grey eyes, “when I want a thing so badly that life doesn’t seem worth having without it, I never lose hope. What hotel did you say?”

She hesitated for several moments before she answered him.

“We shall probably be staying at the Ambassadors,” she told him, “but my aunt often changes her mind. My secretary shall send you a message.”

## CHAPTER V

Downstairs in the lounge Jere hesitated for a few minutes as to his destination. Evidently a fresh party of revellers had arrived, for the orchestra was playing and there was the sound of gay voices and shuffling feet upon the terrace. One of the countless myrmidons of the place, however, solved his indecision by hurrying forward with a message.

“Mr. Hansard would like to see you, sir, in his den,” he announced.

Jere made his way to the small room at the back of the house which his host claimed entirely as his own. Hansard was stretched out in an easy chair with his hands in his trousers pockets, smoking a pipe. A few feet away from him stood one of the menservants of the place, a man who had appeared to Jere to exercise the functions of the old-fashioned private *maître d’hôtel*.

“Come in, Jere,” Hansard welcomed him. “Close the door behind you. What about a highball now?”

“I’ll have a spot,” the former assented, helping himself at the sideboard.

“This is going to be between ourselves, if you please, Jere,” his host went on. “You know as well as I do what a lot of guests we have here sometimes in the summer—often seventy or eighty—and what an unprotected house this is. Alice’s jewels are insured all right, but there’s always a fuss when you make a claim. Anyway, for the last two seasons I’ve had a man down recommended by Pilkington’s—given him a sort of superior job as the nominal head of the staff, you know. Here he is. Brodie, this is Mr. Strole whose rooms were gone through this afternoon.”

The man made respectful salutation.

“Well, of course I told him about this little affair, and he takes the matter rather seriously,” Hansard continued. “Just repeat to Mr. Strole what you were telling me, Brodie.”

“It’s like this, sir,” the man explained. “In an establishment of this size, where there are a great many menservants and a sprinkling of what I should call supers, who are only here for the summer season, there are bound to be a few doubtful ones. I have been running through the list and there are three here I don’t fancy at all. One is an Italian, the other’s a Roumanian, and the third comes from a small country in Central Europe one doesn’t often hear of—Jakovia. Now, all these three men are on your floor, and the one I like least was on duty just at the time your room was gone through. Might I ask, sir, whether you had any valuables that remained undiscovered?”

“Nothing whatever,” Jere declared. “My jewels and the wad of bills were the only things worth lifting, and the fellow didn’t touch either.”

"I gather that you've been in the diplomatic service, Mr. Strole," Brodie continued. "There's some question of your taking a post in Europe, isn't there?"

"There is a possibility of it," Jere assented.

Brodie hesitated for a moment. He was a long, thin man, pale, hatchet-faced, with restless dark eyes. He looked apologetically across at Jere. He spoke with a distinctly foreign accent, but with an American intonation.

"I don't want to be indiscreet, sir, but anything that's said to me professionally goes, as it were, into the grave. This coming appointment hasn't been ratified yet, has it? You wouldn't have received any papers from Washington that you would be likely to be taking over to the other side pretty soon?"

Jere shook his head.

"You're dead off it, Brodie," he assured the man. "I haven't received any appointment and I don't possess a single Government paper."

The detective inclined his head meditatively but showed no sign of disappointment.

"One more question, Mr. Strole," he begged, his dark eyes fixed upon Jere. "Do you happen to be acquainted with a Colonel Grogner who has been staying in these parts?"

"Very slightly," Jere acknowledged. "I was introduced to him at the Racquets Club by young Mr. Dimsdale a day or two ago, and met him again at dinner here. Why on earth are you asking about him?"

The man hesitated.

"Well, it doesn't seem to me that there's likely to be anything in it, sir, but I've had my eye on this valet I was speaking of—Sachs, he calls himself—and I saw him talking to Colonel Grogner the night the Colonel was here for dinner, in a rather out-of-the-way part of the house."

"I've just told Brodie that I'm afraid there isn't much in that," Hansard put in. "They both come from the same bit of a country—Jakovia."

"And so far as that goes," Jere remarked, "you were talking to him yourself, weren't you, Brodie, the same night? I thought I saw you as I was coming out of the billiard-room."

The man for a moment made no reply. It almost seemed as though he was considering how to deal with Jere's question.

"I did have a word with him, sir," he admitted at last. "You probably know yourself, sir, that Colonel Grogner has recently resigned a high command in the army to become Chief of the Police in Pletz. I took the liberty of speaking to him about Sachs."

"Does he know the fellow then?" Hansard asked.

"Apparently not," Brodie replied. "Sachs seems to have just asked the



Colonel whether conditions were any better in Jakovia. He confessed to feeling homesick here and wondered whether there was any chance of returning.”

“What did Colonel Grogner tell him?” Jere inquired.

“He advised him very strongly to stay where he was, sir. It appears that conditions in Jakovia are very bad.”

Tom Hansard nodded.

“Well, I don’t know that we need keep you any longer, Brodie,” he said. “I needn’t advise you to keep a strict look-out on this fellow Sachs.”

“I shall be sure to do that, sir,” the man promised, as he took his leave. . . .

Jere leaned back in his chair and pulled at his pipe meditatively.

“Odd idea having a detective on the premises like that,” he observed. “Where did you say you got him from, Tom?”

“Someone from Pilkington’s recommended him,” Hansard replied. “He was not on their staff but he had done some foreign work for them.”

“I suppose he’s all right,” Jere went on.

“Oh, cut it out,” his host enjoined. “I’ll tell you, Jere, in the middle of the summer when the house is full I bet there’s thirty or forty million dollars’ worth of jewellery here. We have to take a lot of extra servants on. Alice likes plenty of them about and so do I. If there wasn’t someone of experience to look into their credentials we might find ourselves the victims of one of the greatest hold-ups of modern times one fine night. As we are now we know there are only one or two wrong ones that could get in, and we could deal with them.”

“I guess you’re right,” Jere agreed.

“What shall we do about it?” Tom Hansard asked, glancing at the clock. “Shall we go and play with the little nosegay of buds the Mellons have brought over, shall we join the gamblers, or would you like to play billiards?”

“Honest Injun I should like to go to bed,” Jere confessed.

“Then hop it, young fellow,” his host assented. “I’ll just go and have a couple of dances with Louie Mellon and see what the crowd’s like.”

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There was something sinister about that cold and deadly-looking Smith & Wesson which Jere found upon his dressing-table, a box of shells by its side. Behind it was propped up a card on which was written:

*Sorry I forgot to bring one, sir. I borrowed this from the gun-room.*

*Sam.*

Like most young men twenty-four years old Jere was perfectly well accustomed to firearms, but something about the appearance of this one, set

out on a fragment of lace-edged fine linen and surrounded by his tortoiseshell-backed toilet articles, seemed particularly menacing. He swung open the breech, however, slipped in the shells, closed it and set the catch at safety. Then he undressed slowly, smoked a last cigarette in his pyjamas upon the balcony, turned out the light and crept into bed. . . .

He must have slept for several hours before the shock came. Ping! The echo of that singing, serpent-like sound was still throbbing in his ears as he sat up in bed. He was suddenly intensely awake, his apprehensions quickened, his entire nervous system responsive to the note of danger. The report came, he realised at once, not from the inside corridor but from the open window leading out on to the balcony. He sprang out of bed, threw his dressing-gown around him, caught up the revolver which Sam had thoughtfully provided, and, stepping out into the darkness, glanced swiftly up and down. There was no sign of any disturbance. A nightingale was singing from a thicket close at hand, otherwise there was silence. The room next to him on the left was the end one which was occupied by his servant. The window was closed and, as he very well knew, nothing but the morning alarm ever awakened Sam Clowes. He glanced to the right. The windows were closed for at least a dozen yards, both suites being unoccupied. The next were the Princess' rooms. Two windows were open there. It was from one of these that the sound had issued. . . .

Jere had long legs, and half a dozen strides took him to the first open window. He had no need to travel any farther. Before him was a scene which he never forgot, which was to haunt him indeed through days and nights crowded with more serious happenings. The room into which he looked was the Princess' salon, and on the threshold of the doorway communicating with her bedroom stood Marya, clad in some strange white robe, with white fur around the neck, which covered her from her throat to her feet. Her eyes were ablaze and there was a glow of fierce and angry colour in her cheeks. She held a weapon of some sort in her right hand, and a few paces away from her a man in the livery of the house lay doubled up upon the floor. Anna Maria, her Jakovian maid, had thrown the bedclothes from a couch set against the wall and, with her hands upon her knees, was rocking backwards and forwards. There was a slight odour of gunpowder in the air, a faint spiral of blue smoke crawling towards the ceiling. Of sound there was nothing, not even a gasp from the doubled up figure upon the floor.

"What is it?" Jere asked quickly, as he stepped across into the room.

The Princess pointed to the floor.

"I woke up suddenly three minutes ago," she confided. "I heard sounds in the salon here. I came through the door. My secretaire has been broken open. This man was examining its contents!"

She pointed to the writing-table and to the heap of scattered letters and objects surrounding it.

“And your maid?”

“She woke only when I came in. The man worked silently. It was as well! He will be silent now for always.”

Anna Maria, groaning audibly, staggered to her feet. Her mistress waved her back again.

“Stay where you are, Anna Maria,” she commanded. “The alarm shall be given when I am ready. The danger is past.”

The arm which still held the weapon extended dropped stiffly to her side as though indeed she had been some sort of a wooden puppet in a ballet. Jere took a step towards the fallen man. There was a small hole on the left-hand side of his shirt front, and it seemed to Jere that he was stiffening.

“We’d better call some people up,” he suggested, turning to Marya. “You were quite all right to shoot him. There will be no trouble.”

Her eyes blazed. She was furiously angry.

“You fool!” she burst out. “No trouble! Do you realise that we are in America, that we are in New York State? I—the Princess Marya of Jakovia—I have shot a man after midnight in my suite! Can you see the newspapers? Can’t you imagine those hideous headlines? There will be no trouble indeed! If they appear I am ruined!”

Jere listened intently. It was just the first hour’s silence after the departure of the visitors, and everyone seemed to be sleeping profoundly. He crossed the room with swift footsteps, softly opened the door and listened. Not a sound. He returned to his place.

“Princess,” he murmured, “you’re worrying yourself needlessly. You will be acclaimed as a heroine. This man is without a doubt a criminal.”

She wrung her hands.

“Why are people so stupid?” she exclaimed. “Can you not see, Jere Strole, that acclamation would be just as bad?”

He looked at her for a moment in puzzled fashion. She seemed very small and terrified, but oh—how beautiful, as she strained towards him!

“The man is dead,” she cried. “What does it matter who killed him? He was a thief, a criminal.”

Light broke in upon Jere’s clouded understanding and a smile lit up his face.

“What a mutt I am,” he apologised. “Don’t you worry. I’m in command now—if you don’t mind.”

He held up his finger. Marya and he listened intently. Anna Maria listened. It seemed almost as though the dead man were listening too.

“Good,” Jere murmured. “There’s nobody astir. How long will it take you

to put that secretaire in order?”

Marya threw a swift glance towards it.

“Five minutes.”

“I’ll give you ten,” he told her. “You must deal with your maid. She seems to me to want a firm hand. There may be watchmen in the garden. I’m going to take that—” he pointed to the floor—“down to my room. In ten minutes’ time you will probably hear the report of my revolver. I shall have killed a burglar. After that I shall set the bells ringing.”

There was a transforming and transfiguring expression of relief in her face. Every one of those unnatural lines of fierce anxiety seemed to fade away. There were even the beginnings of a smile upon her lips as she looked across at him.

“It will not mean trouble for you?”

“Not a chance,” he answered. “Anyone’s at liberty to kill a burglar at any moment in his room. The fellow’s carrying his gun—you can see the shape of it in his pocket.”

“If you will do this for me,” she said, and there was even a little break in her voice, “I shall be for ever grateful. You think I am foolish, I know, but it is how I am made and how my spirit speaks to me. I could not endure the hundred rumours that would arise from the fact that a murdered man was found in my suite in a country house on Long Island in New York where people live lightly. I have been so very, very careful. I have chosen the places where my feet shall fall, always thinking of the future. I may be called to the throne of my country any day, and there must be no fear that at any time one should be able to say this thing of me.”

Jeremiah Strole stood for a moment at his full height. Whatever the message of his eyes might have meant to her it was a message before which her own drooped. . . . His words may have sounded banal and ordinary but they were like a whisper from heaven to her.

“You don’t need to worry any more about this.”

He stooped down and doubled his handkerchief over the tiny spot on the dead man’s shirt front, lifted and threw the body over his shoulder and crept towards the door. He opened it and looked up and down the corridor searchingly. There was still neither sound nor movement. He passed swiftly along to his room and laid his burden in front of his desk. Afterwards he drew out the dead man’s revolver and laid it by his side, disarranging his clothing a little as he did so. Then, with a curious little instrument which he found in the opposite pocket to the one that had concealed the revolver, he prised open with scarcely an effort the lid of the desk. Again he listened and again he thrust his senses only against a background of deep and intense silence. After that he simply watched the clock. At the appointed minute he fired his revolver

vaguely in the direction where an intruder might have loitered. Thirty seconds afterwards his thumb was pressed upon the onyx bell over which was painted in luminous letters “Night Alarm.”

## CHAPTER VI

Tom Hansard's installation of burglar alarms and signal bells was in its way marvellous. There were only three men summoned by the bell which Jere had pressed, and they were in his room within two minutes. The first was his host in dressing-gown, with tousled hair and—under his arm—a very short shot-gun in which he had more confidence than in any revolver. Second and third were Brodie and a very powerful assistant of his, whose place in the household was that of cellarman.

"Thank God you're all right!" Tom Hansard exclaimed, as he jerked the door open. "What's all this about?"

"I woke up and found a man in the room," Jere explained. "We both drew and I got home first. I'm sorry but I don't see what else I could have done."

"What you did you did pretty effectually," Brodie observed, bending down and casually passing his hand over the body of the dead man. "You'd teach some of those West side gangsters something, Mr. Strole, if you shoot like that every time."

"Just luck," Jere acknowledged. "I aimed a trifle lower down as a matter of fact."

Brodie rose to his feet.

"Kind of interesting," he remarked. "This is that little fellow Sachs from the country one scarcely ever heard of—Jakovia—the man who was talking to Colonel Grogner the night when he was here to dinner. He's been through Mr. Strole's things once before to-day. Queer what brought him in again."

"Well, in here he came at any rate," Jere rejoined. "Am I in deep for this, Brodie? The man was a killer all right."

Brodie stroked his long chin.

"No, I shouldn't say you were in very deep, Mr. Strole," he said reassuringly. "We'll probably get you out of this with half an hour of police headquarters. Luckily for you the man was carrying a gun and we'd got tabs on him for his first expedition. You won't be troubled in any way. We're the ones to get the headache. The little devil had turned your things all inside out once. What the hell was he after?"

"Search me," Jere muttered.

Brodie's eyes wandered round the room.

"If this is your salon, Mr. Strole, it don't seem to me that I see as many signs of Mr. Hansard's hospitality as usual."

"Want a drink?" the latter inquired.

"It's a kind thought," Brodie acquiesced. "A drink's the first thing I need

before I settle down to think.”

“And it’s the first thing I need after I’m wakened up suddenly like that,” Hansard declared, turning towards the door. “I’ll have some things up in a jiffy.”

“Follow Mr. Hansard down and help him,” Brodie directed his subordinate. “Get a move on.”

The man obeyed. Jere and the detective were left alone. The latter closed the door carefully and stood with his back to it.

“So you shot this little rat, Mr. Strole?”

“What else was there to do?” Jere demanded. “I wasn’t likely to sit still and let an obvious thief or burglar pump lead into me.”

“I should say not,” Brodie agreed. “By-the-by, where did you get the gun from?”

“My servant borrowed it,” Jere confided. “On the whole I am just as glad that he did.”

Brodie picked up the revolver, drew out one of the shells from the breech and looked at it, then he glanced across the room at the open window which led on to the balcony.

“Would you be so kind as to close that,” he begged. “I’m feeling a draught.”

Jere kicked the window to with his foot.

“You’re a cold-blooded devil then, Brodie,” he remarked. “The room seems as hot as hell to me.”

“That may be so,” the man observed. “I’m not suffering from cold exactly myself, but there was one little thing I wanted to point out to you without any fear of listeners. This revolver Sam found for you is a Smith & Wesson. There’s a Smith & Wesson bullet in the wainscoting up there, about two feet above the head of that little devil, even if he stood on tip-toe. The bullet that made that hole in his shirt-front was from about the smallest calibre revolver ever made, I should say. Deadly enough to kill in that particular spot, but nowhere else.”

Jere frowned gloomily across the room.

“Seems to me I’m not much use as a detective or a criminal,” he observed.

“Not an atom,” Brodie agreed cheerfully. “The lucky thing is that you don’t need to be. If you can get the young lady’s gun away from her in the morning perhaps you’d be on the safe side. Otherwise it doesn’t matter.”

“What young lady?”

“You make me tired, Mr. Strole,” the other complained. “No wonder you young gentlemen all read detective stories. You’re looking out for Dickens’ Inspector Bucket all the time, I should think. Use a little common-sense, sir. That bullet was fired from a lady’s pistol. This little skunk had done your

rooms once. He didn't come here of his own accord. He wouldn't want to pull everything to pieces again. He comes from Jakovia and he was talking to the Chief of Police of Pletz the other day. The young lady in the next apartment is a Princess of Jakovia. It is well known that you and she are on friendly terms, and he was after what one of you is supposed to have in your possession. The Princess Marya's rooms are within a few yards of yours. That's where he came from, without a doubt, and where the bullet came from you and I both know. That doesn't mean that either of us is ever going to tell, but don't try to put the new-mown hay over an old hand!"

"Sorry," Jere apologised. "The man's dead all right, isn't he?"

"Dead as mutton," the other agreed. "To judge from the look of him, he'd have been better dead a good many years ago."

"It doesn't matter who killed him then, does it?"

"Not one little tinker's curse. The story's going up to headquarters straight enough. You killed him in your room, and that's all there is to it so far as I'm concerned. There's no one to interfere. The local chaps would accept my word about anything. The only thing I would suggest, Mr. Strole, although it's long odds that it would ever matter, is that you should get possession of the little lady's weapon. Gee, I should like to see her shoot!"

"I've never seen her handle a gun," Jere admitted, "but I should say she'd be pretty capable at anything she attempted. . . ."

The drinks were brought in and disposed of. The body of the dead man was removed under Brodie's auspices. The latter returned with a final request just as his employer was saying good night to Jere.

"If you could spare me two minutes, sir," he begged.

"You don't want me?" Hansard asked.

"No, sir. Just a word with Mr. Strole."

Hansard yawned his way back to bed. Brodie obeyed Jere's gesture and re-entered the small sitting-room. He stood on the hearthrug with his hands behind his back.

"Mr. Strole," he said, "I am not here to ask for anything, but I want you to realise that I'm seeing you through this bit of trouble in great shape. Neither you nor the young lady are going to be bothered, and I'm the only man who could have done that for you."

"I don't imagine you'll find me ungrateful," Jere said significantly.

Brodie held out a protesting hand.

"It isn't that, sir. Don't think it for a minute. What I want is your complete confidence about this matter."

"You know as much about it now as I do," Jere assured him.

"Look here, sir," the man went on. "Let's look at the matter this way. Your rooms and your private belongings have been thoroughly searched during the



day by an expert, whom we can safely say was the little chap from Jakovia who got in here probably with false credentials. I know something about Jakovia, and, though it may not cut any ice over this side, it does amount to something in Europe. Very well, then. This is how things shape out to me. This secret agent, or whatever he may have been, not finding what he wanted amongst your belongings, attempts the same game with the Princess. He'd evidently got to know that she was leaving soon, so he had to take risks which he didn't take with you, and he suffered for it. There you are, sir. Her Royal Highness didn't stand on ceremony; she just shot him as dead as mutton when she found him rummaging amongst her belongings. What was he after, sir? That's what I'd like to know. This is not any ordinary attempt at robbery. There is something pretty big behind it all, and I should like to get wise to it. Can't you help me, Mr. Strole?"

"I would if I could," Jere declared earnestly, "but I can assure you that I'm just as ignorant of what it all means as you are."

"You have been a great deal with the Princess during the last few days."

"That's quite true," Jere admitted, "but you've been here long enough, Brodie, to know that it's not an unusual thing for young people at a house party to be a great deal together."

"That's right, sir. Don't think I've been spying or anything of that sort, because I haven't. Observation comes natural to me. All the same, no one could help noticing that you and the Princess had many conversations together, which were different from the chaff and flirting which goes on usually amongst a crowd of young people."

Jere felt himself becoming irritated.

"Brodie, listen here," he begged. "I am very much in your debt, I know, but you can't expect me to talk to you about any private conversations I may have had with the Princess."

"Put it in this way then, sir," the man persisted. "In this house, or in its vicinity, is or was a spy from Jakovia, the Princess of Jakovia, the head of the police of Jakovia, and you. The spy and the head of the police are in communication. Your rooms are searched, the Princess' were searched. What was that man after? can't you give me the dope on this? I'm a friend, not an enemy. Those serious conversations of yours must have given you an idea."

"You shall know as much as I know," Jere promised him. "I believe the Princess is in possession of secret information which might upset the apple-cart in Jakovia if it were known, but I couldn't tell you whether that secret information is committed to paper or documents or whether it is just something she knows. There you have the full extent of my definite information. Side-by-side with it there is this. The Princess is very anxious to find a capitalist who would help to open up the industries of Jakovia. Now, you could ask me

questions till daylight, Brodie, but I could tell you no more than that.”

“I guess I shall ask you only one more simple thing. Were you by any chance thinking of going to Jakovia?”

“Well, to tell you the truth,” Jere admitted, “I am.”

“You’ve got the money behind you,” Brodie reflected. “You might be thinking of doing a little investing yourself?”

“I might,” Jere agreed.

“Mr. Strole—take me with you as your valet,” the man begged. “I’ll look after you, I promise you that, and I have a kind of itch that I might be able to keep you out of trouble.”

“It’s an idea,” Jere mused. “I have my own servant, though.”

“He won’t want to come to Jakovia. I’ve had a word or two with him on the quiet, and you can give him a holiday for a time. It’ll pay you.”

“But what do you know about valeting? I don’t need much looking after, but I do need my trousers pressed and my shoes treed and that sort of thing.”

“I know everything a mortal man needs to know,” was the prompt reply. “There isn’t a thing your servant can do I can’t do better. Apart from that, there’s one thing I may be able to do which he couldn’t attempt, and that is to bring you home alive! I’ve been in these sorts of mix-ups before in Europe, Mr. Strole. They think our gangsters are a bit ruthless over here. They’re nothing to what goes on sometimes in these out-of-the-way countries. I’ve lived in Turkey and I spent a winter in Bulgaria when Mr. Croombs was Minister there. If it paid me to open my mouth, I could tell some horrible stories about that part of the world. . . . I’ll be ready to start when you like. No wages. Just a trifle to be going on with now and then if I need it. You shall give me just what I’ve been worth to you when we get back home together. Does it go?”

“It does,” Jere agreed.

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Jere was awakened about nine o’clock that morning by the tinkling of the telephone bell by his side. He raised the receiver to his ear and was astonished to be greeted by his father’s precise and cultivated voice.

“Why, Dad!” he exclaimed. “I haven’t heard your voice over the telephone for a good many years—and at such an hour in the morning, too.”

“I trust that I have not disturbed you,” was the placid reply.

“Ought to have been up long ago,” Jere avowed. “I generally like to get a swim here before breakfast.”

“I rang up to be sure that you are coming back to-day,” his father continued. “I wish to have some conversation with you. Perhaps it would be convenient for you to dine here?”

“Suits me O.K.,” was the prompt reply. “Is it a crowd?”

“You and I alone, Jere. I shall expect you then. I understand from Parker that your rooms are all prepared.”

“Righto . . .!”

A harmless conversation! It scarcely sounded like the message of fate it turned out to be. Jere sprang out of bed, donned his bathing clothes, and made his way to the swimming pool. For a quarter of an hour he dived, plunged and stretched out his limbs in the salt blue water, filled with the healthy young man’s joy of the coursing of his blood, of the tang of the cool water, the joy of the sunlit air. Afterwards he lay for some time on the warm needles of the pine wood, watching the sway of the boughs overhead and breathing in their wonderful aroma. It was almost reluctantly that he turned at last to the house which still seemed wrapped in silence. In his sitting-room he was assailed by the mingled odours of coffee, bacon and other breakfast delicacies. One of the footmen had just brought in his tray.

“Mr. Hansard thought, sir, that as nearly everyone was breakfasting in their rooms, you would prefer to have yours here.”

“Quite right,” Jere agreed hungrily. “Here, Sam, get me out a suit of travelling flannels.”

“Your chauffeur would be glad of orders, sir,” the footman remarked, before leaving the room.

“Tell him to bring the car round at eleven,” Jere directed.

A spray, a rub-down, the pleasant feel of silk upon his skin, the leisurely toilet of the young man with a long, thrilling day before him. In what sort of humour would he find Marya, he wondered, after the drama of the night. Fortunately she was not a very late riser. At ten—eleven o’clock at the latest—he might hope to see her come stealing out of the house. He glanced at his watch. A quarter to ten. Not so bad. He made his servant carry the tray out on to the balcony so that he could run no risk of missing her.

“Any mail, Sam?” he asked.

“Only a small parcel, Mr. Strole,” the man replied. “It was brought in by hand.”

Jere glanced carelessly enough at the square brown packet with its thick seals. Then he gave a start of interest. There was a crown upon the seals, and the thin spidery hand-writing was familiar. He cut the strings, threw off the paper and removed the lid of the plain cardboard box. Then, for a moment, he sat quite still. He drew a long breath. Its sole contents was a small miniature revolver with a beautifully carved ivory butt. He looked up. Sam was in the next room putting out clothes. He searched once more with eager fingers. There was nothing in the box but the revolver, which he slipped into his pocket.

“Sam,” he called out, “was there no note or message with this parcel?”

“Nothing at all, sir. It was just handed to me by the Princess’ maid.”

“How long ago.”

“Oh, long before you were up, sir,” Sam replied. “The Princess and the Baroness and all the servants left at seven o’clock.”

Jere swung round in his chair incredulously.

“Left?” he repeated.

“Left for New York, sir. There were three car loads of them with the servants and luggage. They were taking the train at the crossing.”

“Sure there’s no note, Sam?”

“Absolutely certain, sir. Just the parcel. Made a regular mystery about that, the maid did.”

Jere pushed back his plate and lit a cigarette. He had lost all appetite for his breakfast.

## CHAPTER VII

The char-à-banc laden with trippers from a distant city, attending a convention in New York, drew up on Riverside Drive before the magnificent iron gates leading to a grey stone mansion of dignified appearance. The guide, dressed in blue uniform, with a peaked cap, rose to his feet and pressed the loud speaker to his lips.

“Here, ladies and gentlemen,” he announced, “you have the palace of one of the leading members of American nobility—Jeremiah Vavasour Strole. The banking house of Vavasour Strole, known throughout the civilised world, was founded by the great-grandfather of the present Vavasour Strole in the year 1812—three years before the battle of Waterloo. The present head of the family owns a palace in Florence but spends most of his time here in comparative seclusion. Within the walls of that mansion, ladies and gentlemen,” the guide went on, waving his hand up the avenue, “are to be found one of the greatest collections of painting and statuary ever brought into a private house by the efforts of one man. In that mansion can be seen on a fixed day, once a month, free of any charge, the masterpieces of Rubens, Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli, and all the Italian guys whose work was up to anything. Vavasour Strole is admitted throughout the civilised world to be one of the finest judges of art now living.”

“Say, how does he run his old bank, then?” someone asked.

“There are seventeen active directors of the Bank of Vavasour Strole Incorporated, and the millions they rake off every year is nobody’s business. Ladies and gentlemen, you are in luck to-day. The young guy now turning his Packard into the gate, with his chauffeur in front and his valet in the back seat, is the coming representative of the family, the fourth Jeremiah Vavasour Strole. Step on the gas, mate,” he called out to the driver. “We’ve three more mansions to cast our eyes on before we’re through with Riverside Drive.”

The char-à-banc drove on. . . .

Jere was respectfully welcomed by David Martinhoe, butler for forty years in the Strole family. His suitcases were taken away by one of the younger men, his driving-glasses, linen coat and gloves handed over to another.

“A dusty ride, I am afraid, sir,” David remarked. “You would like to wash your hands before I announce you?”

He threw open the door of a marble-tiled downstairs lavatory.

“A highball perhaps, sir?” he suggested.

“David,” his young master declared, taking off his coat and setting the cold water running, “you grow younger in looks and wiser in brain every time I see

you. A highball by all means.”

David gave an order to one of the men. He himself remained holding a towel.

“Dad’s all right, I hope?” Jere inquired, as his head emerged from the basin and he thrust his hands into the fine linen. “Gave me quite a scare to hear his voice on the telephone this morning.”

“Mr. Strole appears to be in the best of health. With the master, however, it is very difficult to say. He never complains. I do know, however, that no doctor has been near the house for several years.”

“Pretty good record that,” Jere observed, throwing away his towel and taking the tumbler with its chinking lump of ice from the hand of a newly arrived servant. “Here’s all the best to you, David.”

“I thank you kindly, sir.”

Jere set down the tumbler.

“Now I’m ready, David,” he said. “We will summon up our courage to hear the great news, whatever it may be.”

“Some matter of business, I believe, sir,” the old man confided, as he led the way across the hall. “The lawyers have been in and out the last two days, and Mr. Strole has even been down to Wall Street himself. I had orders this morning, though, to bring up some of the Rudesheimer cabinet wine and to decant a bottle of the 1870 Cockburn Port, so I fancy that something in the nature of a festivity may be hoped for.”

“Sounds like good news,” Jere chuckled.

David threw open the door of what was reputed to be the most famous private library in New York.

“Mr. Jeremiah, sir,” he announced.

Jere crossed the floor to where his father was lounging in an easy-chair before one of the open side windows leading out on to the garden. Just behind him was a famous portrait by Velazquez, and on the other side of the window a landscape by Turner with driving rain disappearing in a watery sunshine. Vavasour Strole was sixty years old, tall and thin, with finely cut features and dreamy eyes. The likeness to Jere was there, however, in the lean face, the well-shaped nose and the wide nostrils. From his appearance he might have been a diplomat, an artist or even a great physician. There was nothing whatever to suggest the man of affairs.

“Well, Jere,” he said, “you’re looking fit.”

“And you, Dad,” Jere answered, as they shook hands. “A little fine drawn, eh? You really ought to get out of New York for the summer. There’s Hawk Hill standing empty, you know, beside the Newport place.”

Mr. Strole shivered slightly.

“God forbid that I should ever set foot in Newport again!” he murmured

fervently. "As for Hawk Hill, why don't you go there yourself? Marvellous boating and fishing, or rather there used to be when I was young. A few too many neighbours, perhaps, but you young fellows don't mind that."

"No use to me," Jere declared, as he flung a superfluous cushion out of his easy-chair. "I'm going abroad in a week or so."

His father indulged in a slight grimace.

"Everyone to their taste," he sighed. "Europe reminds me of a gigantic circus ground in August. If you wanted to go to Europe why didn't you shoot grouse with Maxwell in Scotland? He sent a cable the other day begging you to go over. Herbert swears you're the only young man he ever saw who knows how to swing a gun at low birds."

"I might have thought of Scotland," Jere admitted, "but my plans are changed. We'll talk about them afterwards, sir. I've hurried up to hear what you've got to say to me."

For the first time Jere was conscious of a slight sense of apprehension. It may have been the somewhat severe light, it may even have been the suggestion of that long melancholy face in the background, but it seemed to him that there was a noticeable change in his father since they had met a few months before. The pause became prolonged. Jere leaned forward.

"Nothing wrong, I hope, Dad?" he asked quietly.

Mr. Strole made an effort. He too leaned further forward in his chair, and, catching for a moment the full blaze of the sunshine, he seemed positively haggard.

"I'm sorry to say that there is a great deal wrong, Jere," he acknowledged. "We have been surrounded by a conspiracy of silence. My directors, knowing my aversion to the details of business, have had very little to say to me, and I, knowing your ignorance of the whole situation, remained silent so far as you are concerned. The bald facts are these. I need not speak to you of the terrible hammering every financial house in New York has had during the last year. Those things are known to the whole world."

"But it couldn't touch us," Jere exclaimed. "Our capital is too enormous. There isn't a single one of our directors who approves of speculating."

"Quite right, Jere," his father agreed. "Still, the unexpected happens sometimes. Mr. Forsythe, who will be here later on, and Mr. Plender, head of the firm of Accountants who are responsible for our figures, will be at your disposal all day to-morrow. Meanwhile what has happened is briefly this. For some reason or other every single person connected with the administration of the bank seems to have fallen for Goldsmith Motors."

"Who wouldn't?" Jere murmured. "They're the soundest thing I know in automobiles."

"On the road maybe. As an investing proposition they have brought what

can only be described as disaster upon our firm.”

A wave of horror almost stupefied Jere.

“We’re not going to fail,” he exclaimed. “Vavasour Strole, Incorporated. It isn’t possible!”

“You are quite right, Jere,” his father reassured him. “Vavasour Strole’s could never fail. All the same we have lost an enormous amount of money. There is no question of failure, though. It is a question at the worst of our private fortunes.”

A fortnight ago Jere would not have turned a hair. At that moment, however, he was speechless.

“The bank practically owns the Goldsmith business,” his father went on. “They seem to have gone on advancing and advancing to the extent of some forty or fifty millions. Perhaps for this they were not so much to be blamed. It is a banker’s business to support sound industry, and the majority of the board still believe that Goldsmith Motors come under that category. The trouble began when our directors found themselves hung up with practically the whole of the Goldsmith stock and found it a dead market. It was then they committed their sin. They went on to the stock market.”

“Good God!”

“I have been out of business so long that I have been unable to follow the various explanations which have been offered me of our huge losses,” Mr. Strole continued. “I am given to understand that we were very near redeeming the whole situation in a single day and simply lost by a fluke. However that may be, we lost. The bank has to face its Government audit within the next few days, and, to enable it to keep the position it holds at present and has held for over a hundred years, a very large sum of money is required.”

Jere’s heart sank. His father’s cold, solemn words were like a sentence of doom. The firm of Vavasour Strole needing money! The thing was ridiculous. He felt little pinpricks of agony, a horrible shadow was already looming up before him. If this should interfere with the great new world of adventure of which he stood upon the threshold!

“Do you mean,” Jere asked, “that they will have to come upon the partners?”

“That is what I do mean,” Mr. Strole acknowledged.

The battle was joined now. Jere knew very well that he was facing the first great crisis of his life. Except for the death of his mother there had been nothing else to tear at his heart strings, to bring the tears up to behind his eyes, to throw him into rebellion against the great forces which governed fate. He had been young too when that first tragedy had happened. No more than eleven years old. The soreness of it had passed away. He had walked gaily through the years. The days had been cloudless, the sunshine of fortune had



never once flickered. He felt himself like a warrior grown soft with easy days, with his muscles lax and his spirit shrivelled. Nevertheless this was the cry to battle and he must prepare himself.

“What,” he asked hoarsely, “is the proposition?”

“Briefly this,” his father explained. “Every one of the directors have advanced out of their private fortunes money according to their means. With you and with me it is different. We both bear the name of Vavasour Strole. The claim upon us is of an exceptional nature.”

“Let me hear the proposition,” Jere interrupted in an unfamiliar tone.

His father looked across at him with wondering eyes. He scarcely recognised his son. They had seen little of one another during the last few years, he reflected. Jere had doubtless changed. In one respect, however, he could not change.

“Out of my private fortune,” he confided, “I am handing over forty million dollars to the firm and keeping five millions for myself. I suggest that out of your thirty millions you hand over twenty-nine and keep one million for yourself.”

The blow had fallen. It was his whole fortune which was demanded. He stared across the few feet of intervening space at his father’s calm face. With scarcely a change of expression and in an absolutely cold-blooded tone he had made his astonishing suggestion.

“Wealth has never seemed to mean a great deal to you,” his father continued. “You have never even spent your allowance or anything like it. You prefer golf to polo and the sea or the country to the cities. You have fortunately no expensive tastes like mine. You can live on the interest of a million dollars without acute discomfort.”

“And you, sir?” Jere asked.

“If I live in one room,” the older man replied, with a note of fierceness in his tone, “I shall keep on this house and I shall keep on every servant. I shall not alter my style of living. Not a soul will know that I am living upon a diminishing capital.”

Again there was silence. The father was arming himself against what he knew was to come. Jere was steeling himself to frame the question which in all justice he meant to ask. It came out at last.

“The pictures?”

Jeremiah Strole, the elder, leaned back in his chair. The suspense was over and with it the strain. He crossed his legs, he pressed together the tips of his long delicate fingers.

“My collection of pictures,” he announced, “if I include with them my marbles, bronzes and statuary, are probably worth forty million dollars. I admit it. It is the Vavasour Strole collection, the acquisition of which has been the

joy of my life, in the contemplation of which I spend ten happy hours every day, the Vavasour Strole collection which is famous throughout the world and which is bequeathed at my death to the nation. That will remain untouched."

There ensued the longest silence of all. Vavasour Strole, Senior, lit a cigarette and drew his chair slightly nearer the open window, outside which the breeze rustled pleasantly in the elm trees. Jere sat like a granite figure, unable for some time to think or to move. At last the words came.

"Dad," he said, "I'll admit—this has knocked me out. To tell you the truth I was coming up to see you to tell you something—rather important."

"Tell it me, my boy," his father begged.

"It couldn't happen just yet, but I was thinking—I might have been getting married shortly."

Vavasour Strole, Senior, shook his head gently.

"Bad luck, Jere. Come just at the wrong time, I'm afraid, hasn't it? It wasn't Julia Mexhall by any chance, was it?" he asked, with sudden interest in his tone. "She has a large fortune from her mother, outside our affairs altogether, and her father knows what we have been obliged to do. The directors have to know, but they are all sworn to secrecy."

"No, it isn't Julia," Jere admitted.

His father knitted his brows.

"You must realise that the situation is impossible," he pointed out. "If the young woman is wealthy her trustees or her parents would require to investigate our affairs and the truth might become known. If she is poor, then I am afraid marriage would be out of the question."

Jere smiled bitterly.

"I am afraid," he said, "the girl I'm in love with, Father, wouldn't marry a poor man."

"You mean that she's marrying you for your money?"

"I suppose it comes to that," Jere admitted.

His father extended his left hand in a gentle gesture of deprecation.

"My dear Jere," he begged, "surely you can find consolation in that thought. There is too much of that sort of thing going on. You are young, well-looking enough and you bear an honoured name. Take what you can out of life and wait. It may be long before it comes, but the pendulum will swing. The time may come when I shall find myself once more in an armchair at Christie's and you will be reading of your inamorata's first or second divorce. Something of that sort always happens when an alliance is contracted solely for financial reasons. . . . Meanwhile, may I suggest a bath and an early change—unless you wish to run round to the club for half an hour? Dinner is ordered to-night as early as eight o'clock. We have Mr. Forsythe to deal with afterwards."

Jere rose willingly enough to his feet. The atmosphere of the room, the

faint smell of old calf from the thousands of volumes, the odour even of that perfect Turkish cigarette, the perfume of the roses with which many priceless vases were filled, all seemed to him suddenly nauseating. He had the feeling of a modern pilgrim flogged on his way out of Paradise as he walked up the broad staircase.

## CHAPTER VIII

Jere found himself slightly irritated by the Lucullan nature of the banquet shared by his father and himself that evening. The food and salads were light and exquisite, the wines priceless. Everything was served too amidst surroundings and under conditions of epicurean luxury. The paintings upon the black panelled walls were Holbeins and Van Dycks, the linen upon their round table had come hundreds of years ago from a Florentine palace, the glasses were the true old Venetian, the silver was Jacobean and the high-backed chairs with their dark red cushions in which the two men sat were Georgian. Vavasour Strole was inclined to be apologetic.

“We can live and sleep,” he expounded, “in a symphony of architecture and surroundings. We cannot dine under the same conditions. The world cannot match the work upon that Florentine tablecloth. The secret of making that Venetian glass is lost. No one but the Jacobean silversmiths knew how to deal with their wares, and one man only under the third George learnt the art of turning those chair-backs. I shall not apologise to you, however, Jere. I never apologise to anyone. I won’t even say I am sorry for giving you Johannesburg Cabinet in Venetian glass.”

“It’s a wonderful wine, sir.”

“Choice wines,” Vavasour Strole continued, “rank with the other less fluid productions of genius. There is artistry in them of the finest sort. Unfortunately the modern palate is too debased to perform its highest functions. . . . Do you feel like telling me anything about this young lady, Jere? We can speak in French. The servants who are waiting upon us are from the home market.”

“If you don’t mind,” Jere replied, “I would rather not talk about her.”

“I quite understand,” his father agreed. “You will not take it amiss, will you, if I remind you that you are twenty-four years old. Before I was your age I too had had my peep into romance. It didn’t last. Nothing to do with human beings lasts. That is why wise men collect pictures.”

“It might lead perhaps to a certain selfishness,” Jere suggested daringly.

“And why not?” his father assented with gentle tolerance in his tone. “Where would the world have been without its selfish men? If ever I gave any time at all to serious thought I should proclaim myself an individualist and adopt their philosophy. . . . The last ortolans worth stuffing, I fear, François sends word. I trust they have given you a good one.”

“Delicious, thanks,” Jere murmured. “You know I’m rather a Goth about food. You ought to have asked Mexhall or Rheinbilt to a feast like this.”

His father smiled.

“It would have been inappropriate,” he declared. “This morning I had a visit from some of our Wall Street friends. In the strictest confidence, of course, I told them of our intentions. One of them—old Daniel Littlecote, whom you have probably forgotten—shed tears of sympathy. Thorndyke’s voice broke when he shook my hand. This dinner is my reply to all that maudlin sympathy. I sent for François at once and gave my orders. To-night I shall sign away thirty million dollars, but there will be no self-denial in this house. Fortunately I am afflicted with a mild form of heart disease and five millions should see me through. For you, Jere, I should certainly recommend that you continue your career, which will naturally keep you abroad. Until you become an Ambassador—which I suppose you will some day—nothing much will be expected of you in the way of spending. You can keep your secret as I shall keep mine.”

Jere saw his chance, and he plunged.

“Father,” he said, “you have spoken to me very frankly and you have encouraged me to be frank. I haven’t said much so far because there is a sort of dead wall round what I want to say. I’m going to have a shot at it now if I may, though.”

There was a steely light in Vavasour Strole’s eyes as he watched the wine being poured into his glass. Nevertheless his smile was inviting, his tone courteous.

“Say everything that is in your mind, my dear Jere,” he enjoined. “It is to incite you to do so that I have been so frank myself.”

“Sell half your collection,” Jere begged, “and let us sacrifice only half our fortunes.”

“Half of my collection!” his father repeated quietly.

Jere was over the first stile and he went on eagerly.

“You have two hundred and seventy-two pictures alone. I have heard you say that there are a few which do not please you. Sell them. The rest will seem more perfect. I heard you once tell an art gathering that if you were starting life again as a collector you would concentrate, you would never buy pictures *and* statuary. Why not sell your statuary? Keep that copy of David if you want to. You admitted yourself that it was of no great value. Sell the rest. I know your bronzes are terribly valuable, but I don’t believe they give you anything like the pleasure of your pictures. Get rid of them. Leave your books, except those manuscript volumes. They are not beautiful. They are only curiosities. You could afford to leave your pictures untouched then, and you wouldn’t have to think about your money slipping away. You know what I read in the paper the other day—‘Many a man can live to eighty with heart disease and then die of something else.’ I’d have my chance too, then, Dad, and I’m desperately keen to have it.”

It seemed to Jere that he might as well have spoken to a graven image. Not a muscle of his father's face had moved. Eyes and lips were alike expressionless. Only when Jere had finished he rose to his feet and touched him on the arm.

"Come with me, Jere," he invited.

They left the room and crossed the hall, down a long corridor into the familiar first gallery. A watchman was perambulating the place, lights were burning from the ceilings and a few along the walls. Vavasour Strole, the elder, drew a bunch of keys from his pocket, unfastened a show case and took out the bronze image which formed the central exhibit.

"That," he declared, "is the genuine Raj-Ta-Pul which was stolen fifteen years ago from the Temple of the Cow in the middle of the holy quarter of Rangoon. Two priests were thrown alive into the River of Crocodiles when this theft was discovered. I was there and I waited. Neither the English nor the American officials would speak to me. I was told that I had done more harm than they had been able to do good in five years of diplomacy. I stayed on until I felt myself watched, then I took that awful journey through the jungle one night, hired a native boat and found refuge on a Dutch steamer. I landed at Saigon and waited. In nine days the image was in my hands. There is nothing else like it, Jere. Look at the curve of the scimitar, the bracelets on the arms, the long tapering fingers, the queer head-dress. I looked at it day by day until all desire for movement began to slip away from me. Look at the face even now, Jere. The triumph of immobility! It has looked just like that for a thousand years. And so looked the young priest in whose likeness it was modelled. It is beautiful? I scarcely know. It is a miracle because of what it represents. Live with it long enough, and all Asia will speak to you with those silent lips."

From case to case Vavasour Strole passed, his arm within his son's. He broke faith with the past. He told stories of acquisition, of purchase and of barter, on the memories of which the earth of forgetfulness had been heaped and over which vows of forgetfulness had been sworn. When it was over and they had reached the first of the picture galleries, Jere was dazed. It seemed to him that he had been led, dreaming, through a forgotten chapter of the Arabian Nights.

"Once and for all time, Jere," his father said, "get it out of your mind that this collection of strange and beautiful objects which, of course, in a way is a species of madness, can be done over the shop counter. Believe me, it can't. There have been a few times in a locked room in the back of some of the bazaars of Cairo or Alexandria and once at the back of a fish shop in the bazaar of old Constantinople, when I have bartered face to face with the owner of my prize with a counter between us. That doesn't happen often. You go to get the

things that are worth while and you find that others prize them. You have to fight superstition, jealousy and real honest devotion, you have to steel your heart and fight these. Of course, once in a lifetime there comes an epoch like the Chinese Revolution, when the very earth vomits up its treasures. That doesn't happen often."

David, the only servant who was allowed in the galleries, approached with an announcement.

"Mr. Forsythe is waiting in the library, sir."

"Carry the decanter of Cockburn port there carefully, David," his master enjoined, "with three of the Queen Victoria glasses. Serve coffee in half an hour."

David withdrew respectfully. Father and son followed him. No words passed between them. There scarcely seemed need of any. When they reached the library the lawyer was already seated at the head of the table, spreading out sheaves of papers. He was assisted by a clerk whom he had brought with him. Vavasour Strole, Senior, glanced at the mass of papers with a little exclamation of disgust.

"Can this not be simplified?" he asked. "I am prepared to sign my form of renunciation, so, I believe, is my son."

"The matter is not so simple," the lawyer pointed out. "Only a small part of your fortune, Mr. Strole, or your son's, is invested in the firm. All these other signatures I require are orders to sell your existing securities, and pay the proceeds into the account of Vavasour Strole, Incorporated. But before you sign—both of you—I must point out one thing. Have I your attention? Good. Very well then, what I want you to understand is that you are not, either of you, loaning this money to the firm of Vavasour Strole, Incorporated. You are to all intents and purposes donating it. You will have no claim upon it in future. You can regard it as lost. That is necessary, because it must appear in the balance sheets to be presented at the audit as cash in hand, and neither you, Mr. Vavasour Strole, nor you, Mr. Vavasour Strole, Junior, can appear in any way as creditors of the bank."

"I agree to that," Vavasour Strole said quietly.

"And I," Jere echoed.

There was silence for some moments, but for the scratching of pens. This great sacrifice was in progress.

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"The finest port I have ever drunk to the most melancholy purpose," Mr. Forsythe declared, as he handled reverently his third glass.

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"The finest port, yes," Vavasour Strole agreed. "As to the melancholy purpose, I am not so sure. We have executed a magnificent gesture. The firm

of Vavasour Strole is back again where my father and grandfather placed it.”

The lawyer glanced as though compassionately at Jere.

“You are one of the giants of the old days, Mr. Strole,” he said. “You look backwards and find all the joy you need in contemplation. You forget sometimes that youth has no background, but a very glowing future.”

“Sometimes, my dear Forsythe,” Vavasour Strole said, as he poured out the last glass of port, “you become prosy. I have probably saved my son from a *mésalliance* and myself from the indignity of grandfatherhood.”



## CHAPTER IX

Jere amused himself during the next few days by exploiting several hitherto unheard of economies. He paid a visit to Washington and refused the drawing-room car which was offered to him as a matter of course, he instructed his agent to let his own Long Island property, Hawk Hill, at the best price he could obtain, and he insisted that the great barn of a house at Newport which he and his father owned between them, should be put on the market. All the time he waited with fear and trembling for the summons which he felt now could not be long deferred. One day it arrived. A thin envelope and a sheet of thin notepaper in the middle of a batch of correspondence. He felt almost sick, and he paused for a few moments before opening it. All the menacing possibilities concerning it which had stolen into his mind during his depressed moments suddenly re-established themselves. The fingers which held his cutter and drew out the sheet of paper were trembling.

After all, it amounted to very little.

*Dear Mr. Strole,*

*My aunt and I arrive at the Ambassadors Hotel to-morrow, Wednesday, at twelve o'clock. If you are in New York, I shall be happy to receive you between five and six.*

Whereupon, Jere promptly forgot all his economies. He sent the most expensive young woman from the most expensive flower shop in New York to adorn the apartment at the Ambassadors with long-stemmed red roses, and he also gave a very gratifying order to the candy store most in favour at the moment. Having executed these two important commissions, he made his way down to Wall Street to pay a visit of courtesy to Mr. Mexhall, the managing director of the bank, and in the waiting hall, to his astonishment, came face to face with Colonel Grogner. The latter gave him no opportunity to escape. He welcomed him with *empressement* and at once drew him apart.

"Delighted to meet you again, Mr. Strole," he said. "Curiously enough, I never associated your name with the name of the great bankers or I should have asked you to receive me here."

"Wouldn't have done you a bit of good," Jere assured him. "I'm not in the firm. I'm only making a call here now. Are your letters of credit upon the firm?"

"Not exactly," Grogner replied. "There was a little outside matter concerning which I wanted to see one of your directors. I had the pleasure of

staying for a few days with young Mr. Dimsdale, as you know. By the by, have you seen anything of the Princess?"

"Nothing at all," was the curt reply. "If you will excuse me, I have an appointment."

Grogner's high forehead became slightly wrinkled, and he smiled a deprecating smile.

"Mr. Strole," he said, "you do not like me. I fear you have been prejudiced against me. It is a pity. I think that perhaps I could save you a great deal of disappointment—perhaps something even more important."

"I do not see why you should bother about me at all," Jere returned, without any particular enthusiasm. "In any case, I must ask you to excuse me now."

Grogner drew to one side. He was an elegant, somewhat foppish figure, in his perfectly chosen clothes amongst the crowd of business men who were streaming in and out.

"I am staying," he said, "at the Biltmore Hotel. If you should change your mind, I should be delighted to receive your visit."

That was the end of the brief interview. By mysterious agencies, Jere was passed through the crowds, and finally conducted into the sanctum beyond the directors' room where Mr. Dimsdale, father of Joe Dimsdale, and Henry Mexhall conducted the affairs of the still most renowned bank in New York. Both men shook hands with their young visitor. Mr. Mexhall, whose methods were direct if not abrupt, motioned him to a seat and plunged at once into conversation.

"Jere," he said, "we got your note. We are delighted to see you. You are more than welcome at any time, but let me be frank—we don't want to talk business with you."

"I understand," Jere meditated.

"Your father and I settled that," Mexhall continued. "It was the only sane thing to do. So I hear you are going to Europe?"

"I shall be leaving very shortly," Jere acquiesced.

"You will allow us the privilege, I trust," Mr. Dimsdale proposed, with twinkling eyes, "of handling your business there—letters of credit and all that sort of thing. Any one of the cashiers will take your instructions."

"I will see to that," Jere promised. "It is a small affair. And Mr. Mexhall, I did not come here to talk about our own affairs at all. I came to ask—knowing you are behind the scenes of nearly everything that goes on in the banking world—a rather curious question. Have you heard of any attempt on the part of anyone to raise money on this market on the strength of various lands in Jakovia?"

"Jakovia," Mr. Dimsdale murmured. "Where in God's name is that?"

Mr. Mexhall leaned back in his chair.

"Jere," he confided, "your question is off the map. To us you are just an ordinary client. If any propositions had been made to us, I could not tell you about them."

"There was a Colonel Grogner, Chief of the Police and son of the Prime Minister of Jakovia," Jere persisted, "staying with Joe Dimsdale down at the Dimsdale place. I met him just now in the bank."

"Quite possible," Mr. Mexhall agreed. "People are passing to and fro all the time from every quarter of the world."

Jere looked downwards at the ash tray with which his fingers had been fidgetting.

"He smokes incessantly cigarettes on which there is a blue coronet. He had just lit a fresh one when I met him. This, I suppose," Jere added, tapping the extinct portion of a cigarette bent up in the ash tray, "is the one before."

"You are not by any chance thinking of changing your profession from diplomacy to police headquarters work, are you, Jere?" Mr. Mexhall inquired.

Jere shook his head.

"This is quite a chance, sir," he said. "As a matter of fact, there are two important personages from Jakovia in the United States at the present moment. One of them is Grogner, whom I dislike and distrust, the other one is a person in whom I take a great interest. I came in here to beg you, although you may say that I have no right to interfere, not to enter into any business transactions with Colonel Grogner."

The two men were silent.

"Is this just prejudice, Jere?" Mexhall asked.

"Wait a minute," Dimsdale intervened suddenly. "What were those headlines I saw the other day—all boiled down to nothing, though—didn't you have to appear in Court for having shot a burglar in your room, Jere?"

"Quite true," was the brusque reply.

"Didn't that burglar come from Jakovia?"

"He did," Jere admitted, "and he was seen in conversation with your visitor of this morning, Colonel Grogner, before he burgled my rooms."

"God bless my soul!" Mexhall exclaimed. "What sort of a romantic imbroglio are we drifting into?"

"I know very little about the whole matter," Jere assured them. "Later on I may have something to say to you about Jakovia myself, and if I do it will be very much sounder business than anything Colonel Grogner can put before you. In the meantime, I am quite aware that I am only a visitor here, and I have not even the right to ask a favour. However, I am going to do it. I will ask the bank not to enter into any transactions whatever with Jakovia through Colonel Grogner."

“Request noted, Jere,” Mr. Mexhall said, stretching out his hand. “Ten minutes up. Good luck to you on the other side. Hassall, in number seven box, is the best man for you if you want to fix up any foreign credit.”

“Good day, sir, and many thanks,” Jere replied. “Hope to see Wall Street wagging its tail next time I come down this way.”

It seemed to Jere that he walked straight into fairyland at ten minutes past five that afternoon. Marya received him with both hands outstretched, a transforming smile and a welcome in her eyes, which were a great deal more eloquent than her words.

“You are very punctual, Mr. Jeremiah Strole,” she said.

He kissed her fingers and released them reluctantly.

“It seems to me I have waited quite long enough to see you again,” he replied.

She pointed to a chair quite close to her own. She was a princess at that moment, he thought, only in the faultlessness of her physical presence, the slimness and elegance of her body, the perfection of her simple white *crêpe de Chine* dress. Even that air of aloofness, if it had not disappeared altogether, was modified.

“I ran away,” she confessed, with something of the air of a child acknowledging her misdeeds. “Oh, how terrified I was! Not because I shot the man. That was nothing. I was afraid of those awful newspapers!”

“There could be no scandal attached to you,” he declared.

“It is a long way to Jakovia,” she reminded him, “and the headlines of your papers are sometimes so terrifying. Do you know that I bought them for days—a thing I have never done before—I read about your appearance in court. It all seemed very simple. You must have been clever. Sometimes during the last week or so,” she added gently, “I have wondered whether I was not a little unkind to you. I ought not, I think, to have run away.”

“You might have left me a note—just a word.”

She shook her head.

“I seldom write with my own hand,” she told him. “For friendship I am not very good. I think I expect more than I am willing to give. You must forgive. I would like to hear—have you seen your father?”

Jere’s heart sank. During the last week he had kept himself from brooding over this great disaster to all his plans by various minor activities. Now he suddenly realised that the dreaded moment had come. He must go back upon his word. The trouble of it was that even to her he dared not tell the truth. In some lesser degree he had absorbed the spirit which was part of his father’s religion. No word must be uttered, no thought even harboured which might for a single second shake the faith of any one human unit in the majesty and far-reaching power of Vavasour Strole, Incorporated.

“Yes, I’ve seen my father,” he admitted. “I’m sorry, Princess. I haven’t had altogether a good time.”

The light faded from her face. Something which was rather like fear rushed into her eyes.

“What do you mean?” she asked quietly.

“Princess,” he went on, “it’s terribly hard to explain. I went to my father without any anxiety at all. The money I thought was mine—it was simply his good will I wanted—and I thought perhaps before you left you might have consented to meet him. I had rather a shock. I found that it was impossible for me to lay my hands upon the money which I had always believed to be entirely my own.”

The light in her eyes grew colder, her expression had become almost stony.

“I see,” she murmured. “What you are trying to tell me is that you have changed your mind.”

“God knows I haven’t,” he exclaimed fervently. “Something has happened, though. I can’t touch my money without my father’s permission, and he refuses to give it.”

“You are over twenty-one, are you not?” she asked.

“I am in my twenty-fifth year,” he replied. “It isn’t a matter of coming of age. There are other considerations.”

“Poor Jakovia!” she murmured. “You have lost your confidence in her.”

“Princess,” Jere begged, “won’t you, please, be as kind to me as you can? I admit it, I’m in a mess. I promised—honestly believing that I could do just what I liked with my own money. I can’t.”

“It was a great deal to ask, I suppose, without any return,” she reflected.

Something broke in Jere. Something of his temper perhaps, something of this passion which had found its way into his life. He rose to his feet, a half-angry, half-distracted person. In the small salon, with its feminine French furniture and its bower of roses, he seemed almost to lose control of himself.

“You’re not fair to me,” he declared. “You have no right to say that I have changed my mind. I am not a liar. My people don’t lie—we never have. Every word I have said to you has been the truth. This business about the money has been a terrible blow to me. I meant to do exactly what I promised you with three-quarters of it, whether I could win what I want to win from you or whether I couldn’t.”

“What did you wish from me?” she asked.

“Your love,” he answered hoarsely. “After all you’re a woman, aren’t you? You aren’t like anyone else in the world, but you are a woman. I wasn’t afraid. I was taking my risk anyway. It might have been years. I didn’t care. I meant having you at the end of it, whether I had to sit by your side like a popinjay or whether you came back to me and were content to live the life of an ordinary

human being.”

“You were rather sanguine, I think, Mr. Jeremiah Strole.”

“That’s right. Mock me if you want to,” he continued in a calmer tone. “You don’t believe me and you won’t, but I’d throw that money into the sea and never see a cent of it again at your bidding if it would prove to you that I meant to keep my word.”

“I am an intelligent person,” she said, “although I may not seem so to you. Explain to me in plain words—either in French or English—precisely why you had twenty million dollars at your command three weeks ago and nothing today.”

“I cannot do that,” he answered sadly.

“You cannot or you will not?”

“It is as I have said.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“You are one of those people, Jeremiah Strole,” she said, “who expect too much in life. You expected too much when you suggested an impossible reward for your interest in my country. You expect too much now when, having changed your mind after a few weeks’ reflection, you tell me that you are powerless to deal with your own money. I thank you for the services you have rendered me. I have liked you very much indeed, but I do not trust you any longer. My maid is sitting in the corridor. She will ring for the lift.”

“You are going to send me away?”

“It does not seem to me,” she replied, “that there is anything more to be said.”

There was a touch of speculation in his eyes as he looked at her—cool and flower-like in the shaded room, a note of wonder in his tone.

“Is it possible,” he demanded, “that there could be anyone else in the world as heartless as you?”

“I do not see,” she rejoined icily, “where my heart enters into the matter.”

Fury blazed up in him once more. He had never believed it possible he could be so angry with a woman. She seemed to him like some beautiful venomous insect that had crawled out of the roses and was spitting poison at him. His hands twitched. He felt that he could have flicked her into eternity with a single movement of his wrist. If only she would look for an instant afraid!

“You are presuming a great deal,” she continued. “It does not please me that you stand glowering like that over me in my apartment. I should be very much annoyed if anyone found you here in such a state. You must go away and compose yourself. I am disappointed in you. I have nothing more to say.”

Just as suddenly as it had come the passion left him. To be angry with such a child! He was half ashamed of himself. He held out his hand.

“Good-bye,” he said.

She hesitated for a moment, then she gave him hers. At the last moment she would have withdrawn it but it was too late. It was touching his lips—it was held there for one long moment. The touch of his fingers upon hers was in no way imprisoning, yet the fire of his passion seemed to pass into her body and she was for a moment powerless. When he released them it still seemed that his grip had been like velvet. She pointed to the door.

“Be so kind as to leave me at once,” she ordered.

Jere obeyed, but he went out with a smile upon his lips.

## CHAPTER X

The *Berengaria*, leaving New York some two months after Jere's eventful house-party on Long Island, had the ill-luck to run into the first of the equinoctials very soon after she had passed the Statue of Liberty. For the next forty-eight hours only a few seasoned passengers, amongst whom was Jere himself, were visible on deck. It was on the third morning that he came face to face with Colonel Grogner muffled up from head to foot in heavy overcoat and scarf, with his arm in a sling. He was stumbling into the smoking-room and Jere, after he had got over his surprise, would have passed on with a slight nod, but Grogner detained him.

"Help me to that seat, please," he begged, "and sit down with me for a minute. I have been ill. I have not what you call sea legs. I cannot walk any further."

Jere did as he was asked, and took the adjoining easy-chair. There was no doubt about Grogner's illness whatever its cause might have been. His cheeks seemed hollower than ever and his complexion was yellow.

"I am greatly distressed in my inside," Grogner faltered. "Never will I cross the Atlantic again. Please order me some champagne. Let it be served in those pewter mugs; I could not bear the look of a glass."

Jere did as he was bidden and also provided some dry biscuits.

"I did not see your name on the passenger list, Colonel," he remarked.

"It is not there," Grogner admitted. "In my little country there are jealousies. It was better that my mission to the United States was not talked about."

"So you really were in the States officially?"

Grogner drank a little more champagne and drew a long breath of relief.

"I shall live," he announced. "Nothing in the world was ever so good as that wine. I feel better. Yes, Mr. Strole, I had a mission, and a more complete failure than I have made of it was never known."

"Bad luck," Jere murmured. "Something to do with police headquarters, of course. Dan Horsfall is a first-class man, but he is not nearly so hospitable to foreigners as his predecessors. Ulman used to tell them and show them everything. This man simply doesn't believe in it."

"My mission," Grogner confided, "was not in connexion with police business at all. Nothing that I could have learnt in New York in that direction would have been the least use to me in Pletz. We work things on an absolutely different basis. I came over to New York on an entirely different matter. I see no harm in telling you that it was a question of finance."



“You happened to strike a pretty bad time,” Jere reminded him. “Wall Street cannot even afford to get its hair cut!”

Grogner took a gulp more wine and sat up in his place. His voice had gained strength.

“It is only Americans who do not wish to lend money who talk like that,” he declared. “There is a huge fall in the paper value of securities, and the man who was worth fifty millions a year ago is perhaps on paper only worth twenty-five now. But what is that? It is only the gamblers who have been wiped out, the silly sheep who play on margins.”

“I guess you are more or less right there,” Jere agreed. “It is the small speculator who has got what was coming to him.”

“The great banks,” Grogner continued, “are untouched. There is more money to lend than ever because until prices are steady no one will invest. You are American, the son of a banker who must be behind the scenes, and I am a soldier citizen of a small country tucked away in a little known part of Europe, and yet I will venture to tell you that, so far from Wall Street not being able to get its hair cut, Wall Street is oozing with money.”

“If that is so,” Jere pointed out, “it seems hard luck that you could not bring off your little coup.”

Grogner drank more champagne. His eyes grew brighter. It appeared to Jere that he was either playing a part or that he was really becoming a little lightheaded.

“I will tell you something, Mr. Jeremiah Strole,” he confided. “There are powerful influences at work against me—of that I am sure. I had introductions. I passed a pleasant week-end, as you may remember, with Mr. Dimsdale, the son of one of the directors in the great firm of Vavasour Strole. I approached them first the morning I met you, if you happen to recollect, in the lobby of the bank.”

“I remember quite well,” Jere assented. “You were coming out as I was going in to arrange for my credits in Europe.”

“Just so,” Grogner continued. “I was welcomed with great courtesy, notes were taken of my propositions, which I may tell you were received very seriously indeed and with much interest. I was invited to call again within a few days. That same evening, however, a letter was brought by special messenger from the bank to me at my hotel. It was signed by one of the directors and it informed me very courteously but definitely that they had carefully considered my proposals, but in the present unsettled state of the financial markets they were unable to operate abroad.”

“I guess that seems reasonable enough,” Jere observed. “I don’t know much about these things—I am in another profession, as you know—but it’s the Continental exchanges to-day which make foreign business almost

impossible.”

Grogner’s pale hand flashed contemptuously through the smoke-laden atmosphere of the room. He ignored altogether the trivial matter of exchanges.

“The minister from my country,” he continued, “was in New York and at my service. Together we approached three other banking houses with the same result. Now I ask you—how do you account for that? The business I offered, even if it were a little troublesome, was sound and good. The matter of the exchanges was entirely in favour of the lender. Not one of them would entertain my proposal. I return to my master a discredited envoy!”

“To your master,” Jere mused. “You mean the Prime Minister, I suppose?”

Grogner glanced suspiciously at his companion.

“Never mind about that,” he muttered. “I have failed.”

“Tell me what influences you imagine were working against you?” Jere inquired.

Grogner opened a case and lit a cigarette. His hands were trembling and he appeared to be able to use only one freely, but he was certainly in better shape.

“There is only one possible thing to conclude,” he confided, his face darkening. “The King’s cousin, the Princess Marya of Pletz, has been at Washington visiting her aunt whose husband is the Austrian Ambassador. She has been in New York also for some time, as you know. I am telling you nothing fresh, my young friend, your friendship with Her Royal Highness was quite apparent. The Princess pretends to have a great affection for her country. I doubt the sincerity of it. I can say no more.”

“Can’t you even tell me why you doubt it?”

Grogner gestured scornfully.

“So that you, my young friend, may stroll to the companion-way, touch the bell of the lift, descend to Deck ‘C’, make your way to the Princess’ suite and amuse yourself with her at the humiliation of poor seasick Grogner! I think not. What I have said makes no difference. What I might say if I answered all your questions would be, as you call it in English, letting the cat out of the bag!”

“What the devil are you talking about?” Jere exclaimed. “What do you mean about descending to Deck ‘C’?”

“To the Princess’ suite, of course,” was the bitter reply. “You are very clever, you two, but you don’t throw dust all the time in the eyes of a simple policeman.”

Jere was several moments recovering from his astonishment. He spoke at last, however.

“You are not going to tell me,” he demanded, “that the Princess is on board this ship?”

Grogner’s surprise at least equalled his companion’s. He stared at Jere for a

moment incredulously, then he called to the barman and pointed to the tankards.

“We will drink another bottle,” he declared. “My stomach is already steadier. You have the look of an honest young man, Mr. Jeremiah Strole. Will you tell me upon your word of honour as an American gentleman that you did not know that the Princess was on this ship?”

“American gentleman or American chimpanzee I will swear that I did not,” Jere assured him. “I should not have been on her myself if I had.”

Grogner pounced upon another biscuit wolfishly. He watched his tankard being filled with wine, and took a long gulp.

“Be as frank with me, my young friend, as I have been with you. What are your present relations then with the Princess if you did not know that she was on board?”

“I do not see why I should discuss the matter with you at all,” Jere replied at last, “but I will go so far as this. The Princess and I have differed upon a certain matter. I have not been able to assist her in the manner she desired, and she appears, temporarily at any rate, to have withdrawn me from the list of her acquaintances. She has my address. She could have let me know that she was crossing upon this steamer had she wished, but I have not seen or heard of her for six weeks, and I had no idea that she was on board.”

“This is all very amusing,” Grogner acknowledged. “I begin to wonder to what extent I have been deceived. I shall ask you one further question—you have not any letter or papers or documents confided to your care by her?”

“You are one over the limit,” Jere told him tersely. “I should certainly not tell you if I had. You seem to have done everything you could to find out for yourself.”

Grogner’s smile might have been a trifle self-conscious, but he showed no signs of shame.

“That is true, my young friend,” he admitted. “I make no concealment about it. What will you have? I am Chief of the Civil Police and of the Secret Police in Jakovia, and in the course of my duty it becomes necessary for me to learn the measure of confidence which existed between you and the Princess. I could find no trace of any. Your ignorance of the Princess’ presence on board finally convinces me that there has been none. I ask your pardon, Mr. Strole, but I conclude with one further and perfectly harmless question. Why has your appointment as extra attaché at the American Legation of Pletz been announced within the last few weeks?”

“It comes to me quite naturally,” Jere pointed out. “I am in the diplomatic service, I have done my bread and cheese stunt down in South America, I have now to commence at the bottom in Europe, and Jakovia seems to be the lowest rung of the ladder.”

Grogner coughed.

“There are less important countries,” he said stiffly, “but no matter. I accept your explanation. I trust that confidence is restored between us.”

“I trust so,” Jere echoed, without any particular fervour.

“You do not drink your wine,” Grogner complained.

“I have not been seasick,” Jere reminded him, “and I am scarcely used to drinking champagne in the middle of the afternoon. By-the-by, if the Princess is, as you say, on board why is her name not on the passenger list?”

“For the same reason that mine is not, I should think. The Princess, who always has an inflated idea of her own importance, desires to travel incognito. She is down under the name of her *dame de compagnie*, la Comtesse de Vallouris. She will probably not leave her room until we arrive at Cherbourg and will travel privately to Paris.”

“Well, you will be all right now if I take a stroll,” Jere suggested, rising to his feet. “I cannot stand the atmosphere in here.”

“You are going to try the atmosphere on Deck ‘C’,” Grogner murmured, with an unpleasant curl of the lips.

Jere looked down upon him with placid good-humour.

“I think I can promise you,” he said, “that unless I meet the Princess by accident I shall not see her at all this trip.”

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Jere descended straight to his stateroom where he found Brodie brushing his evening clothes.

“Brodie,” he asked, “did you know that the Princess was on board?”

“Certainly, sir,” the man replied, without looking up. “Travelling under the name of the Comtesse de Vallouris, and the Comtesse herself is travelling as her maid. Takes her exercise in the early morning and at night on the lower deck, and has all her meals in her room.”

“For the love of Mike why didn’t you tell me this?” Jere demanded.

Brodie laid down the brush.

“Mr. Strole,” he reminded him, “I am here to look after you and keep you out of mischief as much as possible. I kept tracks of Grogner, and I should have warned you if there had been the slightest danger from him. Your strict orders were, though, that I was not to attempt to spy in any way upon the movements of the Princess.”

“Quite true,” Jere assented, “but if you made no inquiries how did you find out that she was on board?”

“That is another matter, sir. I happened to study the passenger list pretty closely, and I have a friend—he is one of the petty officers—who generally takes a walk with me in the evening on Deck ‘C’.”

Jere reflected for a moment.

“Well, I don’t know that I can blame you then, Brodie,” he decided. “The only thing is, I should be very annoyed if she thought that I had been shadowing her in any way.”

“She won’t think that, sir,” Brodie declared cheerfully. “She has no idea even who I am. By-the-by, sir, since you do know that she is here, might I ask who told you?”

“Colonel Grogner.”

“Getting friendly with him, are you, sir?”

“I shouldn’t call it friendly,” Jere replied. “I helped him into the smoking-room this afternoon, and we have been having a talk. He seems to have been seasick all the time and to have fallen on the deck and hurt his arm.”

Brodie picked up his brush again and smiled.

“Seasick, is it, sir?” he meditated. “Well, he has not suffered so much that he has not been able to send about half a dozen notes a day to Her Highness, not one of which has she replied to. I caught his man banging around the suite on Deck ‘C’ yesterday, and I took the liberty of telling the cabin steward that if he found him there again he should report him to the purser. Come to think of it, sir, he has not been too seasick either to find out Her Highness’ chauffeur in the second class and try to get hold of his itinerary homewards.”

“Are you in earnest, Brodie?”

“Sure. You ain’t used to these schemers, Mr. Strole. Good thing you’ve got me to look after you. All the same, don’t you let on to what you know. I’m thinking you will do more good by palling up with the Colonel than by letting him get wise to your being on to his games. Seasick! Eyewash!”

For the first time that evening, after dinner, Jere paused to glance at the news board. There were a few announcements of no interest, but he lingered for a moment or two over the Stock Exchange news. Markets, he read, were irregular, and transactions limited in number. The principal feature of the day was the continued advance in Goldsmith Motors which were up another seven points. . . . He strolled into the smoking-room and, taking a sheet of notepaper from the rack, worked out how much an advance of seven points amounted to on twenty million dollars’ worth of stock. When he had finished he called the steward.

“I will take a Napoleon brandy with my coffee this evening,” he ordered.

## CHAPTER XI

“A small world after all, Mr. Jeremiah Strole.”

Jere rose swiftly to his feet and leaned over the top of the divided writing-table. It was indeed Marya who occupied the opposite chair.

“Princess!” he exclaimed. “So you really are on board.”

“Apparently,” she answered. “Who told you so?”

“I only heard it yesterday,” he assured her. “Colonel Grogner was my informant, as a matter of fact. I sincerely hope that you didn’t think I knew before I embarked.”

“I am willing to believe that you did not,” she said. “I did try to make it difficult for anyone to know. You have most of the faults which are common to your sex, but I do not imagine that you would presume to follow a woman about against her will. You have certainly shown no ill-timed curiosity concerning my whereabouts during the last six weeks.”

“I could have found out where you were, I daresay, if I had made an effort,” he rejoined. “As I was afraid of annoying you I made none.”

“Does six weeks see the end of all your consuming passions?” she asked.

“I’ve only had one in my life,” he replied, swift to recognise the note of pique in her tone which justified his altered attitude. “And now that I have seen you in that adorable little turban it is worse than ever.”

“You possess the gift,” she told him severely, “of an immense impertinence.”

“You confuse impertinence with a natural flair for telling the truth,” he assured her.

“You would persuade me then——”

“It is perfectly true that I am more in love with you than ever,” he interrupted.

She resumed with severe diligence the task of writing the letter upon which she had presumably been engaged. For several minutes there was no sound but the scratching of her pen across the paper. Jere, on the other side of the screen, was filled with a deep and holy satisfaction. The dreaded moment had arrived and passed, they had met, and her attitude was at any rate human. As soon as her pen halted he spoke again.

“Can I come and sit on the divan by the side of your chair?” he asked. “It is not easy to talk over this screen.”

“There is nothing to prevent your sitting on the divan if you wish to,” she replied. “I do not think, however, that we have anything to talk about, and I myself am going out on deck.”

"I would rather be on deck," he confided, "and we have a great deal to talk about. You have told me very little about Jakovia yet."

"Why should I tell you anything about Jakovia? You have proved that the subject does not interest you."

"On the contrary," he objected, "I have proved my interest in your country in the most convincing manner. I am on my way to Pletz at the present moment."

She was both surprised and incredulous.

"I do not believe you," she exclaimed curtly.

"Princess!" he remonstrated. "To-morrow morning I will show you my passport and my letter to the Minister."

"Why should you be going to Pletz," she demanded, "and what do you mean by a letter to the Minister?"

"I forgot that you do not read the newspapers. I think I told you that I was more or less in the diplomatic service, did I not? Well, they have given me a job at the Legation in Pletz."

"You are going to the American Legation at Pletz!" she exclaimed. "Do you mean that you are going to work under Mr. Homan?"

"Sure," he assented. "Mr. Homan is my chief."

A small dark woman, whom Jere had noticed once or twice on deck, came in and addressed Marya. They conversed for several moments in an undertone, after which the Princess handed the newcomer her writing-case and rose to her feet.

"I will sit with you for a few minutes in the sun lounge," she announced, turning to Jere. "We can talk there if you wish. On the deck it is windy, and I do not like wind."

"Wherever you say goes," was the cheerful response.

They made their way to the enclosed space upon the upper deck and found seats by a window. Even in that very garish light her complexion still remained as perfect as ever, but the faint lines under her eyes, even though they detracted nothing from her youthful appearance, spoke of trouble.

"Did you choose this post at Pletz," she asked, "or is it only by chance that it was offered to you?"

"I chose it."

"Why?"

"Because I am interested in Jakovia."

"Again why?"

"Because I am interested in you."

"You have proved it, have you not?" she observed bitterly. "When I spoke with the few friends I have in the United States about my scheme, the answer was always the same—'you should try and interest the Stroles'. Your bank,

they all said, was the principal one for foreign business.”

“Just now,” he told her, “most banks have enough to do to take care of their home clients. One never knows, though. A scheme like yours could not be carried out all at once. Some means may be found of making a beginning.”

“It will be too late,” she assured him. “My cousin will see to that.”

He drew a small map from his pocket and unfolded it. To her astonishment it was labelled—‘The Kingdom of Jakovia’.

“Whereabouts,” he asked, spreading it out, “is this oil-bearing territory?”

She indicated at once with her forefinger a long strip of apparently desolate country.

“And the forests?”

She pointed them out.

“The mines,” she went on, “are behind that range of mountains on the left.”

“Are these lands privately owned?” he asked.

“They are mostly Crown lands,” she told him.

“One would have to apply to the King, then.”

“Need we discuss this matter?”

“We may have to one day.”

“Are your twenty million dollars coming to life again?” she asked with a shade of bitterness in her tone.

“No such luck,” he sighed, “but I like to believe that a part of them may some day. Just as well to be prepared, you know.”

“We have gone now as far as is possible,” she replied, “unless you are in a position to make serious proposals; in that case there would be very intimate matters to be discussed.”

He folded up the map and put it in his pocket. It was then for the first time that he realised the identity of the man lounging in a chair opposite, apparently deeply engaged in the study of a newspaper.

“It is your countryman,” he murmured, indicating him with a slight gesture. “The inquisitive policeman.”

She nodded coldly.

“I do not envy him,” she said. “I fancy that his visit to the States has been as unprofitable as my own, and he has the bad fortune to be working for an ill-tempered master. I do not think that Phillip will receive him exactly with open arms, when he has to confess to his double failure.”

“Why double?”

She hesitated.

“You are becoming troublesome, but in this case it might perhaps be wise to gratify your curiosity. Be so good as to ask Colonel Grogner to come here and speak to me. You may listen to what I have to say.”

Jere at once fulfilled his commission. Grogner bowed low to the Princess,



but made no effort to possess himself of her hand.

“Mr. Strole here tells me that Your Highness wishes for a word with me.”

“I wish to inquire after your arm for one thing,” she said. “I see you still have it in a sling.”

He touched the bandages gingerly.

“It has caused me considerable pain,” he confessed.

“I am pleased to hear it,” the Princess replied. “Have you, by chance, confided in Mr. Strole the cause of your accident?”

“Why should I?”

“I will tell him then,” the Princess continued. “It might perhaps be as well. On our first night out Colonel Grogner, who has not been very well served lately by his staff, attempted to carry out for himself one of those enterprises which as a rule he is content to leave to his hirelings. The attempt was not successful. I admit that my aim was not perfect, but a bullet even from a small revolver in the fleshy part of the arm can be very painful, can it not?”

“I admit the fact,” Colonel Grogner agreed. “At the same time I must protest against your inference. In entering your suite I had no thought of robbery.”

“That is a lie and a stupid one,” was the scornful retort. “Your presence in my suite at two o’clock in the morning speaks for itself. This is our last night on board—I have made what I consider quite adequate preparations in case you or any of your people attempt a return visit, and in case any accident should happen to me I am explaining the situation to Mr. Strole. I will save you some trouble, Colonel Grogner. I will assure you upon the honour of my name that the—shall I call it the treasure?—which you believed, with excellent reasons, I took with me to America is not at the present moment in my possession or the possession of any of my suite. It is not on board this steamer.”

Colonel Grogner drew himself up. There was something of dignity in his manner.

“Your Highness has acted wisely in making these disclosures,” he said. “I accept your word.”

The Princess turned to take her leave.

“I may hope to pass an undisturbed night, then?” she asked, looking over her shoulder.

“Your Highness may sleep in peace,” Grogner promised her. “At the same time I may, perhaps, be permitted to say this. If I felt it possible to doubt your word, if I had the slightest reason to believe that the ‘treasure’ to which you have alluded was in your possession, I should not hesitate to risk my own life or the lives of any of my helpers to relieve you of it. In such an action I should only be doing my duty to my King and my conscience.”

Her head was barely more than on a level with his shoulder as she passed, but she seemed to be looking down upon him from immeasurable heights.

“One would not wish to interfere,” she said, “with your sense of duty, however ill-founded it might be. . . .”

She crossed the passage and entered the waiting lift opposite. Jere turned to his companion.

“So your accident upon the deck——”

“Precisely,” Grogner interrupted. “All the same, I do not mind assuring you that if it had not been for what the Princess has just told us I should be taking the same risk again to-night.”

“You’re a nice sort of fellow to tell me that,” Jere said, frowning.

Grogner’s face became like a mask. He was intensely in earnest.

“You do not understand,” he said. “I am a man with a duty to perform. For success—to achieve success—I would kill any human being I know—you, Mr. Strole, not excepted.”

The man was entirely convincing. His voice had trembled with emotion. There was a light in his eyes which made him an almost heroic figure. Jere shrugged his shoulders.

“Well,” he observed, “I suppose it isn’t my affair.”

Grogner took his arm.

“My young friend,” he declared, “there you spoke the truth. It is not your affair. I am an older man than you by many years, and I was in this troublesome business of intrigue whilst you were in the cradle, and, believe me, you would be very wise indeed if you keep out of it. That treasure of which the Princess has spoken, for instance, it is not a legal document, it bears no stamp, it is not in any sense of the word an agreement, yet if it fell into the wrong hands it might cause one of the bloodiest wars Europe has ever seen. . . . I will now, in the charmingly direct phraseology of your countrymen, propose to do myself the honour of buying you a drink.”

“Sounds a bit long-winded,” Jere commented, “but it’s a good idea.”

## CHAPTER XII

It was the merest chance which brought Jere in search of a taxi after the theatre on a wet night into the side street bordering the Café de Paris. Just as he was preparing to emerge into the more crowded thoroughfare, a large automobile drew up a few yards in front of him, three people descended and, sheltered by the enormous umbrella of a waiting commissionaire, crossed the pavement hurriedly to an open doorway, through which one caught a glimpse of an attractive and inviting staircase. The umbrella, large as it was, however, was not large enough to conceal the third person, and Jere recognised Grogner, whom he had not seen since they had left the *Berengaria* a week ago. He lowered his own umbrella and looked up the staircase. The commissionaire blocked the way. Jere's exhibition of interest in the three people who had just entered appeared to have excited his resentment.

"Entry by this way is prohibited, sir," he announced.

"Why?" Jere protested. "This is the side entrance to the Café de Paris, isn't it?"

"It is the private entrance to the salons."

"Well, I'm going there."

"Have you a salon engaged, monsieur?"

"No, but I expect I'll find one free."

The man shook his head.

"The salons are not available for gentlemen alone," he informed the intending visitor. "Monsieur would do well to try some other place."

Jere smiled and furled his umbrella.

"I am a regular client," he explained. "It may be true that this is the entrance to the private rooms, but there is also a door there on the left leading into the restaurant. I will take a table there."

"That is as monsieur wishes," the commissionaire agreed, throwing open the door to which Jere had pointed, but still carefully blocking the way to the staircase. Jere slipped a tip into his hand.

"Who were the people just ahead—two men and a woman?" he inquired.

The man pocketed the tip, but all he vouchsafed in return was a civil answer.

"I never see anyone who passes up and down these stairs, monsieur. Those are my orders."

"And very good orders, too," Jere acquiesced, as he entered the restaurant. . . .

A *maitre d'hôtel* found him an excellent table, and if Jere had been looking

for society he would have found an embarrassment of choice. Beautiful ladies seated alone left off the artless manipulation of their lips and faces to give him their attention. Vanity bags were closed with a snap, smiles of half tentative invitation reached him from every quarter. Jere, however, had no use for a permanent companion. He ordered wine and supper, he paid his respects to two little ladies from the Opéra Comique whom he remembered to have met at a party last time he was in Paris, he was permitted to pay for several bottles of champagne, and he even went so far as to indulge in a couple of dances. The vacant chair at his table, however, he kept unoccupied. A *maître d'hôtel* who had known him from a previous visit came to pay his respects.

"Monsieur prefers to remain alone?" he asked, with a smile.

"For to-night, yes," Jere replied. "I see you are nearly full up, as usual."

"It is always so, monsieur," the man told him.

"And your private rooms," Jere continued, "they are as popular as ever?"

"They are usually occupied, monsieur."

"I saw an acquaintance, as I came in, mounting the stairs," Jere observed. "A Colonel Grogner—I crossed with him on the steamer—but I thought he would have been in Jakovia before now."

The *maître d'hôtel* who, a moment before, had been full of pleasant gossip, became suddenly dumb. He served his client with a glass of wine from the bottle which stood in the cooler, looked around the tables and bowed.

"One moment," Jere begged. "Is Colonel Grogner a regular client?"

"Monsieur will excuse," the man apologized. "It is the custom here to discuss as little as possible visitors of distinction. Sometimes they prefer to remain incognito. Several of these young ladies, for instance, have asked your name. I told no one that you were Monsieur Jeremiah Strole, son of the famous American banker. It might not have been discreet. Monsieur agrees?"

"I should say you were dead right."

"The last time monsieur was here," the man reminded Jere, "you enjoyed very much our old Armagnac. There is still a little which remains."

"I should have to dine to appreciate that," Jere replied. "One day this week, I hope. At this time in the morning your Pommery goes better."

"Monsieur is right," the man agreed, as he faded away.

Jere had a moment of thoughtfulness, almost depression, as he fingered the glass. He was one of the central spots of a little world of gaiety, the music was enticing, the wine and the supper with which he was being served were of the best, yet there was something wrong with life, and he knew very well what it was. The tinsel of his present surroundings, very pleasant and gracious tinsel though it was, meant nothing to him. His one idea was to get to Jakovia. The perfume, the wiles, the undoubted beauty of some of these very charming women by whom he was surrounded, left him entirely cold. Life for him had

become focussed upon one thing and one thing only. He asked himself why he had come to this place at all, and he could find no answer. Suddenly he remembered—it was because he had seen Grogner and Grogner reminded him of the Princess. Then he lifted his head, disturbed by a slight commotion at the further end of the room, and he saw Grogner again!

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The little party of three made noisy entrance into the restaurant by the same door through which Jere himself had passed. In front, dressed in a striking but very magnificent costume of light orange with a black velvet turban, came a familiar figure—even to Jere, who was only an occasional theatre-goer—Suzanne Delage, the principal star at the Ambassadeurs. Brilliant and smiling, she made a sufficiently conspicuous entrance, turning continually to talk to the man immediately behind her.

“You must not mind that I choose a little life,” she exclaimed. “Now and then the salons by all means, they are agreeable, but not always.”

The head *maître d’hôtel* bowed before her. He abased himself before her companion who, for some reason or other, Jere himself regarded with interest. He was a man of apparently early middle age, slightly under middle height, with bronzed skin, fair hair brushed smoothly back, a small moustache, also fair, curled slightly upwards. He was inclined towards embonpoint, a misfortune discreetly concealed by the art of his tailor. He carried himself a little arrogantly and he had the air of not being in the best of humours.

“Suzanne, my angel,” he complained, “I do not care for the public rooms of the restaurant at this hour of the morning. The seclusion of our salon is more agreeable to me.”

“Oh, la, la!” she exclaimed. “Last night we spent in solitude. I work hard. Sometimes I must have life and gaiety. I should like to dance.”

Two young ladies were tactfully removed from one of the best tables nearly opposite Jere, and the three ensconced themselves there, Suzanne Delage between her two companions. She rose to her feet.

“I insist upon dancing,” she declared. “If you refuse, my friend, I shall dance with Colonel Grogner. If he will not, I shall flirt with the *beau garçon* opposite.”

“Dance with Grogner, for the love of heaven,” her companion enjoined. “Do not bring any strangers here.”

“If mademoiselle will pardon my inexperience,” Grogner apologised, rising to his feet. “I dance very seldom.”

“And,” *la belle* Suzanne remarked a few moments later, “you dance very badly. It is a great pity that Phillip is so jealous. It makes life very difficult. What does he suppose I do when he is not here? I should like to dance with that handsome young man. He looks as though he knew you, Colonel. Why

can you not present me?"

"Quite impossible," the latter declared hastily. "Be reasonable, I beg of you, dear mademoiselle. Our friend is in a bad temper already, and when he has had a great deal to drink he is, as you know, very troublesome. Be content with my poor efforts and wait. In a few more nights we shall have departed and you will be free again."

She indulged in a petulant grimace.

"You are always so tactful, are you not, my dear Colonel?" she pouted. "In a few nights Monsieur *le beau garçon* will probably have gone too. . . . Ah, I was right, then, you do know him!"

Jere and her companion had exchanged perfunctory salutations. Mademoiselle Suzanne took the opportunity to smile at Jere. The latter did not hesitate to smile back again. Suzanne would have stopped at his table but her partner's arm developed an unexpected strength.

"Mademoiselle," he begged, "do not, I beseech you, commit an indiscretion. Our friend, as you know, permits you to speak to no one else while you are in his company."

"Oh, la, la!" Suzanne exclaimed pettishly, "the game becomes not worth while, my friend. There is little money this time, it seems——"

"There will be more money in a few days," Grogner interrupted earnestly. "There are great schemes on foot. Have a little patience, dear mademoiselle. You do not wish to lose our friend."

"Oh, I am not so sure about that," she declared. "He has not the right gaiety for my taste and he drinks too much. He drinks, he loves and then he wants to drink again. For a French girl, there are other things in life. Since you will not present me you shall at least tell me the name of the young man."

"His name is Strole," Grogner confided. "Jeremiah Vavasour Strole. He is an American and his father is reputed to be a very rich man."

"I am more excited about him than ever," Suzanne confessed. "A young man of that appearance whose father is a rich American banker pleases me very much."

Grogner led her back to the table.

"Mademoiselle is not satisfied with my dancing, alas!" he announced.

"Mademoiselle had better sit down," her escort growled. "It is the worst of coming into these public places. The young man opposite has already an impertinent air. If he does not learn better manners I shall have him turned out."

Suzanne took her sulky admirer's arm and patted his hand.

"Come," she invited, "drink a glass of wine with me. Ask yourself whether it is not natural that the young man should wish to dance with me. But see, I am content here."

“Yes, for five minutes! Afterwards, your feet will go jigging to the music again.”

She patted his cheek.

“Do not be so hard with me, dear one,” she begged. “Our evenings together are so few.”

“We will go to your apartment,” he suggested. “You can order music there and I will dance with you.”

“It is an idea,” she exclaimed, but with an obvious lack of enthusiasm. “In one little quarter of an hour then we will go, meanwhile I drink a glass of wine with you and Colonel Grogner here, your very severe friend.”

She bent to her companion on the right, she turned from him towards Grogner, and the sweep of her glass hesitated for a second as it passed Jere. Suddenly a *maître d’hôtel* leaned across and spoke to the latter.

“Monsieur Strole,” he said, “you will forgive what might sound like an impertinence.”

“I am very certain, Henri,” Jere replied, “that you could not be capable of such a *gaucherie*.”

“Monsieur’s interest in Mademoiselle Delage is making one of our very distinguished clients angry,” the man explained. “We do not wish to lose a valuable patron, as might very well happen.”

“I don’t want to butt in,” Jere observed, “but I don’t like either of the men mademoiselle is with. I rather thought of asking her to dance.”

“Let me implore you not to, monsieur,” the *maître d’hôtel* begged. “Only trouble could come of it. Listen, monsieur. If you have indeed a penchant for Mademoiselle Suzanne, the matter can easily be arranged. I will make the rendezvous myself for the first day mademoiselle is free. It is quite obvious that she herself is well disposed.”

Jere shook his head.

“You needn’t worry. I am not looking for that sort of thing, anyway. It was just amusing to-night, that’s all. I’m off in a few minutes.”

The man departed with an air of relief, and Jere asked for his bill. He was in the act of paying it when he became conscious that someone had stopped before the table. He looked up. Mademoiselle Suzanne was there, still swaying slightly to the music in Grogner’s clasp. She laughed a challenge into his eyes.

“Monsieur le Colonel,” she said, “refuses to present you because I have a jealous friend here to-night. I have threatened him that if he declines I shall present myself.”

“Mademoiselle has no need,” Jere answered, rising to his feet. “The whole world knows and admires Mademoiselle Suzanne Delage. The whole world of my sex would wish to dance with her, as I do at this present moment.”

She freed herself from Grogner’s clasp and extended her hand. They had

scarcely moved a single pace, however, before the room was in commotion. There was a solid phalanx of waiters in front of them, the music broke off abruptly, the furious voice of Suzanne's protector was heard in the background, the two largest commissionaires in Paris loomed over Jere. He smiled into his companion's face.

"Mademoiselle Suzanne," he said, "it appears to be the wish of everyone present to interrupt our dance. If mademoiselle has the will I will persist. Otherwise one does not wish for a brawl. Paris is a small place, and the Ritz is not an unknown address."

"Monsieur is charming," she whispered, "and he is right. Be wise—these are dangerous men. Leave quickly."

Jere unfortunately had no alternative. The commissionaires had closed in upon him. He was marched out into the side street and deposited in a taxi. He thrust his head out of the open window.

"Would it be possible," he asked the grimmer of the two commissionaires, "for me to have my hat and coat? Here is my ticket, number fifty-seven. I am liable to catch cold these damp nights. I will meet the *vestiaire* at the other entrance."

The man accepted the ticket and retired into the restaurant. Jere's fingers stole for the handle of the further door. He leaned forward as though to speak to his remaining guardian, gave him a push which sent him reeling back, threw open the door on the other side, which he had surreptitiously opened, and sprinted up the street to the front entrance. He walked in quite calmly and was standing before the table where mademoiselle and her two companions were seated, before anyone had realised that he had entered.

"It occurs to me, mademoiselle," he apologised, "that I had the bad manners to leave just now without wishing you *au revoir*. Permit me."

He bent over her fingers, which she very readily extended, and she laughed with joy into his eyes.

"Monsieur is very polite," she murmured.

Monsieur was also very agile. In a matter of seconds he had snatched his coat and hat from a bewildered *vestiaire* and was passing through the swing doors before the hubbub had recommenced. A few moments later he was walking happily down the Rue de la Paix with his coat on his arm and his hat on the back of his head.



## CHAPTER XIII

Brodie, looking very much like the perfect manservant, awakened Jere the next morning soon after ten o'clock.

"I got that fixed up at last with the International people," he announced. "Tuesday next. Leave here at seven o'clock in the evening; second-class for me forward with permission to visit your compartment."

"Fine," Jere exclaimed, sitting up and blinking. "What's been the delay?"

Brodie shook his head thoughtfully.

"Your name I should say, sir, and a little palm oil. The train only runs three times a week, and they told me only the day before yesterday that it was full up for a fortnight. I went to see it off last night, and the Jakovian portion was half empty."

Jere was wide enough awake now. He sat up and looked at Brodie incredulously.

"Do I get you rightly, Brodie?" he inquired. "Do you really think that anyone behind the scenes was trying to keep me out of the country?"

"Seems to me that way, sir."

"Well, hang it all, I'm the best friend they've got. I am going there full of good intentions. If I find everything as I expect it I am thinking of making some large investments there."

"They may want you there all right, sir," Brodie observed, "but it seems to me they only want you when they are good and ready. I only got our reservations through pulling one over on them. I got one of the clerks at the American Embassy here to give me an order in your name. That means that expedition is requested officially on your behalf for diplomatic reasons. After that there was no more trouble. They sent a man down with me and we got the compartment easily."

Jere regarded this new member of his establishment with approbation.

"I might have thought of that myself," he reflected.

"I don't know that you would have been wise to hurry, Mr. Strole. As a matter of fact I should not be surprised if there was not just as much doing in Paris these days. Take that Colonel Grogner, for instance, with whom you seem to be a bit mixed up. He doesn't appear to be in any hurry to get home. He's about the place all the time. I see from the newspapers that the King is staying incognito at a small German spa for the good of his health, which makes me think that he may possibly be in Paris too, and—but I forgot, sir, you don't wish me to mention the young lady."

"Well, you've gone half-way, Brodie. You may as well finish," his master

enjoined.

“The young lady is here in Paris, and since you’ve permitted me to speak of her, sir, I wonder whether you would pardon the liberty if I were to give you a word of advice.”

“Out with it, then, Brodie,” Jere enjoined, in somewhat peremptory fashion. “You are all right considering your bringing up, but there is one quality I wish you would make for—one American quality, I mean. You beat about the bush too much. Say what you want to and have done with it. If it’s something you ought not to say I shall fire you. If you keep something back you ought to say I shall fire you all the same.”

“Very well, sir, I’ll take my risk,” Brodie replied. “Down at Long Island first your room was searched and then the Princess’. What for? Something the Princess possesses which someone else thought she might have given to you for safe custody. Then again on the steamer the Princess had to go through the same thing. The fact of it is she has in her possession some letter, paper, bond or testament which other people are willing to commit murder or anything else for. It ain’t right, sir. She’s as plucky as they make them, but she takes too big risks. With me to look after you no one could hurt us. You persuade her to hand over to you whatever it is that keeps these people worrying round. We will get a portable strong box with a key I know something of, and whatever it is she is anxious about we’ll take through to Jakovia all right with us.”

“It’s an idea, Brodie,” Jere admitted wistfully. “All the same I don’t believe Her Highness would trust me as far as that.”

“You try her some time, sir,” Brodie persisted.

Jere glanced at him curiously for a moment. On the face of it the man’s suggestion was one which entailed danger for both of them. It was either the gesture of a brave man anxious to serve his love-smitten master, or it might mean that even Brodie was not altogether incorruptible. Jere was ashamed of the thought almost as soon as he had conceived it. He sprang out of bed.

“Did you say that Her Highness was staying in the hotel, Brodie?”

“She arrived with her aunt last night, sir. The one who was down at Long Island—the Baroness de Sturgiwil. I believe the Baron is here too, or expected very shortly.”

“Turn on my bath,” Jere ordered. “Any mail?”

“One note, sir, just brought in by hand.”

Brodie handed it across discreetly—a rose-coloured and perfumed affair, with the address written in violet ink, and leaving very little doubt from its exterior as to the nature of its source. Jere read it through with a grin at the memory of his last night’s adventure. Mademoiselle Suzanne, it appeared, was entranced by his enterprise! She had decided to plead fatigue and excuse herself from accompanying her friend to the races that afternoon. At four

o'clock she would expect Monsieur Jere. Jere tore up the note with a little laugh.

"I have taken one liberty already this morning, sir," Brodie remarked a few minutes later, as he stood rubbing his master down with eau de Cologne. "I wonder whether you would allow me to take another?"

"Go right ahead with it," the latter invited. "I brought you along to look after me, didn't I? That gives you the right to butt in when you want to, or rather when there is any need for it."

"The young person who brought the note—a very handsome piece of goods, sir—she would not give it up to anyone except you or your personal servant, so they fetched me. Glad they did, sir, if you don't mind my saying so—means a free seat for me at the Ambassadeurs to-night and a little supper afterwards if you have no objection."

"Not the slightest. Amuse yourself while you can, Brodie. From what I can hear there won't be much doing that way in Pletz."

"Well, anyway sir, the young lady was quite friendly. She is the confidential *femme de chambre*, as she told me, to Mademoiselle Suzanne Delage, and Mademoiselle Suzanne is quite an interesting lady to know just now."

"Why?"

"Well, the young woman would not listen to it, of course," Brodie continued, "but I have been told more than once that she is the famous beauty whom all the papers keep hinting at who is responsible for some of the trouble in Jakovia."

Jere whistled softly to himself.

"What an ass I was not to think of that," he murmured, "and what an ass I might have made of myself if I had had just one glass more of champagne! Where's the Rue Dubonnet, Brodie?"

"Last turn but one on the Champs Elysées before you come to the Arc de Triomphe," was the prompt reply. "Mademoiselle Delage's apartment is number seventeen at the corner of the first street you come to on the left-hand side."

"You seem to know a great many things, Brodie," his master observed.

"I hope I know that you will be there at four o'clock this afternoon, sir. I figure it out that it might be worth your while if you are really going to take an interest in Jakovia. I would not be later than a quarter to four, either, sir. That would give you plenty of time for a nice little chat and I will hang around—there's a café at the corner of the street—in case there should be any trouble."

Jere lit a cigarette and threw himself into an armchair.

"You being in a kind of way my father confessor, Brodie," he confided, "I will be frank with you. I should like a talk with Mademoiselle Delage, but I

don't want to keep this rendezvous seriously."

Brodie's expression was one of mild pity. The morals of a native of Jakovia had always been very plastic where a beautiful woman was concerned.

"If you are in earnest about that, sir," he remarked, after a moment's reflection, "I will arrange something in the nature of an interruption before you have time to get too confidential. I think I can work it. I will do my best, anyway."

"Sound fellow," Jere approved. "See to the roses then and order a car. I've got to lunch at the Embassy and meet the Consul, the chap who knows something about the business end of Jakovia. He's going to talk to me about the place."

"The roses, I guess, will be for Mademoiselle Suzanne?" the man inquired. Jere nodded.

"The serious business, Brodie," he confided, "is a little more difficult. I think I had better not approach the Princess until we happen to meet."

Brodie's smile was perfectly respectful but rather subtle.

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At a quarter to four that afternoon a discreet-looking butler admitted Jere to Mademoiselle Suzanne Delage's very famous suite of apartments in the Rue Dubonnet. He handed him over at once to the charge of Mademoiselle Céleste, who invited him to mount the stairs.

"Madame will receive you in her room," she whispered confidentially. "Monsieur is very highly favoured."

Jere's pocket-book acknowledged the compliment. . . . In due course he was ushered into a small but very luxurious apartment filled with delightfully designed French furniture, which lacked a definite period, however, as it was comfortable almost to the point of exaggeration. Suzanne in a primrose coloured negligée received him joyfully.

"Oh, that droll return of yours last night," she exclaimed, as she made room for him to sit by her side on an enormous settee. "How I laughed, and how furious those two idiots were!"

"I couldn't resist the temptation," Jere remarked, smiling. "After all it can be no sin to dance with you. Tell me—Colonel Grogner I know slightly, of course, but who was your other companion who refused to dance and who wanted to have me turned out?"

"An old friend of mine—the Comte de Mellet," she replied.

"De Mellet," Jere repeated. "A Frenchman?"

"What does it matter?" was the somewhat peevish rejoinder. "What do the people who are not here at this moment count for? I am free of him for the afternoon. I have made him very angry. I told him that I would not go to the races. He does not know, but I prefer to remain at home and receive you,

Monsieur Jere. I tell you that in case by any chance you should be feeling a little jealous.”

“I’m afraid one would always be jealous about you,” Jere sighed. “Tell me, how did you know my name?”

“Colonel Grogner told me. He is a strange man but he does what I tell him. Tell me, Monsieur Jere, how long do you stay in Paris?”

“Just so long as the world smiles upon me,” he answered.

She pouted very charmingly. It was not for nothing that she was reputed to have the most beautiful mouth in Paris.

“Is it that you want the whole world to be kind to you—Jere?”

“I think,” he answered, with very creditable emphasis, “that I should be very well content if a single person in the world were kind enough.”

She touched his fingers, shivered slightly as though with involuntary emotion, and leaned towards him.

“On Wednesday,” she confided, “he goes.”

“Back home?”

“Never mind where he goes. He goes,” she repeated. “Why are you so curious about him? What does it matter who he is? He is stupid, I tell you that. He does not interest me any more. On Wednesday he goes home. You will be in Paris?”

“Wednesday is quite a long time,” Jere complained.

She laughed.

“Now you talk as I love,” she murmured. “You talk like a Frenchman. You talk almost like a lover. For me too Wednesday is a long time.”

She glanced across at the clock. Very gracefully she slid off the sofa on to her feet. She held out her hand with a charming gesture of invitation. Through the half-open door Jere caught a little vista of the apartment beyond. . . .

“What is it?” her mistress asked impatiently, as the door of the salon was quietly opened, and Céleste came fluttering in.

“Madame,” she announced, “it is a friend who has telephoned. Someone whom I can trust. It is, in fact, the *valet de chambre* of monsieur.”

“Well, what of it?” her mistress demanded.

Her fingers tightened on Jere’s arm. Céleste was out of breath. She glanced at the clock and paused.

“It appears,” she confided, “that Monsieur le Comte lost money upon the first and the second races. He then lost his temper! He sent for the car. By this time he is on his way here.”

There was an angry fire of disappointment in Suzanne’s eyes, but she dropped Jere’s arm at once.

“Much good that will do him,” she exclaimed. “For your sake and mine, Monsieur Jere, I regret so much—you must go. But stop,” she went on. “I must

see you again to-day if only for a minute. This afternoon—at once—without delay. You shall meet me somewhere where he has never been, where he has not the entrée. There we can arrange a rendezvous. Listen—number fourteen Rue de la Paix—*chez* Madame Levillon, my dressmaker. I have a gown to try on. You shall come to my fitting-room. Madame will give us a cocktail. At seven o'clock, dear Jere. Hurry now, please."

Mademoiselle Céleste escorted him down the stairs and handed him over to the butler, and Jere took his leave. Arrived at the hotel he at once summoned Brodie.

"Order me a highball right away," he directed. "And, Brodie," he added reproachfully—

"Yes, Mr. Strole?"

"Don't run it quite so fine another time."

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Madame Levillon's fitting-rooms were little temples of luxury, but they lacked altogether, to Jere's relief, the voluptuous atmosphere of Suzanne's apartment. Suzanne, in the most distracting *déshabille*, sat on the side of the easy-chair in which she had ensconced her visitor and drank a cocktail with him.

"It is finished with him now," she confided, with a sigh of relief, "until he fetches me from the theatre to-night. As for this afternoon, your servant was over anxious. It appears that the Comte did indeed lose his temper and declared that he would leave the course, but when the car was found he went back again. He is just like that. He is a spoilt child. I am tired of him, but—I have a great fondness for you, Monsieur Jere."

"And I, like all the world," Jere assured her, "find you adorable."

She lit a cigarette and, slipping from the side of his chair, submitted herself to the ministrations of one of the fitters. The situation began to be alarming.

"Tell me if I ought to go," Jere begged.

"Do not dare to suggest such a thing," she exclaimed. "You do not like to see me like this—no? Yes? Very well, then, you will remain to see me into my *voiture*. It will be, alas, only five minutes."

"Don't you dine?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Not before the performance. I sup afterwards. One of these gowns they are making for me is to wear for you the first night you fetch me from the theatre and we sup together."

"You will look ravishing in anything," Jere told her gallantly.

She whispered something in his ear and laughed softly at the rising colour in his cheeks.

"The freedom!" she murmured. "Ah, how wonderful! How happy I shall

be.”

“I wish you would tell me who your Comte de Mellet is?” Jere demanded. “I have seen his photograph in the papers somewhere, but I can’t remember when.”

“Next Wednesday I will tell you,” she promised. “Now, mademoiselle, my gown—my hat. My *voiture* is there, I hope?”

“It awaits madame,” the girl replied.

Suzanne placed her hand on her escort’s arm, and they passed through the showrooms together, Madame herself escorting them to the door. They were crossing the pavement and were half-way towards the waiting automobile, when they were compelled to pause to let a little party of people pass who were apparently also paying a visit to the famous dressmaker. With a terrible sinking of the heart Jere recognised them. The first two were the Baroness de Sturgiwil and the Princess, a step or two behind the Baron and Madame de Vallouris!

“Is anything the matter?” Suzanne asked Jere suddenly.

“Nothing,” he assured her.

“Your hand is cold,” she said. “You look as though you had seen a ghost. Those people who were passing—they meant nothing to you?”

He set his teeth. They were several paces away now. A servant was holding open the door of the car. His lips were upon her fingers.

“Ghosts do not haunt the Rue de la Paix,” he murmured, as he handed her in.

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For an hour Jere paced that strip of pavement outside the establishment of Madame Levillon. At the end of that time there was some commotion around the entrance doors. First of all the Princess arrived, escorted by Madame Levillon, behind them the Baron followed with the Baroness and the Comtesse de Vallouris. Jere, who had obstinately determined to stop and take his punishment, nerved himself for what he felt instinctively was about to happen. The Comtesse de Vallouris glanced at him half curiously, half compassionately. The Baroness took in his presence as some defect of the landscape in which she was not greatly interested. Marya passed on, looking at him as at the other passers-by, with eyes incurious and unspeculative. Servants fussed about the door of the automobile, the footmen of the establishment stood bare-headed as they stepped inside. The door was closed, the car drove off.

## CHAPTER XIV

“Colonel Grogner calling to see you, sir,” Brodie announced late on the following afternoon.

Jere collected the papers which he had been studying, covered over several books of reference, and, picking up a novel, made his way to an easy-chair.

“Any idea as to what this may mean, Brodie?” he asked in an undertone.

“It is my belief, sir,” the man replied, “you’ve got the Colonel beat. He can’t believe that you’re not mixed up with the Princess in some sort of intrigue. He’s worried, that’s all. He don’t believe you’re as clever as he is, and he’s come to see if he can get anything out of you.”

Jere smiled confidently. It seemed to him very possible that Brodie had correctly diagnosed the situation.

“Show him in,” he directed.

Colonel Grogner in Paris presented a very elegant appearance. He wore dark grey trousers and patent shoes, a black double-breasted coat which became his thin figure, a tie of dark purple, and a bunch of violets. He had discarded his fixed eyeglass and was wearing one suspended by a cord. The change was rather to his advantage, for his eyes were of a pleasant shade of brown and had a quality of softness.

“Mr. Strole,” he said, as he handed his hat and gloves to Brodie, “it is very good of you to receive me. This is a visit which I think should have been paid on the day of our arrival from Cherbourg. I am glad to believe that perhaps it is not too late.”

“Sounds very interesting,” Jere observed. “I hope you are going to be thoroughly explicit.”

“It is my desire to be so,” Grogner rejoined. “You and I by this time, Mr. Strole, might have done useful work together. We might have progressed far towards a valuable alliance. Unfortunately, I made a mistake.”

“Let’s hear about it,” Jere suggested.

“At Long Island I listened to gossip. They coupled your name with the name of the Princess. I got the idea that she had made good use of her time there to—shall I say?—bind you to her chariot wheels.”

“It sounds picturesque,” Jere admitted, “if a little uncomfortable.”

“I imagined you,” Grogner went on, “on terms of far greater intimacy than I now believe you have ever reached. Naturally, I prepared to defend the interests of my master. I am beginning to feel that my alarm was unnecessary.”

“I should think it probably was,” Jere assented. “Do take a more comfortable chair. Anything to drink?”



“Later, if I may,” Grogner replied, moving into an easy-chair. “I should like to think that we might perhaps drink a cocktail together to cement the new alliance. Mr. Strole, will you permit me to speak of this country in which you have so suddenly displayed a queer interest? I refer to Jakovia.”

“Go ahead, by all means,” Jere invited. “Seems to me, so far as I can learn, to be one of those places one makes a great deal of fuss about, and which doesn’t after all amount to much.”

“It does not appear so to us,” Grogner protested stiffly, “because we are Jakovians. What does appear to us to be strange is that Jakovia should be considered in some quarters as a state brimful of intrigue. In reality, it is nothing of the sort. The issues concerning Jakovia and her future are absolutely simple.”

“Let’s hear them.”

“First of all, then, there is His Majesty King Phillip. He is on the throne by right of direct succession, and, whatever his personal peccadilloes may be, he has never betrayed the trust of the people. And then there is the Princess Marya, whose other titles I will spare you, but who is also of the royal house of Jakovia. She is next in succession to the King, and provided she does not contract any morganatic marriage or otherwise displease the people, she would certainly succeed him.”

“Thanks for that little rub,” Jere said. “Get on with it.”

“The third consideration is a dangerous condition of unrest which exists amongst the people,” Grogner acknowledged frankly. “You see, I am not attempting to deny it. Before we succeeded in driving them out the Bolshevik interest was strong in Pletz, and I am perfectly prepared to admit that there is still a strong revolutionary element. They are beginning to make themselves felt in Parliament, they would, if they could, upset the monarchy altogether and establish some form of communist government.”

“Do you know,” Jere confided, “I am finding you very interesting, Colonel Grogner. You are putting the situation before me lucidly and, I believe, truthfully. I must confess that I am intrigued.”

“You flatter me,” Grogner remarked, smiling. “But for an unfortunate misunderstanding, this would have been the manner of our conversation from the first. I pass on now to the fourth element in Jakovia. It is this. The country is penniless. We have no export business because we have nothing in a fit state to export. The standard of living amongst the people drops all the time. The Jewish bourgeoisie, who are the shopkeepers of the place, are the only portion of the population who can afford to live in any degree of luxury. We others, even we of the aristocracy, are hard put to it to live at all.”

“And yet——” Jere began.

“And yet,” Grogner snapped out, striking the arm of his chair with

clenched fist, “the wealth is there. We have millions of acres of marvellous timber. It is proved that we have oil. We have saltpetre mines, salt, iron and coal and other very valuable minerals. There they lie. The timber uncut and unsawn, the mines unexploited, the oil undisturbed.”

“All for want of capital, I suppose.”

“Primarily, yes,” Grogner agreed. “But there is a catch in that. The oil-bearing lands, the forests and the mines, are all Crown lands. They are not, strictly speaking, part of the national wealth. Anyone prepared to deal with these must deal in the first instance with His Majesty King Phillip.”

“Now,” Jere pointed out, “we are coming to a really interesting juncture. There is no harm in telling you this—what I am sure you have already discovered for yourself—that I have been approached by the Princess Marya with a view to ascertaining whether I would help raise money to exploit these industries. Will you tell me how we’d have got to work supposing I’d been able and willing to find the capital?”

“We come to the crux of the whole matter,” Grogner declared joyfully. “With your capital the Princess Marya would have addressed herself to the malcontents, they would have driven away the King, confiscated his rights, probably placed Princess Marya upon the throne and brought in the proceeds of the various enterprises to the national exchequer.”

“There seems to me a certain amount of reason about that,” Jere decided, “only I can’t see why the revolutionaries can’t act for themselves instead of dragging the Princess in.”

“There is an amazing royalist spirit in Jakovia,” Grogner confided. “They would rather do a thing like this under the cloak of royalty. Now, perhaps, Mr. Strole, you can understand why I feared so much your association with Princess Marya. I am a King’s man. The Princess could only have secured your aid by misrepresentation.”

“Good,” Jere said. “Now come along and state your case as a King’s man. You have, let us say for example, five hundred million dollars’ worth of coal, iron and other metals, oil and timber, buried in Jakovia. They belong to the King. The people are, compared to the standard of living of other nations, starving. Now, what is the King, or what are you, going to do about that?”

“We want to do something about it,” Grogner exclaimed in excitement. “We were working out a scheme, and along came Princess Marya and interfered. I went out to America to try and interest your financial houses in the development of the country. The Princess Marya was there before me. She spoilt my chances.”

“But remember this,” Jere pointed out. “You claim that all these lands and minerals are the property of the King alone. You want to finance them on that basis, yet you must know that people would never stand for it. They would

never stand to see the wealth of their country drawn out of the earth to fill the private exchequers of the King, with the people of the country not one penny better off.”

Grogner’s smile was almost beatific.

“Mr. Strole,” he confided, “yours is the type of brain I love to have to deal with. You have enabled me to demonstrate the whole situation in ten minutes’ conversation. You are right in what you have just said. You are unalterably right. No bank or collection of millionaires would finance a country on behalf of a king, knowing very well that the result would be such that a revolution and subsequent repudiation would be certainties. We propose nothing of that sort. The King is willing to make a splendid gesture. He is willing to divide equally with the people. Half the proceeds of any arrangement we can make are to go to the nation, half to his private exchequer. Those are the terms I was prepared to offer if I could have found anyone in your country willing to listen to me.”

Jere lit a cigarette and pushed the box across to his visitor.

“There is only one catch in the whole of this business as you put it, that I can see,” he remarked.

“And what is that?” Grogner demanded.

“The Princess Marya must have something else at the back of her mind. I can’t quite see her associating herself with the people and working directly against the monarchy.”

“Her Royal Highness,” Grogner explained, “is possessed of a very peculiar character. Her devotion to royalist principles is such that she would go to any length to prevent Jakovia from becoming a republic.”

“Does she know definitely that the King is willing to relinquish half his rights?” Jere asked.

“The King has already said as much in plain words. The Princess smiles. She believes nothing. Because the King has once or twice departed from his word she has lost all faith in him. I say, and I say it to you, Mr. Strole, that the Princess’ intervention is unsound and dangerous. This business must be dealt with through the King. I know that you have not, of course, a great word to say in the affairs of your firm, but all the same, I invite you, Mr. Jeremiah Vavasour Strole, to meet King Phillip of Jakovia and hear what he has to say. You have listened to the Princess. Now listen to the King. Between the two you may gain vision.”

“But after all, you know,” Jere pointed out, “for any all round scheme here you’d want an enormous amount of money. I shouldn’t say you could start on all three propositions with less than two hundred and fifty million dollars.”

“Seven years ago,” Grogner reminded his companion, “the firm of Vavasour Strole, Incorporated, started a little affair down in South America

with three hundred and fifty million dollars.”

“Seven years ago,” Jere commented, “there was enough money in Wall Street to have bought half the civilised world. Things are very different now.”

“Not so very different,” Grogner insisted. “It may seem an impertinence for me to remind you of your firm’s transactions, but remember I spent a week in Wall Street, and one learns a great deal in that time. I learnt, for instance, that as a side-show to banking, Vavasour Strole, Incorporated, had acquired the whole of the capital—some hundred million dollars it was, I think—of the largest automobile firm in the world. Even the amount represented by the rise in the value of those shares since we left New York would be sufficient to start us in our little enterprise.”

Jere shrugged his shoulders.

“Well,” he said, “we won’t argue about matters that don’t directly concern the subject. I should like you to understand this, though, I don’t propose to keep any part of our conversation now or at any future time secret from the Princess Marya.”

Grogner for a moment looked grave.

“You yourself must be the best judge of your own actions, Mr. Strole,” he admitted. “The Princess, I know, very much resented my visit to New York, and I am decidedly no favourite of hers. Still, this is a national, not a personal affair, and you have heard what Her Royal Highness has to say about it. With His Majesty’s permission, I am inviting you to dine with him and myself—a party of three—to-night at half-past nine, to hear what we have to say.”

“Very well,” Jere promised. “It will be the first time I have ever dined with a king, but I will take a chance. The little affair of the other night, I presume \_\_\_\_\_”

“Forgetfulness is one of a king’s prerogatives,” Grogner interrupted, with an understanding smile.

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“To-night, Brodie,” Jere announced an hour or so later, “I am dining with a king.”

“You’ll need another white waistcoat, then, sir,” the man replied.

“A white waistcoat by all means,” Jere agreed, “but I’m afraid, Brodie, that I’m not going to get much kick out of it. I may be mistaken, but I have a very strong idea that I nearly punched His Majesty on the nose the night before last at the Café de Paris.”

Brodie remained cheerful.

“If it’s the king I’m thinking of, sir,” he observed, “you may find yourself doing it before you’ve finished with this trip.”

## CHAPTER XV

His Majesty King Phillip of Jakovia, when he entered the small ante-room of the Ritz Hotel where Jere was waiting, proved that he at least possessed the *savoir faire* of a monarch. He greeted Jere with the courteous interest of one making acquaintance with a stranger. Colonel Grogner stepped forward.

"It is understood," he said, as he extended his hand to Jere, "that I am presenting Mr. Jeremiah Strole who has been appointed to the American Legation at Pletz and who is associated with the great banking-house of New York, to Comte de Mellet of Pletz, but it is also to be understood, by you privately, Mr. Strole, that you have at the same time the honour of meeting His Majesty King Phillip, ruling monarch of Jakovia."

Jere, not altogether unused to ceremonial introductions during his brief career as a diplomat, acquitted himself with credit. Not by the flicker of an eyelid did he betray the fact of the recent *rencontre*. A waiter hovering in the background with *apéritifs* now hastened forward.

"I will take the liberty, sir," Jere said, raising his glass, "of drinking to the prosperity of the ancient kingdom of Jakovia."

The glasses were drained. The King, as he set his down empty, appeared to be in good temper.

"It is from your country, I believe, Mr. Strole," he observed, "that there comes the quaint superstition as to the inability of a bird to fly on one wing."

The little flight of humour was duly appreciated, and Grogner pointed, with the satisfaction of the complete host, to the door through which a second waiter was already approaching with a fresh shaker.

"You have never visited America, sir?" Jere asked.

"Never. It would give me great pleasure, but the country over which I reign allows one scant opportunity for prolonged excursions. If I were away for even a couple of months, I should probably return to find either our friend's father here, who is Prime Minister of the country, firmly established as President, or my own fair cousin on the throne as Queen! As a matter of fact, Grogner," the King concluded, "I think your father would be much too clever to play any games of that sort. They would never pay him as much for being President as he gets out of being Prime Minister. . . ."

One of the head *maîtres d'hôtel* announced dinner. The three men entered the restaurant and were established at a corner table beautifully decorated. The King's appreciation of the compliments shown to him by the arrangement of the flowers and the colours of Jakovia, was courteously expressed to the manager who was hovering in attendance. Grogner, as soon as the champagne

had been served, plunged very quickly into the business side of the proposed conversation.

“Mr. Strole wishes it to be understood, sir,” he said, “that he is not visiting Jakovia in any way as an ambassador from his firm. He is, as a matter of fact, not connected with the bank at all. He has been appointed to the American Legation at Pletz, which will, of course, give him many opportunities for studying conditions amongst us.”

“Quite so,” the King agreed.

“Mr. Strole has already shown his interest in our country,” Colonel Grogner continued, glancing at Jere with a faint smile, “by despatching various experts—some from America and some from England—who are at the present moment making reports upon the timber lands and the oil country.”

Jere was momentarily taken aback.

“Say, who put you wise to that, Colonel?” he demanded.

Grogner smiled. It was, at any rate, a minor triumph for him.

“The domestic Secret Service of Jakovia,” he observed, “has always been good, and since my appointment I have done my best to keep it up to the mark. I congratulate you upon your enterprise, Mr. Strole. It may save us months of negotiation, because the reports you will receive from your investigators can only be favourable.”

The King, who was displaying both a wholesome appetite and a copious thirst, became at this point impressive.

“Mr. Strole,” he said, “I doubt whether in the whole of Europe you could find an area so rich in the natural products of the land as that tract of country known as the Crown lands of Jakovia. The wealth it contains is inexhaustible. Think, I beg of you, of the paradox of the conditions under which we are now living. These lands are mine. A billion dollars would be less than their cash value, yet at the present moment my treasury is empty, my privy purse is depleted. I am suffering the indignities of owing money. You will find such a condition of things unbelievable, Mr. Strole. It is nevertheless true.”

“It certainly does not seem reasonable,” Jere admitted. “I must congratulate you upon your English, sir. I do not think that I have ever heard a foreigner speak with less accent.”

The King gave his moustache the familiar upward twirl. He was very proud of his linguistic abilities.

“I speak Italian, French and German just as good,” he declared complacently. “I was educated in England and I very nearly had the good fortune to be betrothed to an English princess. In that case, with the Capitalists of England to fall back upon, the present unfortunate situation would not have arisen.”

“I should like you to understand, Mr. Strole,” Grogner went on, “that His

Majesty is absolutely correct in what he has been saying. The Crown lands of Jakovia are sufficient to make him one of the richest men in the world. His Majesty, however, has no desire to take up that position. He has inherited the old traditions, traditions which I may say have been in existence since Biblical days. He desires to share what he has with his people.”

“It is true,” the King declared, signalling to the waiter to bring back the dish from which he had recently been served. “What I would like,” he went on, “and anyone able to assist me in the matter would scarcely be able to complain of my ingratitude, would be in the first place—and this to be looked upon as a matter of urgency—in the first place a loan upon my seventy thousand acres of oil lands. I should not require to borrow more than a tenth part of their value. I should be prepared to pay an exceptional rate of interest, and any office, emolument or title within the power of the Crown to bestow, would be at the disposal of the lender. But the one condition would be urgency. It may seem to you a matter for jest, Mr. Strole, that a king should have to confess to poverty, but that situation, let me tell you, in my case exists.”

The King emptied his glass of champagne, pushed his plate away for the third time, sat back in his chair and gazed with glassy stare across the room. He relapsed into most unkinglike slang.

“Look who’s here,” he murmured.

Jere already knew. It was not long before Grogner shared his knowledge. A very distinguished-looking company were taking their places at a table some short distance away. The Princess, accompanied by the Baron de Sturgiwil, an elderly man with the ribbons of many orders on the lapel of his coat, were a little ahead, the Baroness with a younger man and a very beautiful woman, followed. The Comtesse de Vallouris, who was already standing at the table, indicated the places. One by one the women made their almost indefinite curtsey across the room to the King, and the men bowed. The King returned their greetings with dignity. The only slight lapse from the smoothness of the ceremony rested with Marya. The sight of Jere at the King’s right-hand seemed for a moment to trouble her self-possession. Her curtsey almost faltered. She obviously paid no attention for several seconds to her somewhat garrulous companion.

“That is the worst of dining in a public place,” the King complained. “One’s relatives are always there. You are an admirer of my cousin, I hear, Mr. Strole?”

“I am indeed,” Jere replied. “I think she is very attractive and very beautiful.”

“So all the world says,” the King remarked drily. “I prefer her companion, the Princess Louise of Parma de Bourdon, who is also a connexion of mine. She has more of the real southern blood in her. . . . So you are coming to

Jakovia, Mr. Strole?"

"Very shortly, sir."

"Consider my propositions, I beg of you. There are indirect concessions I should be willing to yield to anyone showing themselves a true friend of my country. Remember that, though in some respects we may seem to have fallen behind, we are still one of the few independent kingdoms which remain. We have our place at Geneva. Our vote there in a moment of crisis might be an exceedingly valuable thing. Although you are only at the commencement of your career, Mr. Strole, I need not tell you that there are wheels turning within wheels in the great game of diplomacy. No one has ever said of a Jakovian that he was ungrateful."

"No one would expect to find you so, sir," Jere acknowledged. "I have some agents in the country now, as Colonel Grogner seems to have found out, and I am hoping that soon after I arrive they will be able to present their reports to me."

The King studied his guest shrewdly. His fingers were playing with the ends of his fair, upturned moustache.

"Your first interests in the country, I understand, were awakened by my cousin."

"That is quite true," Jere admitted.

"Charming no doubt," the King conceded, "but at the Palace we look upon her as an *intriguante*. At one time she had a great ambition. It was to marry—I will not tell you his name, but a royal prince of great wealth—to stir up trouble amongst the people, induce me to abdicate, and herself ascend the throne. That was at a time when I was not so well served by my secret police, but Grogner here found out all about it. A thousand cases of rifles came in one day—across the frontier too. We had to shoot six of our customs men."

"What became of the rifles?" Jere asked curiously.

"They are in the arsenal at Pletz," the King told him. "Some day or other they will come in useful, but at present we cannot secure the proper ammunition. They will speak bullets, though, in the next war. It is time enough."

"You do not believe, then, that we are in for a forty years peace, sir?" Jere inquired.

The King twirled his moustache scornfully.

"Neither I nor any sane person believes that. I could put my finger upon the map at the present moment and show you where, within a hundred miles, the first shot will be fired. When that next war is over, Mr. Strole, Europe will be nothing but a dust-heap, with one savage beast still alive, sniffing round to see if by chance there is anything he has spared. That is why I say to my friend Grogner here—although he is not young like you and me—I say if you seek



anything of pleasure in this world, take it now. I know what I am talking about, Mr. Strole. As a rule we sovereigns are the last people to know anything that happens outside their own country. With me it is not so. Often I choose to travel incognito. It is then that one learns.”

“It seems incredible,” Jere ruminated, “to think of another war when the whole of Europe, and America too, talk of nothing but disarmament and Peace Conferences.”

The King laughed scornfully as he leaned forward in his place.

“My young friend,” he confided, “a fortnight ago two European Powers, both of them signatories to the League of Nations, were on the point of war. Nothing stopped them but one thing, and that was not the authority of the League of Nations, not the sceptre of any king—it was the sceptre wielded by you bankers!—the exchange. . . . If you would be a great man, Mr. Strole, during the next generation, and carve your name on the leaflet of fame, do not be ambitious to rule a kingdom—be the head of a bank. . . . Grogner, I talk too much. I am thirsty.”

Wine flowed as though by magic into the King’s glass. He glanced at his watch.

“You are quite right, sir,” Grogner whispered, “we have an engagement in ten minutes.”

“It has been a very pleasant meeting,” the King pronounced graciously. “I hope you will think seriously over what I have said, Mr. Strole. You have the opportunity, with our help, which will be freely given to you, of carrying out a great financial coup. Take my advice—pay your diplomatic calls in Pletz as a matter of course, but avoid any entanglements, cultivate my friend Colonel Grogner here as much as you will, but have little to say to his father. As for my cousin—avoid her. Believe me she is dangerous! She has nothing for you. She has nothing for any man. She would like to sit upon my throne and be the Virgin Queen of the moderns!”

Jere sighed.

“I have the greatest admiration for your cousin, sir,” he confessed, “but it is unfortunately an admiration which she does not seem to reciprocate.”

“Some day you will realise how much that is your good fortune,” the King assured him. “Many thanks, Mr. Strole, for your hospitality. It will give me great pleasure in Pletz to make some effort to return it.”

The King rose to his feet. Grogner and Jere followed suit. The three walked together to the door.

“You will pardon my reminding you, sir,” Grogner whispered, “that it will take us at least ten minutes to reach the Ambassadeurs.”

The King shook hands hastily and the two men hurried away. Jere turned back into the lounge where a smiling *maître d’hôtel* was waiting for him with

the bill. . . .

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From a place of obscurity behind the giant palms in the lounge Jere watched the breaking up and departure of the rival dinner party. It seemed to him that Marya lingered at the gate of the lift, after she and the Baroness had taken leave of their guests, as though in search of someone, but before he could step forward the gate had been closed and they had disappeared. Rather aimlessly he mounted to his room. Brodie had gone off duty, but there was neither note nor telephone message. He descended again into the lounge. There were still plenty of people moving about, and with the help of a newspaper he settled himself down to pass the next half an hour. He was still within sight of the lift and, for some reason or other, whenever it descended he turned that way. The reward for his pertinacity came quite unexpectedly. He glanced up at the opening of the gate and found the Comtesse de Vallouris crossing the floor towards him. He rose at once to his feet and she immediately quickened her pace.

“It is Monsieur Strole, is it not?” she asked.

“That’s right,” Jere assented.

“The Princess begs that you will await her coming here. She will be down as soon as possible.”

“With the greatest pleasure,” was Jere’s prompt reply.

He escorted the Comtesse back to the lift.

“The Baron de Sturgiwil is in Paris for a few days,” she announced, “and he and the Baroness may detain the Princess for some short time. She will not keep you waiting, however, longer than necessary.”

“Beg Her Highness not to hurry on my account,” Jere replied. “I have some papers to read and you will tell her where to find me.”

He returned to his place and suddenly found the *New York Herald* entrancing reading. That she was coming down herself to talk to him seemed too good to be true. Half an hour passed—three-quarters. Then there was the rattle of the lift and Jere raised his head once more. This time he rose to his feet with a little smothered exclamation of pleased surprise. The Princess in a filmy dress of smoke-coloured grey, followed by a maid carrying her bag and theatre coat, was crossing the floor towards him.

## CHAPTER XVI

“But this is wonderful,” Jere exclaimed, as they moved side by side towards the exit. “Is it a Cinderella trick? You were wearing black when I saw you an hour ago, and looking rather bored.”

“I was bored,” she admitted. “With the Baroness I am always happy, but my French relatives I find sometimes a little distressing. However, I must not say too much because I am taking you to see them. You have a car?”

With a wave of relief, Jere remembered that he had forgotten to send his away.

“It is waiting,” he replied.

She nodded approvingly.

“You are quite like the Fairy Prince,” she proclaimed. “Everything with you is where it should be. Listen, I am being very daring. After all, this is Paris and not New York.”

The car rolled up to the entrance. The maid wrapped the cloak around her mistress’ shoulders and stepped back.

“Forty-three, Avenue du Bois de Boulogne. Will you tell him, please,” Marya begged. “Now I will explain,” she added, as they rolled off. “The Lucigny de Bourdons are giving a reception to-night. It is as well that I should be seen there. You escort me, we pay our respects and afterwards, if there is any place you know of which is not too noisy and where we are not likely to meet Phillip, we will go and dance. Does my plan please you?”

“Entrancing,” Jere declared. “I am wondering what on earth I’ve done to deserve such good luck!”

“I am beginning to think that I have not treated you very well,” she confided. “It is my aunt who first put it into my head. She has not an obsession in life like I have, so she lives more amongst the world that counts. You disappointed me rather badly, but I have the feeling that it was not altogether your fault. At any rate, you did not run away.”

“I should say not,” Jere replied. “I not only got that job at Pletz, but I have my places in the train for next Tuesday.”

She lifted her eyebrows at this.

“That may be embarrassing,” she declared. “On the other hand, it may be amusing.”

“You are travelling by the same train?” he exclaimed.

“Shall I believe,” she asked, “that your surprise is genuine?”

“It certainly is,” Jere assured her. “I had nothing to do with booking the reservations, but if I’d known that was the day you were going, I wouldn’t

have dared to accept them. I promise you I wouldn't."

"Well, I daresay it will be all right," she said. "Now I suppose if I ask why on earth you were dining with Phillip this evening, you will probably imagine that my changed attitude is simply due to my curiosity."

"I'll believe anything you tell me," he assured her. "I was invited to dinner by our mutual friend, Colonel Grogner, as an American who might influence the investment of capital in Jakovia, and to discuss the matter of the Crown lands."

"I thought so," she murmured. "And did you buy all the King's oil, and all the King's forests and all the King's mines? Did you thrust your hand very deep down into your pocket, Jeremiah Strole?"

"I was left to pay the dinner bill," he confided. "That's all the money I've parted with up till now."

She laughed softly, but so continuously that she was obliged at last to wipe her eyes.

"That is so like Phillip," she exclaimed. "It is so like Grogner. They have no money. I do not know how Phillip paid his railway fare to Paris. They would invite you to dinner and then leave you to pay. Yes, that is the type. And what of Mademoiselle Suzanne? Were you also permitted to pay her dressmaker's bill?"

Jere's cheeks burned. Somehow or other his little adventure with Suzanne seemed suddenly to assume serious proportions.

"I can assure you——" he began.

She stopped him.

"I dislike protestations," she interrupt coldly. "I asked you only one question. Have you relieved Phillip of his obligations? Is Mademoiselle Suzanne your mistress?"

"I have never possessed a mistress in my life," he declared emphatically.

She laughed at him, but he fancied that he detected relief underneath her mirth.

"Do not let anyone in France hear you say that," she advised. "You would be thought quite unfit for the *monde chic*! Heavens, we are there! Keep close to me, please. If I do not present you to many people it is because it is not the custom here. That you are my escort may make you an object of some curiosity. Ignore it. I am in a queer mood to-night, and I do not wish to meet more of my friends than I can help."

To Jere the next half-hour, interesting enough though it was in its way, was a period of mitigated torture. The reception rooms were on the first floor, and upon their arrival they took their places amongst the line of people making slow progress up the broad stairs. Nearly every man except himself was wearing the ribbons of many orders, and the majority were in uniform. They

moved about a foot at a time, and it appeared to be indecorous to talk. There was a clear space around the Prince and Princess, kept by an imposing-looking personage wielding a wand. At Marya's approach, the Princess took a step forward and curtsied. Jere received a stiff but gracious bow, a shake of the hand from the Prince, and in a few minutes they found themselves in the great ballroom.

"Look around you for a moment," Marya begged, "for this is very beautiful. Do you see the faded silk panels which reach nearly to the ceiling? They are all by Watteau. The room has not been redecorated for over two centuries, but it is still beautiful."

"What is this music?" Jere asked.

"Nothing I ever heard of before," she shivered. "We turn to the right here."

They found themselves in an ante room into which apparently few people had penetrated. A footman brought them sweet champagne and cakes. Afterwards the Princess led the way out into a great hall and down a staircase.

"Now, my young friend, Mr. Strole," she said, "will you admit that I know how to enjoy an evening party and pay my respects to my relatives at the same time?"

"Do you mean to say we're through?" he asked.

"That is indeed the case," she assured him. "The doors in front of us through which no one is allowed to enter—only to leave—lead into the Rue Huber, and you will find your car there. If there is any place where we can go and dance and talk for a time, I will go with you. I have never done such a thing before, but my aunt says that I am foolish. Perhaps she is right."

"I always liked your aunt," Jere declared fervently.

"And she likes you," the Princess replied.

"And you?" he ventured.

"That is a more difficult matter," she announced. "I like and dislike you. If you could learn to be a little less abrupt I think I might at least achieve toleration."

They found a restaurant in the Bois of which Marya approved. They ordered wine and danced to the music of the Tzigane orchestra. Quite suddenly the Princess declared that she was hungry, and Jere ordered supper.

"I ate nothing to-night," she confessed. "The sight of you three men opposite to me took away all my appetite. It seemed to me that by my silence I was assisting at a fraud."

"Did I look so much like a shorn lamb?" he demanded.

She looked at him contemplatively.

"No," she admitted. "You looked quite equal to the task of taking care of yourself. I daresay you are clever in your way, but I must tell you this. Supposing you advance my cousin one hundred thousand dollars on the

security of five hundred thousand dollars' worth of oil lands, you will lose every cent of it!"

"This is a new game to me," Jere declared. "You'll have to show me the ropes. How do I lose money when I hold securities worth five times as much as my advance?"

She sighed.

"All this is so hard and unsatisfactory," she murmured. "Ah, my dear young friend, if only you were a prince!"

"If I were a prince," he repeated, "what should you do with me then?"

"Marry you, I suppose," she answered. "Then there would be an end of all this nonsense."

"But what about Phillip? I admit I don't think Phillip is the world's wonder as a king. He doesn't seem to take the job seriously enough. All the same, I don't see how we could get rid of him unless we adopted your idea of a revolution. I think a joust at arms between Phillip and myself would be just as effective and much more amusing."

"You must please take me seriously," she begged. "This is not a night for frivolity."

He sighed.

"I'm all attention," he assured her, "but listen to that divine waltz."

"You will be serious afterwards?"

"Absolutely," he promised.

They danced for some time in silence. It was a restaurant de luxe, but the theatrical supper-goers as a rule preferred the places closer at hand, and there was no crowd. When they resumed their seats there was an unusual colour in her cheeks, and he could have laughed aloud for sheer happiness. The miracle had happened! His Princess was condescending to look out upon life.

"Here comes our supper," he pointed out. "Just in time to save me from saying anything banal about your dancing. Oh, Princess," he groaned, "if you were only like this to me always!"

"I wish I could be," she told him frankly. "Sometimes I think that I am two different people. Be kind to both, please, Jeremiah Strole. It may not seem so to you, but if you hurt one you hurt the other, and—Jere," she went on, bringing out his name with an adorable hesitation, "I think I must ask you to promise me something—I was too proud to ask you to do so before, but I have more confidence in you now—you must not lend, or cause your bank to lend, any money whatever to the King."

"But you know what he promises?"

"What?"

"He promises to divide the whole of any money he may get from the Crown lands between the National Exchequer and his Privy Purse. If anything

should come of our negotiations, he is going to have placards in all the streets to this effect.”

“That is what he would do,” she murmured bitterly. “You must not let him go so far. If he were allowed to do that, the people would take him back into their hearts, and it is not fair. Indeed, it is not fair.”

“Look here,” Jere pointed out. “Supposing that after all I had been able to find you that twenty million we were speaking of, you couldn’t have dealt with the matter except through the King. Most people would agree that it was pretty generous of him to give up half his holdings.”

She became very quiet, and he realised that she was coldly angry.

“You have been talking to Grogner and Phillip,” she said. “It is the one thing which I warned you that you must not do. If you deal with them, I warn you that you will lose your money.”

“You tell me so much,” he begged, “tell me a little more. These lands and forests cannot disappear. You yourself have told me that they are Crown lands. In what other way can they be dealt with than through the King?”

He could see the struggle of indecision in her face. Very nearly she cast her pride to the winds and told him the whole truth. Then some intruding impulse crept in. Horror of the thing she was proposing to do locked her lips. The old standards triumphed.

“I am going to ask a great deal of you, Jeremiah Strole,” she admitted. “Frankly, I am going to ask more than I have a right to ask you.”

“I am right here,” he said softly.

“I want you to promise me that you will have no dealings with the King, or with Grogner on his behalf, whatever.”

“That goes,” Jere promised. “I imagine you are just in time.”

“You have not parted with any money to them?” she asked quickly.

“Not a cent,” Jere assured her. “There was a little matter of a hundred thousand mentioned which I expect I shall hear something about again, but I not only have not parted with a cent, I have not promised to part with a cent, and I now promise that I never will without your permission.”

She drew a great sigh of relief.

“Now,” she said, “you can finish your supper, we will have one more dance, and then you can take me home.”

## CHAPTER XVII

Jere had the shock of his life when, after having left Marya at the lift, he mounted happily to his room to find two visitors established there. The King was stretched out in the most comfortable easy-chair, his feet extended upon a footstool. Grogner was seated at the table, apparently making some calculations upon a sheet of paper. There was an empty champagne bottle upon the table, and from a full one Brodie was refilling the King's extended tumbler. The latter waved his hand gaily to Jere at his entrance, but made no attempt to rise. Grogner at once sprang to his feet.

"I do hope you will pardon this liberty, Mr. Strole," he begged. "His Majesty took it into his head to-night that he must have a conversation with you before he slept. I accordingly brought him up here. We learnt from your servant that you were out, but that you were not addicted to late hours, and we decided to wait for you."

"Why, that's all right," Jere declared hospitably. "You have found something to drink, I'm glad to see."

"We took the slight liberty, I fear," the King murmured. "I drink nothing but champagne, and your servant was most pressing."

"I am delighted," Jere assured him. "A highball for me, Brodie. Very nice of you to have looked me up. Cigarettes at your elbow, sir. Any fresh news from Jakovia? You can leave the bottle upon the table, Brodie; we will look after ourselves now."

Brodie looked round the room to make sure there was nothing else likely to be needed, and took his leave. The King smiled approvingly.

"Excellent servant," he murmured. "Excellent master. Mr. Strole, you have the makings of a diplomat. You realised at once that a visit at this hour of the night was something out of the usual, you realised that a little private conversation was indicated."

"Well, I thought you had something to say, perhaps," Jere admitted. "Now we are alone we can get right down to it."

Grogner left his chair and came and stood on the rug between the King's easy-chair and Jere.

"His Majesty, Mr. Strole," he explained, "was very much interested in your conversation at dinner. I will not at this hour beat about the bush. You may remember that an immediate loan of a small amount was hinted at."

"I remember quite well," Jere assented.

"It must seem almost fantastic to you," the King intervened, with a little upward twirl of his moustache, "positively and absolutely fantastic, Mr. Strole,



to come across a king who is short of money.”

“There is something a little quaint in the idea,” Jere agreed.

“It never occurred to my father or my grandfather,” Phillip went on. “It never occurred, so far as I can gather, to any previous sovereign of Jakovia. I am the first unfortunate to face trouble of this sort. I came to the throne to find a diminished civil list, reduced allowances and impoverished exchequer. Such economies as were possible I have effected, but one must live, Mr. Strole—even kings must live.”

Jere checked the famous retort of Voltaire to such a speech, which rose promptly to his lips.

“Naturally,” he murmured.

“And kings,” Phillip went on, smiling as Jere leaned forward to replenish his glass, “must pay their hotel bills, give presents to their friends and generally speaking—er—what is that expressive American phrase?—keep their end up.”

“The phrase,” Jere commented, “is English, but it will do.”

“Very well,” the King said. “To do these things I need money.”

“The King, as a matter of fact,” Grogner intervened, “needs money very badly and he needs it immediately.”

“A purely personal matter,” Phillip observed, “absolutely secured upon any portion you, my young friend, might select of the Crown lands—amply and fully secured—but with the cash ready without any delay for legal formalities.”

“A note of hand of His Majesty’s,” Grogner suggested, “would, we thought, be sufficient.”

The latter turned apologetically to the King.

“Your Majesty will excuse me for one moment?” he begged. “There is a word I should like to have with our young friend privately.”

The King waved his hand graciously.

“By all means,” he agreed. “My presence at all at such a conversation is perhaps a little irregular, but I looked upon Mr. Strole as a friend for whom an exception could be made.”

Grogner led his host into the latter’s bedroom and carefully closed the door.

“You will understand, my dear Mr. Strole,” he said, “that it was impossible for me to explain the urgency of this affair in His Majesty’s presence. You have seen him and know what sort of a man he is—like us others, eh? Genial, a *bon viveur*, fond of his glass of wine, and as a bachelor king—what would you have?—his mistress.”

“A very human person, I should say,” Jere admitted.

“He is simply infatuated with Suzanne Delage,” Grogner went on. “Personally I regret this, because I think a woman with a different reputation

would be more suitable, but for several years the King has looked at no one else, nor will he do so. Up till the last few days the young lady seems to have shown every sign of returning his affection. Since Wednesday, however, there has been a change. Not only has she twice tried to avoid a rendezvous, but today she issued what one might call an ultimatum. She declines to receive His Majesty again until certain arrears in the sum which he promised to her are paid. I can do nothing with His Majesty. He has had a great deal to drink, although no one would ever notice it. He will go to no other place of entertainment, he will not allow any of the other little ladies of the world one knows of to be presented. He waits for the money to take to Suzanne. All that he desires is to be re-established in her graces. At a moment's notice there was no one else we could think of but you. We remembered the conversation of earlier in the evening and decided to seek you out. We alluded, if you recollect, to a small but immediate loan. The King, as I suggested, will give his note of hand, and that, I think, should be sufficient security. What we want is two hundred thousand dollars at such a rate of interest as you think fair."

Grogner's uneasy eyes were travelling all the time over Jere's inexpressive face. His instinct told him that there was something wrong. This young man's demeanour was not the demeanour of their guest of a few hours ago.

"Well," Jere said, "I am glad you brought me in here, Colonel. It makes it less embarrassing for both of us. The fact of it is—I can do nothing about these loans—neither the smaller one you were speaking of nor the larger one—for the immediate present."

Grogner was clearly dismayed.

"But, my dear young friend," he exclaimed, "you are not in earnest? We are not to accept this as final?"

"It is too bad, but I am afraid you must. Something has happened which has affected the situation to a very material extent."

"You can arrange for the smaller sum, perhaps?" Grogner suggested. "His Majesty will be terribly disappointed after our conversation: we were almost counting upon you."

"I must confess that I am in some respects to blame," Jere admitted. "At the time I myself thought something might be arranged. Sorry."

Grogner was a figure of despair. He glanced with apprehension at the inner room.

"This is going to mean a great deal of trouble," he declared. "Can you give me any idea, Mr. Strole, as to what it is which has changed your outlook?"

"I'm afraid I can't. I simply don't feel like lending any money on Jakovian securities until I have looked the place over."

"You are still going there, then?"

"Sure. I am going there in a very few days."

Grogner walked to the furthest corner of the room and back again. His bony fingers were clenched together. He had the air of a man desperately puzzled.

“What I shall say to His Majesty,” he remarked disconsolately, “I have not the slightest idea.”

“You will think of something,” Jere assured him.

“I have thought of something already,” Grogner said, his face suddenly darkening. “Is it possible that you have seen the Princess this evening?”

“That,” Jere told him firmly, “is my business. Don’t you think we ought to be going back into the salon? The King may be getting impatient.”

“There was three-quarters of a bottle left,” Grogner replied. “That would keep him contented for another few minutes. Before I go I want to tell you something, Mr. Strole.”

“Get right along with it,” Jere begged. “I’m sleepy.”

“If you are going to Jakovia,” Grogner said earnestly, “to enter into any sort of conspiracy with the Princess Marya, I warn you that you are asking for a very great deal of trouble. Your position at the Legation will not shelter you. I, who am Chief of the Police in Pletz, assure you of that. If evidence is discovered of your being implicated in any sort of a plot against the existing régime, you will most assuredly pay the price—it won’t be a pleasant one, either!”

Jere shrugged his shoulders.

“I have been in some warm corners down in South America,” he observed, “but I seem to have got out alive somehow or other. I expect I can take my risk about Pletz. Hadn’t we better say good night to His Majesty now?”

Grogner paused with his fingers upon the handle of the door.

“There is nothing I could say, Mr. Strole, to change you?” he pleaded. “A smaller sum? A higher rate of interest? The fact of it is the King wants at least a hundred thousand dollars badly, very badly indeed.”

Jere shook his head.

“If it was a hundred thousand cents,” he declared, “I can only make one reply—nothing doing for the moment.”

Phillip was peacefully contemplating his own full glass and the empty bottle when they entered. He shook his head at Grogner.

“Two o’clock when we came up here, Michael,” he said. “Half-past three now. An hour and a half—two bottles. You must drink a good deal, Michael. You should take more care of yourself. You will have a headache.”

“I am afraid it is you who will have the headache, sir,” Grogner replied dolefully. “I can do no business with our young friend here.”

The King set down the glass which he had been in the act of raising to his lips.

“Do you mean that he is not willing to lend the money?” he demanded.

“Not at any rate at present,” Jere said. “You must remember, sir, that I have never set foot in Jakovia. I do not even know where the Crown lands are.”

“This is most extraordinary,” the King declared, in a tone of great solemnity. “I thought the whole affair was finished. Was not that your idea, Grogner?”

“I certainly did not think that there would be this difficulty. I do not understand it even now. I am afraid that some ill-disposed people have influenced Mr. Strole.”

Phillip seemed to have shrunken up in his chair. That ruddy complexion of his was all that remained of his bland and open physiognomy. His eyes had narrowed, his teeth were showing between an unpleasant curve of his lips. He pulled his moustache fiercely.

“I can imagine,” he muttered, “who has been interfering here.”

“Please do not jump at any false conclusions,” Jere begged. “I am after all a business man, you know, and I should like to see something of the country before I invest my money in it.”

“Something of Jakovia,” the King murmured. “You would like to see something of Jakovia?”

“Sure.”

The King smiled. He had suddenly become a very sinister-looking person and there was nothing in the least attractive about the gesture. He rose to his feet. There was a sort of malicious dignity about him as he moved towards the door.

“I hope before you go, Mr. Strole,” he said, “that you may be wise enough to change your mind. Jakovia knows how to reward its friends—and its enemies!”

## CHAPTER XVIII

There was a distinctly gloomy expression upon Brodie's face a few mornings later as he assisted his master to dress. As soon as the waiter had wheeled in the tray with the *petit déjeuner* he closed both doors and approached the table.

"Excuse me, Mr. Strole," he said, "but I reckon it would be a wise move on our part if we could get out of Paris before next Tuesday."

Jere paused in the act of shaking out his newspaper.

"But why, Brodie?" he asked. "You have our reservations and everything. Besides, there is a particular reason why Tuesday suits me remarkably well. It is already Friday. Only three more days to wait."

"There's a lot of trouble can happen in three days, sir," Brodie declared nervously. "You will bear in mind what I told you when I begged for the job, sir. I knew bits here and bits there, and I guessed you might run into some sort of trouble before you were through. You are standing well in it at the present moment, sir."

Jere was unmoved. He was firmly convinced on this occasion that he knew more about the matter than anyone else.

"I think you've got hold of this wrong," he argued. "Until just recently I do believe that our friend from Jakovia had it up against me. Do you know what happened Wednesday night?"

"I understood that you were to dine with the King, sir," Brodie replied guardedly.

"I dined with the King and Colonel Grogner, his Chief of Police. We talked business. I didn't discourage them. There was no need to. They know that I have men in Jakovia looking over the country, and they are only too anxious to get me there."

"This would be when, sir?"

"Wednesday night."

"Then something has happened between then and now, sir. It had happened before three o'clock this morning."

Jere buttered himself a piece of toast and poured out his second cup of coffee.

"The only thing that has happened," he confided, "is that they have since tried to anticipate matters a little with regard to a loan. I told them frankly that they must wait until I reached Jakovia."

"How did they take that, sir?"

"Not very well, I must admit, but still they are not likely to kill the goose

before he has made up his mind whether to lay the golden egg or not. What's making you in such a state of nerves, Brodie?"

"I happened to be rather late myself last evening," the man continued. "Mademoiselle Suzanne Delage was kind enough to give her maid an evening off after she left the theatre, and we took supper together at a place which used to be an old favourite of mine."

"On the tiles, were you?" Jere observed, shaking his head. "Well, get on with it. You heard some gossip, I suppose?"

"It was rather more than gossip, sir. I arrived home at twenty-past three, and as I had drunk nothing but this French wine I was in excellent condition for taking note of things. I decided to go into the bar and have a nightcap, and I met an old acquaintance there."

"The men's bar, I hope it was, Brodie!"

"The men's bar it certainly was, sir. The man whom I met has been useful to me at odd times in Paris. We have done business together, but I am not proud of the fact."

"Bad lot, eh?"

"He is connected with a very dangerous crowd of people. He is a member of a society you may have heard of, sir—The Little Brothers of St. Montmartre."

"Sounds familiar," Jere observed. "Is it a charitable organisation?"

Brodie shook his head.

"I'll say not, sir. Nothing of that sort at all. It is the name of a very famous gang of criminals. There are several institutions of the sort, I believe, but this is the oldest of them all."

"What is its special line?"

"Murder, sir."

"Does it get away with it?"

"A great deal more often than anyone has any idea of," Brodie confided, laying down the coat which he had been brushing. "It began in this way, Mr. Strole. Everyone has enemies in the world, I suppose, and about forty years ago, they say it was, this club started in a small café the other side of the Seine, and the only qualification for membership was that you had someone whom you wanted put away and you were prepared to pay to have the job done. They used to meet weekly and go through the list of names which had been sent in. Whenever they came to a name, the owner of which one of the members was in touch with, or that he knew easily how to get at, he made a bid. A thousand francs in those days was a popular price. For a thousand francs this man would offer to murder the person, who may have been a complete stranger to him, but against whom someone else in the society had a grudge. As often as not the thing came off."

“And if it didn’t?”

“Well, the man usually got off because there was never any apparent motive for the crime, or else he suffered and kept his mouth shut. They say that the society has never been given away. There were seventeen members when it started. I believe there are about seventeen hundred now!”

“I’ll hand it to you, Brodie, that you’re the chap to bring to Paris,” Jere declared with a grin. “I certainly never heard of this society before.”

“It’s been kept pretty quiet, sir. They’ve got some very clever men connected with it, and they don’t take members unless they are satisfied that they are in earnest. When you have joined and your little affair is done for you, you can either pay the forfeit to the club—pretty stiff amount it is you’ve got to fork out—and resign, or you can continue your membership in case anyone else turns up you have a down on.”

“The idea,” Jere reflected, “is beginning to fascinate me. But listen, Brodie. What about meetings? They couldn’t have seventeen hundred people meeting.”

“Naturally not, sir. They are divided into lodges which follow the arrondissements of Paris as closely as possible.”

Jere finished his breakfast and lit a pipe.

“Well, what about this fellow you met in the Ritz bar last night?”

“He is one of the executive,” Brodie explained. “The Ritz Hotel is in his lodge and they had a name sent in this morning.”

“He seems to have taken you into his confidence rather easily,” Jere observed.

“He talked more than he should have done, sir,” Brodie admitted. “On the other hand he knew very well who I was and he thought I was still with Pilkington’s. As you know, Mr. Strole, I have been in and out of the detective business all my life, and it is a fact that I was once connected with a somewhat similar organisation over on our side. It only dealt with men who were public nuisances, though, and I was not in the department that went for the serious business. Still, he happened to come across on a bit of business at that time, and he remembered me. That’s why he opened his mouth so wide.”

“He didn’t tell you the name of the unfortunate person who was to be wiped out, I suppose, or who bid for him and his price?”

“He didn’t tell me the name, sir. He was not quite as confidential as that, but he did say that a certain gentleman staying in the hotel had been dealt with for a matter of fifteen mille.”

“Might be me,” Jere suggested.

“The idea occurred to me, sir,” Brodie acquiesced. “The only thing is that membership as a rule is limited to French people, and any trouble that might be looked for as regards you seems as though it might be coming from another quarter.”

“Not only that, Brodie,” Jere declared, stretching himself out happily, “but I am at the present moment at peace with the world. Goldsmith Motors are mounting the ladder every day, and no one hates me. Why should I worry?”

“You are a trifle tangled up, if you will excuse my saying so, with the two different interests in Jakovia, sir.”

“Not now,” Jere confided. “I have made friends with the King and that fellow his Chief of Police, Grogner, and the Princess and I are certainly on the best of terms. I have no enemies.”

Brodie shook his head gloomily.

“I am inclined to think, sir,” he admitted, “that you are taking too optimistic a view of the situation, if you will excuse my saying so. You say yourself that you have hung up financial arrangements with the King, and he’s quite clever enough to know that that is because of the Princess Marya. If you are likely to put your hand in your pocket for the Princess Marya and not for the King, then I will tell you this, sir—you have an enemy all right! The worst thing that could happen for His Majesty at the present moment is for the Princess to present herself in Pletz with money in her hand. That is one thing they are afraid of. I beg your pardon, sir.”

A page boy knocked at the door and presented a note. The envelope was large and blue. It was stamped with a coronet at the back, and a pungent odour stole out from it as soon as Jere opened it. It was dated from Suzanne’s apartment in the Rue Dubonnet.

*My wonderful Jeremiah, it began—*

*My tyrannical visitor absents himself to-morrow. Entre nous he pays a private visit to his uncle, the Duc de Maussent, hoping for good results, but alas, Monsieur le Duc was here only last week and his pockets are empty!*

*Naturally, I say nothing to Phillip, for it is a day’s vacance. You will come to me at four o’clock—afterwards, if all goes well, you will fetch me from the theatre, yes? A bientôt.*

*Suzanne.*

Jere tipped the page and dismissed him. Brodie, for a few minutes, as he busied himself with his master’s outdoor habiliments, seemed distrait. Suddenly he approached the easy-chair into which Jere had thrown himself.

“I am taking the liberty, sir,” he said, “of asking if you will allow me to look at that note from Mademoiselle Delage?”

Jere pointed to the table.

“Read it by all means,” he invited. “It’s only the usual sort of stuff.”

Brodie put on his spectacles and read carefully. Then he replaced the note



upon the table.

“Why this curiosity?” Jere inquired.

The other coughed.

“I’m afraid you won’t agree with my line of reasoning, sir, but I do think you are making a mistake in one direction. You believe your vague promises of help when you have looked into things in Jakovia have reconciled the King and Colonel Grogner to your refusing an immediate loan. I don’t. As I took the liberty of mentioning just now, sir, I think they are disappointed. They are afraid of your going to Jakovia when the Princess Marya is there.”

“What’s all this got to do with Mademoiselle Delage’s invitation to me?” Jere demanded.

“Just this, sir,” Brodie pointed out. “When one man takes on the job of getting rid of another, the first thing he tries to think out is a plausible place for the job. To my certain knowledge there have been two suicides and a murder within a few yards of Mademoiselle Delage’s front door. Lots of men have lost their heads about her, and lots of men have gone mad with jealousy because of that young woman.”

“I’m still entirely in the dark,” Jere observed.

“I don’t think it was the King who told Mademoiselle Suzanne that he was going away for the day. I believe it was the Colonel. He knew very well what would happen. He knew that she would sit down and write to you at once. Very well, there is the scene all set for them. One of the quietest streets in that part of Paris, and on the doorstep of a famous courtesan! Couldn’t be a better place for the job, sir.”

Jere laughed unrestrainedly.

“You are a subtle thinker, Brodie,” he declared, “but this time you are talking rubbish.”

“So long as you are feeling that way, sir,” Brodie observed, as he gave a final turn of the brush to Jere’s hat, “you had better be thankful that you have me for your servant.”

“I will set your mind at ease to this extent,” Jere said, as he rose to his feet and stretched himself. “Nothing in the world would induce me to accept Mademoiselle Suzanne’s invitation.”

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The Baroness stepped into the lift on the third floor and found Jere its sole occupant. She took little heed of his ceremonious greeting.

“What have you been doing to my Marya?” she demanded.

“Nothing that should commit me to your disfavour, Baroness,” he replied gravely.

“Pooh! I am not one of those who fence with words. I claim some minutes of your time. It does not matter if you have an engagement. Take me to the bar

at the Rue Cambon entrance. It is nearly twelve o'clock and not too early for a cocktail. Marya will tell me nothing. Have you been behaving badly?"

"I'll say I haven't," Jere affirmed indignantly. "The Princess was more charming to me the night before last than she has ever been. She met me down here after the dinner party, took me to a reception, and she permitted me to take her out to a dance afterwards. I brought her home and we parted, as I thought, the best of friends."

"It is odd," the Baroness muttered.

"I have been very happy," Jere went on, "because, as I have told you, the Princess was kinder to me than she has ever been before."

"Ach, then what is the matter with her?" the Baroness demanded. "You must not mind that I speak sometimes with a German accent. There is very little German blood in our veins, but my husband is an Austrian, and I have what they used to call the assimilative faculty. Never mind about that. What do you want with my niece, young man?"

"I want to marry her," Jere confessed.

"Then you are a fool. The world is full of beautiful girls, girls who would like to marry a good-looking young man like you, who would be faithful to you and make good wives and mothers. Not so Marya. She has this passion for Jakovia in her veins. Myself, I call it a poor little country. My mother was of the royal house, and I was brought up at the Palace. I was happy there in a way, but I was a great deal happier after I was married. Ah, you should have known Vienna in my days!"

"I'm sorry you don't approve of my marrying Marya," Jere said, "but I shall do so if I can, even if she hates me for it afterwards."

"You're a foolish young man," the Baroness declared, as they reached the bar and he held a chair for her in a retired corner. "I will take a Bronx with fresh orange juice and plenty of Gordon's gin. Thank you. You are a foolish young man. The one eternal truth which no one in the world has ever learned yet is that usually it doesn't matter whom you marry. If they are gently born and kindly, if they have no personal eccentricities which displease, then custom does the rest. But with Marya there is something else. She is what my husband calls 'a snob magnificent'. Most children of royal birth in the nursery are just like other children. Marya never was. She was born a royal Princess. She is not great enough or small enough—whichever way you like to put it—to adapt herself to any other life."

Jere sipped his gin fizz reflectively.

"The night before last there was none of that business," he remarked, "and she seemed perfectly content."

"Have you seen or heard from her since?"

"I can't say that I have."

“It was you who smothered her room with flowers, I suppose?”

“I did something of the sort,” Jere admitted.

“It was your handwriting upon the envelope of the note that I saw by the side of her bed?”

“Very likely.”

“Have you had any reply—any word from her?”

“No.”

“When you do,” the Baroness assured him, “it will probably be an ungracious one. I went in to see her this morning. She was lying very pale and quiet amongst her flowers and books and magazines. ‘Things do not go well with you, little one?’ I asked. ‘I am unhappy,’ she answered. No more. Just that.”

“Are you my ally or my enemy?” Jere demanded.

“I am neutral,” she told him. “If Marya were different I might be your friend. I am not so prejudiced as she is. I can see the passing of the old things. It is best for us to change with them. I have changed and saved myself much misery and humiliation. Christian, my husband, the proudest man I ever knew, has changed too. He is proud of his great line of ancestors, but he looks at the Kalendar. He is of to-day. He is to be miserable or happy, according to the conditions of to-day. He looks with sad eyes sometimes upon some of his ruined castles, he hears sadly the recital now and then by some court chamberlain of his long list of empty titles. . . . What does it matter? The new order of things is here. He is a man, his pulses beat, his blood flows, his appetite arrives and passes. Many of his friends are still there to speak the same language. If he is not happy, he is at least content. Marya is neither happy nor content. I do not believe that any man can change her. She is not an unnatural girl, mind. She has sentiment, she has affection, she has even passion, but alas, she has something else. She has this absurd devotion to her country. . . . You are very kind, Mr. Strole. I will take another cocktail. A fresh glass, George,” she added, turning to the barman who had arrived at their table to pay his respects, “and two drops of lemon.”

“That will make a new decoction,” the man exclaimed. “Your Highness will permit that I christen it with your name?”

“You have my permission,” the Baroness assented graciously.

“In which case,” Jere announced, “and considering the wave of depression which you have let loose upon me, Baroness, I will join in the function.”

“You are foolish to be depressed,” she assured him. “It only needs a little resolution on your part. Remember that I have just come from your own country. Never in my life have I seen so many physically attractive young women. You do not need to come to this deserted little kingdom, set in the midst of a shattered Europe, to break your heart. Marya would be happier if

you went. Believe me, she has that much heart—she cannot bear to see suffering in others.”

“And to think,” Jere sighed, “that I got up this morning very nearly happy! My servant dealt me the first blow. Have you ever heard of a society calling itself ‘The Little Brothers of St. Montmartre’?”

Then Jere suddenly had a shock. The glass wobbled in the Baroness’ hand, so that he was only just able to snatch it from her in time to prevent its contents being spilt. Underneath her very careful make-up there slowly crept into being a livid streak of pallor. Her eyes were afraid.

“Yes, I’ve heard of it,” she admitted.

“Do you know who or what they are?” he asked.

“A band of murderers,” she replied passionately. “The only lover I ever had, the only man who ever disturbed my fidelity to Christian, was killed by them.”

Jere cursed himself and held his tongue. His question had been careless enough. How could he have told that he might have probed down and reopened such a wound? Her tired eyes looked back through the years, her fingers were trembling. He dropped his pocket-book and made a fuss about picking it up. By the time he had replaced the notes she was regaining control of herself.

“That was foolish of me,” she sighed. “It does not often happen. If you are threatened by those people, Mr. Strole, there is only one piece of advice I could give you. Leave Paris to-day. Pray that you’re allowed to leave it alive, and board the first steamer for New York. It would be a wise action in any case. Marya is not for you. Ach, there is my husband! Now you will have to fight a duel, for he does not allow me to drink cocktails in the morning!”

The Baron had just escaped from the ministrations of the coiffeur. He was very well groomed and turned out, and he wore a large bunch of early violets.

“My last hope!” he exclaimed, as he shook hands a trifle ceremoniously with Jere. “I have searched the hotel in vain. It was Marya who whispered in my ear—‘Try the bar’.”

“The Princess was inspired as usual,” Jere observed. “But might one ask where you found her?”

“She passed me on the steps,” the Baron replied. “She has gone to lunch with the Lucigny de Bourdons.”

The Baroness rose to her feet. She had recovered her self-possession, but she still had the air of a woman who had received a shock.

“You will take my advice, Mr. Strole?” she begged.

“I am leaving Paris on Tuesday,” Jere answered.

She shook her head at him disapprovingly.

“That may be for your relatives to decide,” she warned him.

## CHAPTER XIX

Jere had once been told by an acquaintance at police headquarters that a crowd was the safest place for a man in danger. He took his evening apéritif, therefore, at half-past five o'clock outside the Café de la Paix, surrounded by a score or so of his fellow countrymen. In the background a solitary Frenchman was reading *Le Petit Gaulois*. A long, lean-looking individual with high cheekbones and the sleek black hair of an Indian edged his chair closer to him and leaned across.

"You're Mr. Jeremiah Strole, aren't you?" he asked.

"I am," Jere admitted, his hand travelling in the same direction as his neighbour's but a little quicker.

"Sorry," the other drawled. "You're my meat."

"That's where you're wrong," Jere replied, shooting direct from his side pocket. "You're mine."

It was astonishing how long the commotion was in coming. The scattered crowd at the café looked out on to the boulevard, expecting to see a motor car skidding with a blown out tyre. Jere, with a hole in his trousers but otherwise intact, rose to his feet. The stranger who had addressed him was swaying in his chair dumb and helpless. Jere turned as though to summon a waiter. Suddenly he felt his wrist held, the gun snatched from his hand, an arm thrust through his.

"Don't hurry, sir," Brodie begged. "We've got to seem kind of interested. There's the man who shot himself—in the front chair there. Over he goes."

"Shot himself!"

"Of course he did. I saw him do it."

Years of experience and a good deal of cunning stood Brodie in good stead. In a few seconds they were on the outside edge of the crowd, round the corner and out of sight in a taxi and speeding homewards.

"Claridges. Top of the Champs Élysées," Brodie shouted through the window. "If anyone can trace a taxicab across the Place," he observed with a grin, "they're clever."

Into the centre of the maelstrom Brodie dropped the revolver. They leaned back in their places.

"Queer thing to me you never noticed that fellow shadowing you, sir," Brodie remarked. "He was hanging in and out of the men's bar at the Ritz and was only a minute late for you at the Embassy. You came out with the Ambassador, which spoilt his chance that time. He was very near you at the Travellers' Club, but it isn't a safe neighbourhood. Outside the Café de la Paix

he thought he'd got you cold. I never saw a neater turn than that, Mr. Strole, if you'll allow me to say so. I was ready with my stick to knock his arm up, but I never thought you'd get in first."

"Will this sort of thing go on all the time now?" Jere asked.

"I should say not, sir. This fellow, if he's got any life left in him, will have to make his report, and I should not think anyone else would be very anxious to take the job on. The worst of it is they'll know you're going to Jakovia on Tuesday, and that may hurry things on a bit."

They dismissed their taxicab at Claridges, strolled through the hotel and took a fresh conveyance to the Ritz.

"Pretty good guardian, aren't you, Brodie?" Jere remarked, as they mounted in the lift. "I was never conscious you were near me at any time today."

"There's no man can shadow better than I can," Brodie declared. "That's why I felt I was wasted in a job like Mr. Hansard's, although the money was good. There's something doing over here all the time. I've got to keep you from 'The Little Brothers of St. Montmarte', land you safely in Pletz and then tackle the police there with your friend Colonel Grogner nosing round all the time. You sure do keep one busy, sir."

"What about to-night, Brodie?"

"We'll see when you've had your bath and we've got you dressed, sir. If you're going to wander round the Boulevard des Italiens with your mouth open, or the Marigny, or the Folies Bergères looking like an American tripper, all I can say is—No, nothing doing. It would take a squad of invincibles to look after you. If you want to fetch Mademoiselle Suzanne from the Ambassadeurs in a closed car, and make up your mind firmly that you won't take her home, well, let me do a bit of scouting first, and we'll see."

"Chatty to-night, Brodie, aren't you?" Jere remarked.

"I'm in my element, sir," was the contented reply. "What I hate is stagnation. Something to do all the time is what I like. I wish I understood this business a trifle better, but I understand quite enough to make it interesting. There's your bath ready, sir. Be careful of the shower. The warm water's running rather freely to-night. Underclothes and everything all looked out. If you could spare me for a quarter of an hour or so I'll be having a word with the floor waiter and a prow down stairs."

Jere took his bath slowly and luxuriously, drew on his silk underclothes, wrapped himself in his dressing-gown and sat down to await Brodie's return. A quarter of an hour passed, half an hour. Then he heard a key rattle in the lock. Something about the sound was unusual. The slow turning of the key was unusual. The opening of the door inch by inch was sinister. Jere dropped on his knees behind a table and covered the slowly widening crack with his revolver.

He was on the point of calling out when the figure behind the door spoke. Jere lowered his gun. It was Brodie's voice.

"It's all right, sir," he called out. "Stand back against the wall, though. I have an idea there's some one in one of the rooms."

"What's wrong with you, Brodie?" Jere asked, for the man's voice was weak as though he were out of breath.

"I've been in a bit of trouble, sir," the latter confessed. "My own fault. Heard anyone about?"

"Not a soul," Jere declared. "There's no one in the bathroom. I've just come out. There couldn't be anyone in here. There's only my bedroom left. We'll go through that."

The door of the bedroom, which was an inch or so ajar, was suddenly pushed open.

For one blurred, kaleidoscopic moment everything seemed scintillating and unreal. Marya stood upon the threshold of the communicating door, her eyes ablaze, her lips parted, her cheeks ashen. There was an arrow of flame, the dark vicious spit of a gun. Jere, with a sudden stab of pain in his shoulder, dropped the revolver gripped in his right hand.

"Marya," he cried, "what have I done?"

She swayed upon her feet, then staggered forward. She was carrying a weapon of some sort in her right hand, but her arm hung downwards as though nerveless. He moved a step towards her. The weapon suddenly slipped from her fingers. She held out her arms with a little sob. He felt them around his neck, drawing his head down, her breath was upon his cheek.

"What have I done to harm you, Marya?" he faltered, the pain suddenly worse.

"Nothing," she cried passionately. "Look if you don't believe me," she went on, pointing downwards. "I didn't shoot."

Strength returned to his limbs, courage to his heart. His arms went around her joyously. The pain was there, but for the moment his unloosed passion killed it. He felt her lips against his cheek, her fingers tightened around his neck, more of life, more of happiness than he had ever dreamt of so short a time ago. If only the room would keep still! If only he could hear what she was saying!

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Jere sat up on his couch and felt convinced that the world had gone mad. The sitting-room looked exactly as usual, there was no sign of Marya, and Brodie in a distant corner was going through a handful of ties, obviously sorting them out to be ironed. After all, though, something must have happened. He was wearing a different set of underclothes, he had the devil of a pain in his shoulder, a raging thirst, and Brodie, as he calmly continued his

task, was smoking a cigarette. Jere had never been drunk in his life, but a horrible idea flashed into his mind. There had been some trouble at the Café de la Paix. Perhaps someone had dropped something into his tumbler!

“I say, Brodie!”

Brodie turned quickly round. He threw the cigarette into the fire-place.

“Sorry, Mr. Strole,” he apologised. “After our bit of an upset I must say I felt like a smoke.”

“Have we had a bit of an upset?” Jere asked, sitting up on the couch.

Brodie grinned, and there was an almost ecstatic expression on his smooth, unwrinkled face.

“We might call it that, sir, I think,” he confided. “Things were lively for a short time—very lively. Will you permit me, sir?”

He crossed the room and felt Jere’s pulse.

“What’s that for?” the latter demanded.

“To be sure that I may give you what I think will do you good,” the man replied, moving to the sideboard. “I’ve got it all here ready—a highball, sir, good and stiff. How are you feeling about that now?”

“Don’t waste time in words,” Jere begged. “Bring it. Let me hear the ice chinking.”

Jere set down the tumbler half empty with a long gulp of relief. Upon one point he felt he must be certain.

“Tell me,” he insisted, “has the Princess been here?”

Brodie grinned again, and the grin told Jere all he wanted to know.

“She surely has, sir.”

“But what’s happened to me?” Jere demanded. “I’ve got a beastly pain in my shoulder, and I must have gone off into something or other.”

“You were knocked out by a pretty well spent bullet,” Brodie explained.

“It was not—” Jere began breathlessly.

“Not likely, sir,” Brodie interrupted. “It was not the Princess. What she was doing down here I am not absolutely sure about even now, but she was not up to any mischief. As she opened the door between your bedroom and the sitting-room, someone who had been waiting in the corridor opened the door of your bedroom. He fired at you over her head. A pretty bad piece of work that was. The bullet went right through the wainscoting there, fetched splinters off the door, and as you had nothing else on but your vest it got as far as your collar-bone. The little Princess and I fixed that up in five minutes, sir, washed the place out with disinfectant and tied it up. Had to give you a shot of dope, sir, begging pardon for the liberty.”

“Where is the Princess now?” Jere asked.

“Gone back to her room,” Brodie confided. “I don’t know, sir, whether it will be according to your wishes, but I have done what she asked me.”



“Anything she told you to do was right,” was the firm rejoinder.

“She’s terrified of anything like scandal, sir,” Brodie went on meditatively. “I suppose those royal personages and semi-royal, as you may call them, have to be careful. You see, this took place with her in your room. What she was doing there I don’t know, but it would not take a few hundred thousand people who read the newspapers long to guess if the story got in.”

“But the sound of the firing?” Jere demanded. “Didn’t that bring anyone here?”

“Not a soul, sir. You see the doors are double thickness, and everything in this wing specially is constructed to keep out sound.”

“What time is it?” Jere asked.

“Twenty-past eight, sir. It was about a quarter-past seven when I came back from my little rough and tumble. I have no doubt you will be seeing Her Highness, sir, but her idea seems to be to bottle this whole affair up. You see, if we caught the fellow who fired from the corridor over her shoulder, the whole show would be given away when he came up.”

“What the Princess says goes,” Jere declared firmly. “About your own little affair, Brodie? When you came in you were looking as though you had had a dust-up with someone.”

“You can bet I had, sir,” was the grim reply. “I just went across to the service-room when you were in your bath to get one of my irons, and I found a strange young man there messing about with some glasses. He was wearing the hotel livery and he looked like a waiter all right, but I soon tumbled to it that he wasn’t. I asked him what he was doing there, and he told me that he was the relief waiter from the floor above. I knew that was a lie, but I hadn’t sense enough to hold my tongue.”

“Who was he then?” Jere asked.

“Can’t say for certain, sir, but he wasn’t after any good. He no sooner got wise to it that I knew the waiters and he couldn’t put any bluff over on me, than he swung suddenly round and tried to knock me out. He darn nearly succeeded too! Serves me right for not keeping my mouth shut.”

“How did you finish?”

“Well,” Brodie confided, “as soon as he saw that I was as good a man as he was he bolted. He fenced for a position near the door, and he was out of it and down the back staircase before I knew what he was up to.”

“Do you think he was the man who shot at me?”

“Can’t say, sir. He was hanging around after some sort of mischief.”

“Have you reported it?”

“Didn’t like to, sir. The little Princess, she’s in a rare state, and the whole business might come out if they got a line on this fellow.”

Jere straightened his tie and looked at himself in the glass. Except for the

stiffness in his shoulder there was nothing to indicate the physical side of his strenuous hour.

“A note came for you a few minutes ago, sir,” Brodie announced.

Jere recognised the square envelope and the crown, and tore open the flap. He stared in bewilderment at the few apparently hastily written lines.

*I have become convinced that your efforts to help me and your projected visit to Pletz are attended with the most serious and imminent danger. You must please abandon the idea altogether, or you will distress me greatly. Return to America on Tuesday.*

Jere folded up the letter and put it in his pocket.

“Got our marching orders, Brodie,” he observed. “We’re for New York.”

“What, back to the States?”

“Back to the States,” Jere repeated. “Are the Steamship Company’s offices closed?”

“The Star people have an office in the hotel,” Brodie announced in a dazed fashion.

“See what you can get for Wednesday’s boat then.”

“I’ll go right away down, sir,” the man promised. “Any answer to the note?”

“Boy waiting?”

“He’s in the corridor.”

Jere sat down before his writing-table and drew out a sheet of paper. He scrawled a line across it after the fashion of her own note.

*I am endeavouring to obtain reservations for Wednesday.*

## CHAPTER XX

At half-past five on Tuesday afternoon, with shrieking of whistles, a succession of spasmodic jerks and much grinding of couplings, the famous trans-European train which had taken the place of the Orient Express drew slowly out of the Gare de l'Est. Anna Maria, opening the connecting door, presented herself in her mistress' salon. Her arms were full of roses.

"The conductor wishes to know what he shall do with these, Your Highness?" the girl asked. "He would like to decorate your table in the restaurant. There are enough, he says, to decorate the whole train."

Marya held out her hands, and for a moment there was a very wistful smile at the corners of her lips. She took some of the blossoms and laid them by her side.

"There was no note with them?" she asked.

"Nothing, Your Highness."

"Arrange them as well as you can," Marya directed. "Certainly let the man decorate our dining-table if he wishes. Take some round to the Baroness too. And, Anna Maria——"

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"Send François to me."

François, whose father before him had been secretary to the Prince of Pletz, arrived after a delay of only a few minutes. He was a slim, punctilious-looking young man, who wore heavy glasses and without a doubt took life seriously.

"I have to report, Your Highness," he said, as he made his bow, "that everything has been arranged according to the dispositions scheduled. The servants of the staff and the servants of the Baron and Baroness have a compartment to themselves. Dinner will be served for Your Highness at half-past eight immediately on the conclusion of the usual meal. The baggage is safely taken care of, and Your Highness' letters and telegrams were all despatched before leaving."

"You executed my principal commission, I hope?"

"I was in the station at least half an hour before the train backed in," he announced. "I got a special permit to be on the platform, which was empty except for a few officials of the company. I then secured a place at the barrier, and I took note of every passenger. The person for whom Your Highness told me to watch did not appear."

Marya was looking out of the window. They were still in the suburbs but fast gathering speed, and the tall, tenement houses were giving way to stretches of open space, with smaller villas dotted everywhere and occasionally a broad

boulevard, along which the electric cars clanged and the traffic flowed on its way in and out of Paris. Marya's gaze was very intent, but she saw nothing. So this was the end then. He had obeyed her bidding without protest. The brief period of melodrama, the threat of what was to come had done its work. It was a great relief, without a doubt, a great relief. She had been foolish ever to have made those suggestions. Phillip might be all the world seemed to find him—idle, dissolute and pleasure-loving—but he was too fond of life, too hungry for money not to be a dangerous enemy when his rights were assailed. She should have known better than ever to have attempted to drag a stranger into the turmoil of Jakovian politics. Still, it had been a great temptation. Jeremiah Strole—she almost murmured the name which sounded so strangely to her—was most emphatically a young man who inspired confidence. She had begun to have very pleasant thoughts about him. With him by her side the whole struggle had seemed so much more possible.

“If there is nothing else I can do for Your Highness?” François suggested.

“There is nothing more, thank you,” his mistress answered, with a little nod of dismissal.

They were in the open country now, screaming and tearing their way towards the war zone. Marya glanced towards the pile of books and magazines by her side, but left them undisturbed. There had been times before on her homeward journey, when every turn of the wheel seemed to bring with it excitement, when the prospect of taking up the battle again for the people whom she loved, had thrilled her madly. This time, however, though the battle had never been more nearly joined, she seemed somehow to lack enthusiasm. The task to which she had committed herself seemed too great. Even the final gesture which she had so often rehearsed to herself in her thoughts might defeat itself, the people in whom she trusted might take all and give nothing, she would be accused of ambition, flouted for having brought about the fall of a dynasty. These people around her—old Grogner, the Baron, Laytu, the philosopher and writer, who was as ardent a patriot as herself, they all lived in too narrow a world—perhaps they had lost vision. They all agreed that another five years of Phillip's reign, of his extravagance, of his frequent absences, his dallying with courtesans, would mean the arrival of a Republic, the downfall for ever of the monarchy. They all looked to her as one who alone had the power to save the constitution. There was not one of them, however, who knew the price to be paid. . . .

There was the familiar stumping of a stick along the corridor outside. The door was opened and the Baroness entered. She disposed of herself in the seat next Marya's.

“My dear,” she exclaimed, “this promises to be a very pleasant journey—if travelling ever can be pleasant. Dear Christian has found a friend already—a

Roumanian Minister whom he knew at Washington. They are busy revising the map of Europe, and they have smoked so many cigars already over it that my people have had to open the windows in the corridor. You heard nothing more, I suppose," she went on, looking round at the flowers, "of your American Sir Galahad?"

"Only the roses," Marya replied. "He must have left an order before he sailed."

The Baroness sighed.

"He was a nice young man," she said. "Absurdly in love with you, of course. Simple-minded, but in his way quite attractive. What scared him away, Marya?"

"Nothing," the Princess answered. "I do not think that he would have been easy to scare. He went back to America because I sent him there."

The Baroness pursed her lips, a gesture having in it, however, something of sympathy as well as contempt.

"You had to do that, I suppose," she remarked.

"The people who fear my influence in Jakovia," Marya said, "were determined to have his life if he remained to help. It scarcely seemed worth while. He is quite young and he is not a Jakovian."

"I am surprised," the Baroness meditated, "that you found him so easy to get rid of. He had the air, to me, of a very determined young man. It seems a pity. We shall either have to revise our morals or our etiquette. Phillip doesn't worry about even a morganic marriage. He takes a pretty woman when he sees one he fancies and his royal status remains flawless. Whereas a woman—well, who in their senses, my dear Marya—I, who am your aunt, ask this—could have blamed you if you had found it possible to give that young man enough of the joy of life to keep him your champion?"

A year ago, Marya thought, how her eyes would have flashed, how bitter would have been her reply. To-day, there was a flush on her cheeks, an uneasy feeling in her heart. So this was how the Baroness, with the blood of two royal families in her veins, thought of these things!

"I did not find it possible," Marya confided, after a moment's pause, "to do other than I did. Several attempts had already been made upon his life. Once, I believe, a chance intervention on my part alone saved him."

"Ach, you could have kept him in the background," the Baroness declared.

"I could never," Marya said, and this time she was in earnest, "keep in the background anything that was very dear to me in life."

One of the waiters from the restaurant car presented himself apologetically. He was carrying with him a small silver salver on which reposed two glasses filled with amber-coloured liquid.

"With the compliments of the Baron de Sturgiwil, Your Highness," he

announced.

The Baroness smiled with satisfaction as she accepted her glass.

“Christian seldom thinks of roses,” she chuckled, “but he has other pleasing habits.”

The manager of the restaurant met his distinguished patrons at the door of the car when they arrived some time later for dinner.

“Everything is prepared for Your Royal Highness and for Your Excellencies,” he announced. “We have arranged the three tables in the centre of the car, and my chef, who is also an artist, has arranged the flowers you see. Everyone has left except one gentleman, who was late and who will have finished in a very few minutes. Permit me.”

He ushered in the little party, reinforced now by a middle-aged Austrian officer, who had been the Baron’s military attaché in Washington and was still his secretary, and the Comtesse de Vallouris. He walked backwards in front of the Princess, and paused to indicate the tables. As he did so he stood a little back.

“Your Highness will probably prefer—” he began.

Then he stopped suddenly, realising that Marya was not listening to him at all. She was looking a great deal more like a woman than a Princess, and her eyes—the *maître d’hôtel* knew her well, but he had never seen her eyes look like that before—were fixed upon a young man who was hastily completing his dinner at a retired table in the opposite corner.

“Why, is that—What on earth are you doing here, Mr. Strole?”

Jeremiah rose ceremoniously to his feet. He bowed to the Princess, he bowed to the Baroness who had raised her lorgnettes, and to the Baron.

“I am on my way to Pletz,” he explained. “I have just received the confirmation of my appointment as secretary to the Legation there. I must apologise for being such a late diner. I am leaving now.”

He would have made his way through the car, but Marya would have none of it. She held out her hand for his salute, and anything that he saw in her face as she smiled up at him must have been encouraging.

“But you said you were going to America.”

“That,” he evaded, “is a long story.”

“What a wonderful surprise,” the Baroness broke in. “Marya, my dear, we cannot stand talking any longer. I am ravenously hungry. The train always gives me such an appetite. Let us arrange ourselves. Why do we not ask our young friend to take coffee with us afterwards?”

“Capital,” the Baron agreed, who also wanted his dinner. “Come back and join us in an hour’s time, Mr. Strole.”

“Please do,” Marya begged.

“I shall be delighted,” Jere most truthfully replied.

## CHAPTER XXI

Jere's first impulse was one of disappointment when, punctual to the moment, he re-entered the restaurant car. The Baron and Baroness were seated there alone. Everyone else seemed to have taken their departure. The latter smiled encouragingly, however, as he approached, and pointed to a seat by her side.

"Marya preferred to take coffee in the little salon attached to her own coupé," she explained. "There is so much noise here and the employees are waiting to have their meal. They are too polite to mention it, but Marya always thinks of those things. We will join her directly, but sit down for one minute with us first, Mr. Strole. My husband and I would like to have a word with you. You can drink two cups of coffee, I daresay. It is not good, but it is harmless."

"I should like to talk to Mr. Strole, yes," the Baron observed. "I come fresh from ten years spent in his wonderful country, and there are many things we can discuss. But shall I have a chance? I think no! It is my wife who desires to speak. I shall smoke a cigar. You will join me, Mr. Strole?"

Jere, however, preferred a cigarette and a pipe later on in the seclusion of his coupé, but, notwithstanding his impatience, he accepted coffee and a small glass of brandy.

"Mr. Strole," the Baroness said, "I am very fond of my niece. I am worried about her. I am going to treat you with confidence. I have come to the conclusion that Marya is in great danger, and I think that anyone associated with her during the next few months will be in the same position."

"I shouldn't be surprised if you weren't right," Jere acquiesced. "I think she had an idea at one time, though, that she would be safer in her own capital amongst her own people."

"It is to discover that," the Baroness pointed out, "that my husband and I are making this journey. We did not wish to go to Pletz, we do not like Pletz. My husband is aching to get back once more to his beloved Vienna. The fact remains, though, that we are unhappy about Marya, and we thoroughly and absolutely distrust Phillip."

"He doesn't seem to be great shakes as a king," Jere admitted.

"There is a crisis at hand in Pletz," the Baroness went on. "It was because she foresaw that crisis that Marya paid her visit to me in Washington. She had a sort of an idea that America was a country flowing with milk and honey, where she only needed to talk for a few minutes to some agreeable millionaires of the possibilities of Jakovia, and they would be hurrying over to Europe with

the wealth of the Rothschilds at their backs! She forgot that Americans as a rule need everything down in black and white. They will have nothing left to the imagination.”

“These Crown lands?” Jere intervened.

“Precisely,” the Baron observed drily. “How is she going to get hold of them? They are the property of the reigning monarch of Jakovia, and why Phillip has not had a dig at them long ago I cannot imagine.”

“It seems to us,” the Baroness pointed out, “that Phillip is the only person who could do anything about them. We know money is needed. We know that if it is not forthcoming before long, there will probably be a revolution. Yet for years Phillip has refused to have those lands developed. Shall I tell you the reason he gives?”

“I am very anxious to understand everything that has to do with Jakovia,” Jere replied.

“Phillip has declared to his Privy Council that he would not touch those lands unless Marya, who is next in the line of succession, married him.”

“Good God!” Jere exclaimed. “And the Princess?”

“Has up till now unhesitatingly refused. There are some of us,” the Baroness went on, “who are not sure whether she is altogether wise. The present Prime Minister, for instance, Colonel Grogner’s father, has always been strongly in favour of the alliance. The Pope at one time was perfectly willing to grant the dispensation. Then something happened when Marya’s mother died. No one knows what it was. The secret—if it is a secret—remains with Marya and Marya alone. The Pope withdrew his dispensation. Marya came back to Pletz and it was everywhere officially announced that all idea of the proposed alliance had been abandoned.”

“Good job, too, I should think,” Jere muttered.

“Perhaps so,” the Baroness observed a little coldly. “You must remember, though, Mr. Strole, that in Marya’s world something has to be sacrificed. The affections which are encouraged in ordinary people have occasionally to be considered a secondary matter. Personally, I was disappointed. I think it would have saved Jakovia, and I think nothing else will save Jakovia—unless the King does something towards the development of the country. Marya is passionately anxious—but what can she do? She cannot touch one acre of the Crown lands.”

“That,” the Baron intervened, “is what we ask ourselves—my wife and I here. Marya has encouraged you, we know, to come to Europe. You have agents exploring the northern parts of Jakovia. When you have finished, what does all that come to? You will have to deal with Phillip, and if Phillip gets his hands on the proceeds, it is fairly safe to say that, whatever promises he makes, the inhabitants of Jakovia will be very little better off.”



"I guess," Jere meditated, "that there is some tangle here that I don't know about and that you don't either. From the moment I first met the Princess on Long Island she has talked of nothing else but the development of Jakovia. She has scarcely ever even hinted at the idea of there being anything in the way. Just lately she has become more mysterious."

"Perhaps," the Baron suggested, "she has made up her mind, now that things are desperate, that if she can get some people really interested in the development and ready to put down some money at once, she will make the sacrifice and marry Phillip."

"I believe there's more than that in it," Jere said deliberately. "I believe the Princess has got hold of some documents or information concerning those Crown lands that other people want, and want pretty badly. I don't know that I get scared quicker than other people, but I've been shadowed all round Paris myself for the last few days, and it was only through sheer luck that I wasn't taken for a ride. . . ."

A message arrived from the Princess. Coffee had been served in her coupé. As they passed along the corridor the Baroness touched him on the shoulder.

"If ever Marya means to take you into her confidence," she said, "I think now is probably the moment. Go in first and we will follow in a quarter of an hour. Say that the Baron is having a cigar with his old friend from Roumania."

"That's all right with me," Jere assented cheerfully. . . .

Madame de Vallouris was in attendance when Jere presented himself and explained the situation. Marya beckoned him to a place by her side and dismissed the Comtesse.

"Come back when the Baron and Baroness join us," Marya invited her. "Until then, I have a little affair of business to discuss with Mr. Strole."

The Comtesse took her leave, closing the door behind her. Jere felt a thrill of pleasure at the intimacy of the comfortable little coupé with Marya its only other occupant. She wasted no time in indirect conversation.

"I do not believe that you ever had any idea of returning to America," she declared.

"I wonder how you guessed that?" he smiled.

"But you replied that you were seeing about reservations."

"That was to fool those people who'd been hanging round after us," Jere explained. "I never meant taking them up."

"But where have you been all the time?"

"Shut up in my rooms learning all about Jakovia. The time sort of hung heavy now and then, I'll admit."

"How did you get on the train? I had a very intelligent young man who was on the platform when it came in, and who watched every person pass the barrier."

"I had a more intelligent servant," Jere confided, "who got me on the railway siding a quarter of a mile down the line where the train was made up. I was on board when it was shunted back into the station."

She leaned back in her corner and laughed.

"You know I'm beginning to rather admire you, Jeremiah Strole," she confessed. "It's a pity you're not going into diplomacy seriously. You certainly have a way of getting things done."

"I've answered all your questions," Jere reminded her. "Would you mind doing the same thing for me?"

"So far as I can."

"What brought you into my room the evening when that fellow was hanging round to get a pot shot at me?"

Marya hesitated.

"I will answer your question," she promised, "but not in quite as direct fashion as you have asked it. So far as I can I will tell you exactly what happened."

"That's just what I'm aching to know," he confessed.

Marya dropped her voice a little although, with the rumbling of the train and their complete seclusion, it was more a matter of instinct than necessity.

"About a quarter of an hour before the trouble began," she confided, "I was called up on the telephone. I have a very keen ear, and I not only recognised the anonymous voice but I knew that he was speaking from somewhere inside the hotel. There is always a quaint hum, it scarcely amounts to a vibration, on all their inside communications. There are a few minor things I cannot tell you—this much I can. Unless I consented to a certain course, which would have been utterly impossible, I was told that my helper—meaning you—would commit suicide in his room at the end of half an hour! I simply rang off. You have realised, I daresay, by this time that the only cowardice of which, I believe, I am capable, is the fear of scandal. I understood quite well what would happen if they did get at you. A forged note would have been found by your side, saying that you had committed suicide on my account, and probably there would have been a letter addressed to me. All very subtle, as you can see, and based upon a malicious knowledge of my character. It was a terrible moment for me."

"Couldn't you have collected the hotel detective?" Jere asked. "You could have had this man for blackmail."

She shook her head.

"Nothing of that sort would have been of the slightest use," she assured him. "I decided that I must see you for a moment, so I slipped my small-bore revolver into my pocket and came down by the stairs to your corridor. The door of your salon was open as I passed, and I caught a glimpse of your

servant looking as though he had been in a fight. I heard voices too—yours strong and quite cheerful. I thought then that the attempt had been made and failed, and I hurried on, meaning to take the lift back to my room. Just as I was passing your other door I heard footsteps behind. I turned my head. The man of whom I was afraid was coming along the corridor.”

Her voice faltered.

“That’ll do,” Jere begged. “Don’t bother to tell me any more. I can guess the rest. What about that coffee? Let’s talk of Pletz.”

She poured out a cup of coffee with trembling fingers and pushed a dusty bottle of old brandy towards him.

“The Baron sent this in,” she confided. “He is coming to drink some himself. Do help yourself. For me no. I do not like brandy. I will sip a little coffee. Now, you see, I am better. The thought of that man always terrifies me. What I feared was that he would hear your voice as he passed the open door, and that naturally you would not have a chance. I made my way into your bedroom, meaning to call out and warn you. Just then your servant closed the outside door into the salon, and I—well, I lost my nerve badly. I had left open the door into the bedroom behind me. I was slow. My knees were trembling, and it seemed to me that I had done everything stupid I could think of. I brought out my revolver in case I needed it, and opened the connecting door. I saw you in the chair. Before I could call out I felt something almost burn my cheek and knew that the man must have followed me and had fired at you over my shoulder. He was gone before I could look round. He was born of great people, but he was always an assassin by trade. I thought that he had killed you, and everything went black.”

“That’s quite enough of digging into the past,” Jere insisted. “He may have been an assassin by trade all right, but he had no idea of handling a gun. The bullet was tired of its job before it reached me.”

“And that manservant of yours?” she asked.

“Brodie,” Jere chuckled. “I think we’re going to have some fun with Brodie. He’s absolutely in his element.”

“Do you mean to say that he likes being thrown into a mêlée like this?”

“It’s what he came for,” Jere explained. “He was Tom Hansard’s private house detective, but he gave that up because there wasn’t enough doing. There’s been some competition,” Jere went on thoughtfully, “about wiping me off the face of the earth. Another fellow had a go at the Café de la Paix, and the way Brodie marched me out of that was a triumph. . . . Don’t think I’m nervy in any way, Princess, but do you think our friends will be able to keep up this pace at Pletz?”

She laughed quietly.

“That I am sure they cannot,” she declared. “You see in Paris our enemies

had a great advantage. They were on friendly terms with that terrible criminal society—The Little Brothers of St. Montmartre. It is very seldom that anyone who is on their black list lives.”

“But won’t they carry on the good work in Pletz at all?” Jere persisted. “I’m not funkng it, mind. Brodie and I have plans already for an armoured car and a bombproof villa!”

She smiled and leaned towards him.

“Mr. Jeremiah Strole, I do like you very much,” she said, patting his hand. “None of the men of my family have ever been cowards, but you are so gay with your courage. You laugh while you speak of death and when you have escaped from it. You have read your Dumas perhaps? You remind me of d’Artagnan.”

“D’Artagnan could love as well as fight,” Jere whispered.

Then there was a knock at the door, and the Baron and Baroness entered.

## CHAPTER XXII

The progress across Central Europe of the eastbound express, although stately, was distinctly slow. The longest wait of all, however, occurred on the third and last day of the journey soon after the Jakovian frontier had been crossed. The heavy train came to a sudden and unexpected stop at a wayside station, which consisted only of a wooden shed and a few yards of wooden platform apparently plumped down in the middle of a field. The bell from a small signal box rang incessantly. A station-master, who looked as though he had dressed in a hurry, held excited converse with the two guards of the train, the engine-driver and various other officials. The chef, who was preparing luncheon, put his white-capped head out of the window and made vain inquiries as to the possibility of purchasing fresh vegetables in the district. By degrees passengers began to alight and stroll around. Jere, when he had reached the end of the so-called platform, was confronted by a scene of unexpected and impressive beauty. Only a few miles away southward, across a perfectly flat region of rough and broken country, stretched a towering range of mountains whose pine-topped slopes literally disappeared into the clouds. The air was crisp and invigorating, but as far as one could see across the prairie and the wooded spaces there was no sign of any human being.

Upon the platform conversation grew every moment more excited amongst the little crowd of officials. The Baron, smoking a fat cigar, descended and joined them. All the time the bell continued clanging in the signal box, and the engine, after its night climb through the mountains, went on snorting and letting off steam.

“No one seems to know what the trouble is,” the Baron announced as he joined Jere. “The station-master—he is beside himself. He had a despatch from Karitza—that was the frontier town—to detain the train until he received further orders, and if the train had gone through, to pass the message on down the line.”

“Well, it’s a beautiful spot anyway,” Jere remarked, feeling for his cigarette-case.

“Beautiful in a way,” the Baron agreed, “but a drear country. I know it well, for the Baroness owns large estates not forty miles away. The country is under populated, the soil is unproductive. I might even say that I know it intimately, for forty thousand acres and a tumble-down *château* formed part of my wife’s dowry. The woods are almost in sight from here.”

“Any sport?” Jere asked. “Seems as though there ought to be bear up in those mountains.”

"If there are," the Baron replied, "you cannot get at them. I rode all round the place once—it took me three days—and I saw nothing alive but a few rabbits—not even a deer. You will not try one of my cigars?"

Jere refused politely and lit a cigarette.

"Seems an odd place to pull up so soon after the frontier," he observed.

"There may be trouble on the line some distance ahead," the Baron surmised. "That sometimes happens. I think that we must invite the ladies to descend. They would find a short promenade agreeable."

The Baron returned to speak to the conductor of his car. Brodie, who had been loitering on the outskirts of the group of officials, approached his master. He waited until he was within whispering distance before he spoke.

"A spot of trouble for us, I'm afraid, sir," he confided.

Jere threw away his cigarette and glanced around.

"Where do we come in?" he asked.

"I didn't get it very clear, sir," Brodie replied. "They're talking a queer sort of lingo there, and they're all so excited. I gathered, though, that there was someone on the train they wanted to arrest."

"What—arrest?" Jere exclaimed. "This is rather a new game, isn't it? Where do the police come in?"

"You know that we're in Jakovia, sir," Brodie reminded him. "You haven't forgotten who is King. To my mind that ginger moustached little guy is at the back of the whole thing."

"They've begun early," Jere meditated. "I thought that they would give us a few days to shake down in the country. What's the big idea, I wonder?"

Brodie had been gazing intently along the valley. He pointed with his forefinger to a curving line of dust which had risen in spirals from the road. A long grey object was coming gradually into sight, the sun flashing upon its metal work.

"A car!" Jere exclaimed. "Soldiers in it if my eyes are any good."

By this time nearly the whole of the passengers in the train had descended. Jere approached and paid his respects to the Baroness and Marya.

"Why do we wait here?" the latter demanded. "Nobody can tell me. It is the first time we have ever been stopped upon the way like this. I am afraid that you will form a very poor opinion of railway travelling in Jakovia, Mr. Strole."

"Never had a pleasanter journey in my life," Jere declared. "But what's going to happen to us now, I wonder?"

"Is anything going to happen to us," she asked, "except that we shall soon start again?"

Jere pointed down the valley.

"The train has been ordered to wait here," he confided. "This is what is

coming.”

“Soldiers!” she cried.

“Soldiers,” he agreed.

She laughed cheerfully. Soldiers in her own country, wearing the uniform of Jakovia, seemed of small moment to her after the assassins of Paris.

“Some formality, I suppose,” she observed. “We only crossed the frontier an hour ago. Did they look at your passport?”

“No one came near me,” Jere replied. “I expect I was passed in under the auspices of your august party.”

The car was close at hand now. There was a soldier driver, a soldier officer by his side and three privates behind.

“A General,” Marya murmured. “This is some affair.”

The car turned into the rough by-way which led to the station. The station-master, shaking himself loose from the little crowd, hurried forward to meet them. He stood at the salute while the General descended. They talked for a few minutes, then the station-master ushered the former on to the platform and escorted him towards Jere.

“You speak French, sir?” the new arrival inquired.

“Indifferently well,” Jere answered.

“Your name is Strole—Jeremiah Strole?”

“That is so.”

“I am General Varysan, in command of the garrison at Karitza. I should be glad to hear your explanation, sir, as to why you did not present your passport for examination at the frontier.”

“For two reasons, General,” Jere replied. “The first one is that I was fast asleep when we passed Karitza, and the second one is that nobody asked me for it.”

“It is a well-known fact,” the General declared, “that passports are examined on all frontiers. It is the duty of a passenger to be in evidence.”

“Then I have failed in my duty,” Jere confessed. “What can we do about it? Will you examine my passport now?”

The General waved it away.

“I am not a passport officer,” he exclaimed offensively. “You come under my jurisdiction only in as much as I find you in the district over which I have military command, with your passport unstamped and unvisaed. You must return with me to Karitza.”

“Sorry,” Jere objected, “but I am afraid I cannot do that. I shall present myself before any authority you like the moment we arrive at Pletz. For the rest it is necessary that I arrive there by this train. I have my engagements to keep.”

“And I have my duty to perform, sir,” was the curt rejoinder. “I do not

wish to place you under arrest, but if it is necessary I shall certainly do so.”

“As a matter of curiosity, what would be the charge?” Jere inquired.

“You are in the kingdom of Jakovia and your passport has not been examined by the authorities. That is quite sufficient.”

“If I let this train go on and return with you,” Jere asked, “when can I arrive at Pletz?”

“I am not a time-table, sir,” the General retorted. “It will involve without a doubt a delay of several days. Through trains are not numerous. Your luggage, however, can proceed subject to examination at Pletz.”

“I am very sorry,” Jere said. “I hate to be uncivil to the authorities of a country I am visiting for the first time, but I positively refuse to return with you to Karitza, nor will I submit to arrest.”

The General smiled. He lifted his hand, and two of the soldiers who were in the rear of the car came clanking down the platform.

“General,” Jere warned him, “do you realise that you are asking for pretty bad trouble?”

The General stroked his moustache complacently.

“Any form of trouble you can invoke, sir,” he said, “we shall, I think, be able to deal with.”

“You see,” Jere explained, “it is not only myself, but there is a good deal standing behind my passport—the United States of America, for instance——”

“That you are American does not concern us,” the General interrupted.

“But does it not concern you,” Jere asked, “that I am attached to the American Legation at Pletz, that I have various diplomatic privileges which you should know of? You refused just now to look at my passport. You will find that it is not an ordinary tourists’ affair—it is a diplomatic one.”

The General almost snatched it from Jere’s hand.

“Who is to testify to your identity?” he demanded.

“I believe, if you ask her,” Jere replied, “Her Royal Highness Princess Marya would do so. She is on the train.”

“I am here,” Marya’s voice intervened, as she strolled across towards them. “What on earth is this trouble?”

The General clicked his heels and stood at the salute.

“Your Royal Highness,” he explained, “we have urgent orders to detain an American travelling under the name of Jeremiah Strole. The message arrived after the examination of passports at the frontier, or we should, of course, have dealt with the matter on the spot. By some means or other the young man seems to have evaded our officers there, and we were obliged to telephone here and detain the train whilst we acted according to our instructions.”

“Instructions from whom?” Marya asked.

“The Chief of the Police.”



The Baron reappeared from the dining-car.

“What is amiss?” he demanded. “Hello, General, what are you doing, holding up our train?”

Again the General saluted and the two men shook hands. The matter was explained to the Baron, who showed signs of irritation.

“Some ridiculous mistake,” he declared. “I know for a fact that this young man is exactly the person indicated by his passport. I am an Austrian, so my word alone may not be acceptable, but Her Royal Highness will tell you that Mr. Strole had the honour of being presented to her recently in New York, and she has met him several times since. So, I may add, has my wife who, as you are doubtless aware, is of the royal house of Jakovia.”

“What the Baron says is perfectly correct,” Marya insisted. “I am afraid, General, that there is some grave error about your instructions. The Chief of Police even has not the right to interfere with the accredited envoy of a friendly power to our country.”

The General folded up the passport and handed it back to Jere.

“I can only offer my apologies to you, sir,” he said stiffly. “It is a situation with which I find it impossible to deal. You had better continue your journey, and I will telephone to Pletz and report what has happened. It will, of course, involve placing my resignation in the hands of the authorities, but after what Her Royal Highness has told me I have no alternative.”

“The resignation shall not be accepted, General,” Marya promised him. “You have been made the victim of a foolish blunder. May we go, please?”

The General gave the necessary orders and saluted. The soldiers stood at attention. The chef leaned out of his window and rang the luncheon bell. The hideous clanging in the signal box ceased, the station-master stood bare-headed. With puffing and snorting and grinding of couplings, once more the eastbound express went on its way.

## CHAPTER XXIII

Mr. James S. Homan, United States Minister to Jakovia, received Jere's formal visit on the afternoon of his arrival good-humouredly but with unconcealed surprise. The Legation was well enough housed in a large stone mansion at the corner of Parliament Square, in close proximity to the Cathedral and the Parliament House. The interior of the building, however, was disappointing. The furnishings lacked dignity and the official side of the place, at any rate, was curiously lifeless.

"I am delighted to welcome you, Mr. Strole," the Minister said, as he shook hands, "but I tell you frankly that why you have been sent to this post is a mystery to me. Supernumerary secretary, your appointment reads. I have two secretaries who have very little to do except ride, play golf on some extraordinary links they have practically had to remake themselves, and flirt with the Prime Minister's daughters. How you are going to employ your time I can't imagine."

"I ought really to apologise for butting in, sir," Jere remarked, as he accepted a chair and a cigarette. "The less work you give me to do, the better I shall be pleased. I didn't come here with any idea of doing diplomatic work. I came here to gain experience and for private reasons which I shall be able to explain to you more fully later on. . . . Rather a sort of musical comedy kingdom, isn't it?"

"The last of its kind, I should think," the Minister pronounced drily. "There's rioting as per time-table every Friday and Saturday, the King spends most of his time either in Paris or Bucharest, there's no industry worth speaking of, and no trade—no export trade at any rate."

"One of those countries," Jere suggested, "where the people live by taking in one another's washing."

"Of course, it can't go on," the Minister pointed out, with a little wave of his cigar. "There may be trouble at any moment—the sooner the better, so far as the country is concerned. I should say there will be a revolution within a month."

"Exactly how will the people be better off then?" Jere asked.

"Because there are great tracts of land in the north rich in minerals and timber, the working of which would set the country on its legs again," Mr. Homan explained. "There are Germans and Russians here now in the city—I could tell you the names of one or two of them—staying at the Grand Hotel, who are perfectly willing to start some commercial enterprises here, but they will deal with no one but a Republic. . . . Honestly, I don't know how on earth

you will amuse yourself, Mr. Strole, unless you have plans of your own. There's very little entertaining even amongst the Legations. A post here is looked upon as a diplomatic backwater and accepted only to avoid being chucked out of the service altogether. There's one great man here, but what he's out for no one knows. Nikolas Grogner, his name is. He is Prime Minister at the present moment, but he has only to say the word and he would be President of the new Republic."

"I have met his son," Jere confided. "Chief of the Police, he calls himself, I think. A very pleasant fellow."

"He could have any office he liked," Homan observed. "What he is in reality is the King's catspaw. He's clever enough, and they say he was a good soldier, but he's absolutely unprincipled. He's been over to America to raise money, I believe, but he didn't get a look in."

"Why doesn't the King part with some of these rich lands you spoke of?" Jere asked.

"Because the moment he did so," Homan replied, "the people would have the money if they sacked the Palace. He knows very well that there are hundreds of malcontents watching and waiting. A few months ago he did get an offer for a tract of forest land, the money to be paid in Paris. A deputation of Members of Parliament waited on him at once—they put it in plain black and white. They told the King that if an acre of the Crown lands is disposed of for cash during the present depression, the money will be confiscated by the House of Parliament. The whole thing is an absurdity, of course. If you were a journalist I could understand your being here, or if you were a diplomat from one of these neighbouring states, but frankly, as an American, I think you're crazy. I'm not going to ask you any questions, though. Come up and meet my sister. We scarcely entertain at all—it isn't necessary—but she'd be pleased to give you a cup of tea any day."

Jere accompanied his new chief into the residential part of the Legation, which he found stiff and gloomy. Miss Homan was a faded recluse, who had been a missionary in her youth and was something of a megalomaniac in her more mature days. She detested Jakovia, read nothing but American novels, and was one of those tired people who seem to have no object in life except an immense desire to get through with it. Jere accepted a cup of tea from what his hostess insisted on calling a samovar, and made his escape as quickly as possible.

"My two young men will look you up as soon as they come back," Mr. Homan promised. "They are not bad lads, and they're only here because they have to start at the bottom rung of the ladder. Where are you living?"

"At the Grand Hotel for the moment," Jere replied, "but I have a servant, who knows a few words of the language, looking out for a house. Do you

know of a good agent, by the by?"

"There are no good agents," was the hopeless response. "Wherever he goes he'll be robbed. Every day you stay here you'll be robbed. Everyone robs in Pletz. There are some decent people, of course, but poverty is wiping them out. Use this place as your headquarters, Strole, and come in whenever you like, but don't expect any work, because I haven't got any."

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Jere strolled thoughtfully back to his hotel. The square in which the legation was situated was fringed by some handsome houses, but half of them were closed. The Cathedral, into which he looked, was utterly devoid of architectural pretensions, and any pictures or interior decorations it may have possessed had been torn from the walls. He passed on into a broad street on which were a fair number of people, but all poorly dressed. There were cafés which seemed to be moderately well filled, but the shops, though spacious enough, displayed nothing but second or third rate articles of German or Italian origin. The women were mostly small and dark, good-looking in their way, but over-anxious and over-curious. At the café, where he sat down and ordered a cup of coffee, for which he paid about the equivalent of a cent, and listened to a small but very excellent Tzigane band, nearly every girl in the place who was unaccompanied—and there were at least a dozen—left her place to come and speak to him. Neither the waiters nor the patron, who was strolling round, interfered in any way. If monsieur did not wish to speak to the young ladies, he could dismiss them. One of them, who could speak a little French, Jere detained. She accepted a *bock* eagerly and sat down by his side.

"Not a very gay place, I should think, Pletz," he remarked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I have never been anywhere else," she told him. "They tell me that it used to be wonderful. Now no one has any money except the King, and he spends it all in Paris. It is not easy for a woman to live here, monsieur, unless she has a friend, and to find a friend who is able to keep another besides himself is difficult. I live with my sister, who is only fourteen years old, but who, they say, is prettier than I am. She waits in a shop but she earns very little."

"There are cinemas or places where you go to at night, I suppose?" Jere asked.

"There are cinemas—there are several theatres—there is an opera house which is now closed, and there are dance halls," the girl confided. "One goes to these, myself always, my sister when she is not too tired, but it is like this—there is nothing to do. There is seldom anyone who has the price of a *bock* to give away. For the price of a railway ticket to Paris, even to Vienna, there is not a girl in Pletz who would not give everything she has in the world."

Jere pointed to a limousine which was passing along. The chauffeur was in

livery, the two girls—one of them noticeably handsome—were fashionably dressed.

“There are some rich people,” he remarked.

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

“Those are the two daughters of the Prime Minister—Monsieur Grogner,” she confided. “They belong to another world. Their father owned mills when there was business doing in Pletz. They go sometimes to Paris. One does not count them.”

“They have a brother,” Jere murmured.

“It is true,” the girl agreed. “One sees nothing of him. He is a companion of the King’s. If you would like to know the sort of man he is, though, I will tell you. A year or so ago he had for one of his friends—he always had many—a little girl who was a cousin of mine. He went away and he left her no money. She wrote, but he sent her none. She went to keep house for a young man who was a watchmaker on the other side of the river. If she had not done so she would have starved. When he came back, this Colonel Grogner, he found out. The young man was arrested on some foolish charge, his house was taken away, his business ruined. That is the sort of man he is—the brother of those young ladies.”

Jere left a present in the girl’s hand which rendered her speechless, then he strolled along the boulevard and back to his hotel, a huge, gaunt structure which possessed few of the comforts and fewer still of the luxuries of modern days. He found Brodie arranging his dinner clothes on the bed.

“All right at the Legation, sir?” the latter asked a little anxiously.

“Quite all right,” Jere assured him. “There doesn’t seem to be any work to do, but that’s just what I was hoping for. Have you found me a house?”

“I could have bought you a row of them, sir, for about what we paid in Paris for a week. One moment, Mr. Strole.”

The telephone, an old-fashioned, worn instrument, suddenly clanged out an unexpected summons. Brodie answered it and turned to his master.

“A gentleman of the name of Grogner to see you, sir. He’s been here once before this afternoon. Kind of fuss they made down in the hotel when he came the first time. Prime Minister or something of the sort they said he was.”

“If it’s the father of the Colonel, he’s the big noise here. Have him shown in,” Jere directed.

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Jere, amongst the faded splendours of his huge and really imposing salon, awaited the arrival of his visitor with some curiosity. He was not disappointed. Nikolas Grogner, the only politician of his country who was seriously regarded in those days, was a man of extraordinary appearance. He was tall, well over six feet in height, but the dignity of his presence was completely lost by his

general lumpiness. One of his broad shoulders was a little higher than the other, his frock coat was buttoned tightly over a far too protuberant stomach, and he had a way of walking as though he were dragging his legs after him. His complexion was pale, almost yellow, his features enormous and irregular. He had a mass of iron grey hair and bushy, over-hanging eyebrows. He presented the appearance of an unhealthy man of tremendous physical force. To Jere's surprise he addressed him in faultless English.

"I am very happy to meet you, Mr. Strole," he said. "We have so few visitors of distinction who come now to Jakovia, that one feels an added pleasure in welcoming one with a name so widely known."

Jere smiled as he shook hands and pointed to a chair.

"I'm afraid that you are confusing me with my father, sir," he replied. "I am just a beginner in diplomacy. They told me at Washington, however, that Eastern Europe was a great place in which to study my craft."

"In the old days that might have been so," Mr. Grogner assented. "To-day that is over. The diplomacy which won more kingdoms than any battle is a thing of the past. A sort of blunt honesty has taken its place which sometimes does quite as well. May I smoke?"

"By all means," Jere assented. "What can I offer you?"

"Nothing, thank you," was the firm reply. "I smoke the foul and ill-made products of my own country. Our tobacco is execrable and our cigar-makers have never learnt the art of rolling the leaves. Nevertheless," Grogner continued with twinkling eyes, "I can assure you that it isn't patriotism alone which leads me to smoke nothing else."

He lit a large, loosely-wrapped black cigar, at which Jere gazed in wonder.

"If you will forgive the suggestion," the latter said, "with such an enterprise before you, you will drink something?"

"I will drink some brandy with great pleasure," Grogner replied. "Let your servant ask for the brand with which they serve me. Now that I have accepted your hospitality, Mr. Strole, I will give you an instance of the new diplomacy. For what purpose have you come to Pletz?"

The directness of the question, the fixed intensity of those brilliant eyes for a moment almost embarrassed Jere. His hesitation, however, was only momentary.

"To consider the possibilities of Jakovia as a place for the investment of capital," he replied.

"Your bank's money or your own?"

"Both," Jere fenced.

"This is very interesting," Grogner declared, taking a gulp of the brandy which had been brought.

"I am glad you find it so," Jere answered. "May I imitate your frankness?"

Why was there a little plot hatched to hold me up at the frontier?"

Nikolas Grogner chuckled.

"It was that ass of a son of mine," he confided. "His Majesty and he, for some queer reason, were anxious to keep you out of the country. I should have seen to it that you were not seriously inconvenienced. That was rather a clever move of yours, though, to come in as an unattached secretary to your Legation. That, as you say in Anglo-Saxon, did them in the eye."

Jere smiled. He was beginning to rather like his strange visitor.

"You smoke an anæmic-looking cigarette and you drink nothing," the latter complained.

"I will humour you with pleasure," Jere said, producing his pipe. "I will smoke a real American college pipe and I will drink a highball."

"Grant me one more favour," Grogner begged, "and we will get to close quarters. Dine at my house without ceremony to-night at half-past eight. There will be none of the diplomatic world to meet you," he added, with a flutter of the eyelids, "nor will my son be there."

"With great pleasure," Jere accepted. "You don't share your son's rather blood-thirsty tenets, I hope?"

"I shouldn't deserve to be Prime Minister even of the North Pole if I did," Grogner acknowledged. "Besides, we lack the machinery for crime here. I will give you a safe conduct both ways."

"Then I will come with pleasure."

Nikolas Grogner knocked the ash from his cigar, finished his brandy and rose to his feet.

"Very well, then," he said, "I shall send a car for you. Come punctually."

Jere stared at him in surprise. Grogner nodded.

"I understand. You are wondering why I come with the air of one who has something to say and depart without saying it. I will show you. Wait."

With a swiftness which was almost incredible in a man of his build he crossed the floor in half a dozen strides, flung aside a curtain, threw open a door, disappeared for a moment and returned, dragging in a man dressed after the fashion of a Continental valet in dark clothes and a striped coat, a man who was nearly choking, but whom Grogner held up with his giant hands intertwined in his clothes and shook like a rat.

"This is some of my egregious son's work," he announced. "He calls himself the Chief of Police and descends to this sort of thing! Be so good as to open the window, Mr. Strole. Thank you. Now, out you go," he added to his prisoner, "and if you're seen about this hotel again or anywhere in the city near me, you will spend the rest of your days rotting in the fortress. Mind you, the fortress on the other side of the river. There's only one man ever come alive out of that."

The window was opened. Grogner braced himself for an effort, and his wretched captive shot out into the paved courtyard as though from a gun. He lay huddled up, making no attempt at movement. Grogner closed the window.

“You’ll meet with a lot of this sort of thing here if my son has his way,” he remarked, with a queer smile. “We’ll talk about it to-night.”

Grogner brushed the ash from his coat and took up his broad-brimmed black felt hat, after which Jere escorted him into the hotel reception-room. His visitor then struck the mahogany counter with the knob of his cane.

“Send me Monsieur Dravon,” he directed.

An obsequious clerk hurried away. The manager came out—a burly, powerful-looking man with cropped head and a short fair beard. He looked as strong as Grogner himself, but there was fear in his face. Grogner watched his approach without any sign of recognition or return of his salutation. When they were standing within a few feet of one another he laid his hand upon the man’s shoulder.

“Dravon,” he said, “if during Mr. Strole’s stay here he or I find another of my son’s blasted spies hanging around, I shall close your hotel and you will be across the frontier in twenty-four hours. Is that plain enough?”

“I can assure you, Mr. Grogner—” the man began.

“Do not trouble,” Grogner interrupted. “I have had to use espionage before, myself, and use it in your hotel too. What you have to understand is that this young gentleman is an American subject who is under my protection and he is not to be interfered with. Can I make it any plainer?”

“There is no necessity, Your Excellency,” the man assured him.

Grogner departed with a nod of warning. The manager of the hotel stood wiping his forehead. Jere returned to his rooms.

“I think I am going to rather like the Prime Minister, Brodie,” he confided.



## CHAPTER XXIV

Jere, whose imagination was rarely touched, felt the piquant thrill of the unexpected as, having entered the private courtyard of the Prime Minister's official residence from a dirty side street, he was ushered by an unkempt-looking man-servant in ancient livery into a salon of gigantic proportions, where Nikolas Grogner, colossal and impressive, was standing before a fireplace as big as a room and underneath an oil portrait twice his own size. Grogner's dinner attire, like everything else about the man, was unusual. His turned-down collar and flowing black tie made the sartorial efforts of any aspiring pianist a thing of naught. He wore a flowered waistcoat, and his trousers were so short that they disclosed his white silk socks. His patent shoes were ornamented with buckles of the finest paste.

"I am glad to welcome you, Mr. Strole," he said. "Let me present you to my daughters."

They issued as he spoke from a smaller connecting apartment—two extraordinarily handsome young women, dark, with flashing eyes, the scarlet lips of custom and the complexion of the Rue de Rivoli. They wore similar dresses of a dark magenta, shimmering a little in the light almost to violet.

"Mr. Vavasour Strole," their father announced. "My eldest daughter Julie and her sister Noamie."

"Mademoiselle speaks English?" Jere asked.

"As well as I do myself," their father replied for them. "Their education has left me a poor man, but they have learnt only two things—languages and tennis."

"That is entirely our dear parent's ignorance," Julie declared, leaving her hand for a moment in Jere's and looking at him with approving eyes. "We have also learnt how to dress like the others in Paris, to dance the tango as it should not be danced——"

"To mix cocktails," the younger sister put in.

"And to avoid God's most dangerous creation," Julie concluded.

"The most dangerous creation of the Deity being?" Jere ventured.

"Man. We were taught that at the convent, but we do not claim to practise everything that we learnt! For instance, I never dance the tango and I always leave Noamie to mix the cocktails."

A servant threw open the top portion of a sideboard which contained more bottles than Jere had ever seen before in his life. Gold cups were placed in a row upon an oblong tray, ice swimming about on a plate stood by the side.

"Touches of the primitive, you see, Mr. Strole," Julie remarked. "We do

what we can, but Pletz is Pletz. We have several favourite creations, my sister and I, but I cannot call them by name. We have not that aptitude.”

“I wonder,” Jere suggested, “if you have ever made what we call a Dry Martini?”

“Wholesome but not intriguing,” Julie sighed. “I know—two parts of Gordon’s gin and one of Noilly Prat vermouth.”

“This surely cannot be Pletz!” Jere murmured.

“And why not?”

“I was told that it was, in streaks at any rate, uncivilised.”

“Well, you may make some discoveries for yourself later on,” she laughed up at him. “You must beware of my sex, I can tell you that. There are only four men in the city, leaving out the King, and three of those are married.”

“I’m beginning to be glad I came,” Jere confided.

“Wait until you’ve tried our cook,” Noamie warned him. “We brought one back from Paris last year. He wanted to go in three days, but father arranged that he could not get his passport for two months. Then someone asked a question about him in Parliament and we had to let him go.”

“The cooking would not be so bad,” Julie observed, “if there was ever anything to cook.”

“Do not listen to those chattering scatter-brains,” Nikolas Grogner intervened. “Our pheasants are as good as any in the world. We only get freshwater fish, it is true, but it is good.”

“You will be poisoned at the hotel,” Noamie warned him, as she screwed down the top of the cocktail shaker.

“Why on earth didn’t you make Mr. Strole stay here, Father?” Julie demanded.

“Because,” her father rejoined, “Mr. Strole is too dangerous a guest. Bring me a cocktail.”

Nikolas Grogner had taken up a position at a smaller sideboard on which were twenty or thirty different sorts of edibles on small plates, from caviare and cod’s roe to raw tunny fish.

“Are you dangerous, Mr. Strole?” Julie queried, as they crossed the floor with the cups and the cocktail shaker.

“According to your father I am,” Jere replied, “but purely in a negative fashion.”

“I said he was a dangerous guest,” Grogner spluttered out in the midst of tearing a sandwich to pieces. “Someone tries to murder him every few days. That would give the Press here a fine chance—‘American Diplomat found shot in the house of the Prime Minister’.”

“You are too nervous of the newspapers, Dad,” Julie declared.

“Some day I will start one of my own,” Nikolas Grogner growled. “I am

tired of being the big bad boy of Jakovia.”

“What is your particular sin in life, Mr. Strole?” Julie asked him. “Why do people want to get rid of you?”

“If I only knew!” he sighed. “My life has really been a singularly blameless one. I think I must be a blunderer. I always seem to be in the way of someone’s pet schemes.”

The cocktails were duly approved of and repeated, after which a very dignified old gentleman with grey hair and a grey beard announced dinner. Julie and her sister, each taking an arm, led Jere across a white stone hall, a portion of which was covered with the most priceless Persian rugs he had ever seen. The dining-room itself was Gothic, the stone walls hung with tapestry and ancient paintings, but a touch of modernity was supplied by the concealed lighting of the table, which came from underneath, and the central lamp of which flamed with a dull orange light in the centre of a bowl of flowers. There were three maids waiting at the table in attractive local costumes, and there was enough food for a dozen people. Nikolas Grogner ate steadily and stolidly, but he had also the eye of a host, and Julie and her sister were as flirtatious hostesses as any young man could wish for.

“The simple food of the country,” Nikolas Grogner explained, “is the only thing which is cheap here. Luxuries and anything which we have to import are prohibitive. No country can live without exports. We are dying of inanition.”

“Outside one hears that you are threatened with revolution,” Jere observed.

“What good would that do?” his host growled. “If there is a revolution they will come to me to be President. The first million pounds worth of oil or timber which we send out of the country will indicate our re-incarnation. Until then we shall not live.”

“At the present moment you seem to struggle along all right,” Jere ventured.

“If one were to lift the curtain which hangs over this city,” Grogner sighed, “it would reveal unimagined miseries. Our so-called bourgeoisie have lost their stomachs and flap along under empty waistcoats. Our poorer classes are literally starving. The oddments of work there are to be picked up are shockingly underpaid and are very scarce. A few miles outside the city you will find the people ranging the country like wolves. It goes against the grain not to help them but there is only one way.”

“You are Prime Minister,” Jere reminded him a little boldly. “If there is a way you ought to find it. . . .”

The meal was finished at last. Cigars, cigarettes and liqueurs were brought. The little table with its subdued but brilliant illumination and its company of four—the men with their white shirt fronts and the girls with overmuch jewellery—was like an oasis of strange modernity in the midst of cavernous

spaces. Nikolas Grogner waved his hand.

“You will wait for us in the salon, Julie and Noamie,” he directed. “You have tried our poor guest’s patience long enough, I’m sure. Have you ever found a hostess brazen enough to hold your hand in that fashion, Mr. Strole?”

“I was only looking at Mr. Strole’s ring,” the young woman laughed.

“I found it very pleasant anyhow,” Jere declared.

“Be off,” their father repeated impatiently. “We will take coffee with you later, but send a strong cup in here first.”

They fluttered away, leaving Jere a trifle bewildered by such a medley of feminine grace, coquetry and shamelessness. They behaved like the young ladies of Hampstead and yet contrived to retain both dignity and allure. The challenge of Julie’s last glance left Jere’s senses entirely dazed.

“I am Oriental, I fear, in my outlook,” Grogner confided, as he selected one of his loathsome cigars and pushed others towards Jere. “I would keep my women-kind in a harem if I had one, and eat and live alone in the daytime. Women amongst the serious things of life are nothing but foolish distractions.”

“What about the Princess Marya?” Jere asked, obeying a sudden impulse.

“A glaring example,” Grogner insisted, biting off the end of his cigar savagely. “No one is a worse hindrance to the regeneration of this country than she.”

“Worse than the King?”

“Can’t you see,” Grogner pointed out, “that but for the foolish affection the people of Jakovia have for Princess Marya they would knock the monarchy into smithereens in half an hour. They know all about King Phillip, as you and I do. They put up with him all these years because they don’t actually want a republic. They haven’t the republican instinct. Life’s a sort of circus game to them. They like the pageantry and glitter of kingship. They have just found out they have been paying too much. Before many weeks have passed they are going to do what they would have done years ago but for their maudlin affection for Princess Marya. When the storm breaks Phillip will be lucky if he gets over the frontier alive.”

“As near as all that, is it?” Jere remarked.

“Can’t you feel it in the air?” his host growled. “I can smell it even when I cross the square to Parliament House. It’s like the smell before a rain storm, like the taste of brimstone in the atmosphere before thunder comes. The people are tired of waiting for a leader. They will explode without one. Even if Phillip brings home the money to pay the army, which is what he was supposed to go to Paris for, it will only postpone the evil day. How old are you, Mr. Jeremiah Strole?”

“Nearly twenty-five,” Jere answered, a little taken aback.

“Have you any money in Europe? Can you sign anything that will bring

money?”

“A few million dollars, perhaps.”

“Then the destinies of Jakovia are in your hands at the present moment. You, a lad just out of college! I’m telling you the truth—whoever can pay the army, bring in those four thousand truck loads of coal and grain which are waiting on the frontier for payment, can rule the country. . . . The thing is, and it’s the thing that interests me mostly, behind whom are you going to do it?” Grogner went on, striking the table with his immense hairy hand. “Are you going to be seduced by my son, bolster up the King and make a hero of him, are you going to press the money into the hand of the Princess Marya, encourage her to break through her scruples and accept the throne that the people are longing to give her, or are you coming to me in a cool, business-like fashion to plan out the revolution and a new form of government, and take treasury-notes with a profit for all the money you advance? There’s safety that way but no romance. There’s romance with the Princess Marya but no security. There’s nothing but folly in trying to deal with Phillip. He would cheat. Half the money would get through somehow to keep his courtesans in Paris.”

“I rather think,” Jere told his host confidentially, “that if I do anything at all I shall back the Princess Marya.”

“It’s the second best thing,” Grogner agreed, “but you run a risk. She is a woman and she is easily swayed. A great weapon has lain ready to her hand for years and she has feared to use it. She may still lack the courage. She needs a man to crack the whip. You are, after all, only a boy.”

“Knowing singularly little of the real state of affairs,” Jere remarked, “it seems to me that you would do thundering well to throw in your lot with the Princess. Couldn’t you plan a rising of the people, seize Phillip and force him to abdicate?”

“I could do that,” Grogner admitted, “but the modern politicians—well, none know the game better than your own—they play for their own hand. What should I get out of it?”

“You would remain Prime Minister,” Jere pointed out. “You would probably have something to say about the administration of the funds which came into the country. I don’t know whether they give titles away here, I don’t know what it is you want, but I should think the Princess would be generous.”

“And you—what would you get out of it,” Grogner asked, “for lending the money, I mean? Don’t flounder about. I’ll tell you what you want to get out of it. You want to marry the Princess. It couldn’t be done. The people would never have it. The Princess would never consent. Jakovia is a poor bankrupt and a humble country, but it would still find strength to shake with laughter at the idea of an American commoner calling himself King or Prince Regent.”

Jere made no reply. There was something diabolically and convincingly true in Grogner's naked, jeering words. Marya had faltered once, perhaps twice, but Queens have had their moments of faltering. They were incidents—no part of the chain of life.

“For one of your race,” Grogner went on, knocking the ash from his cigar and pouring himself out some more brandy, “you're as near being a romanticist as anyone I ever knew. If you want a wife, why not take Julie? You haven't looked at her closely, perhaps; a touch of the Jewess about her maybe, but Markesson, the greatest painter in the world to-day, declared in Leipzig two months ago that she was the most beautiful woman on earth. Seems queer, with me for a father. She has half of her mother's fortune and a title if she wants to use it.”

“Your daughter is marvellously attractive,” Jere acknowledged, “but I met her for the first time two hours ago.”

“Think about it then, my lad,” his host suggested urgently. “You can have the little one if you like, but she will never make the figure in the world that Julie might. If you are an anti-feminist, cut 'em both out and deal with me. We will work together to oust Phillip and put Marya on the throne, or we'll smash up this thousand year old monarchy, and I'll rule the country as it should be ruled. Meanwhile, keep your eyes open. Phillip is a fool himself, but my son is a clever fellow. They've got ideas about you already. . . . Now, come across and talk to the young women. I've got to leave you almost at once—emergency committee meeting at the House—something that's going to bring matters to a head within a few days. I'll take you across to the salon. Ring when you want a car. Don't walk—unless you want a free ride to the cemetery.”

## CHAPTER XXV

Jere had had the foresight to have his letters from the States and those re-addressed from Paris sent through the Legation bag, and he found a very fair pile waiting for him on the following morning. Mr. Homan greeted him in friendly, but in the same querulous fashion.

“What you are going to do with yourself, Strole, I have not the faintest idea,” he confessed. “I cannot keep my own secretary engaged, but I take it that all you want is a quasi-official position in the place.”

“That is the precise truth,” Jere admitted. “The last thing I want is work.”

“Very well. They have given you a little den next to mine. Chandler is going to look out for you this morning. He is my secretary, and if there is anything you want to know about the place, he will put you wise. I shall have to take you to the Palace as a matter of form, but I don’t think the King is back yet.”

“Don’t you worry about me, sir,” Jere begged. “I expect I shall find plenty to do.”

“Even though you are unattached, you will have to call upon the other Ministers,” Homan warned him. “Chandler will put you through that. The Italian man has a very attractive wife, and they entertain now and then. The Austrian Legation is quite decent. They have a tennis court up at the English one, but a young man and his wife there who take life far too seriously. Your room is the next on the left. Ring if you want anything: you will find your letters there. Come in and see me whenever you like. I have done a tour of the country more out of curiosity than anything, so I may be able to tell you anything you want to know.”

Jere expressed his acknowledgments and withdrew. He found his room, notwithstanding the fact that there was no carpet on the floor and no furniture except a writing table and two chairs, airy and quite agreeable. What pleased him most was an immense map of Jakovia, which was its sole mural ornamentation. The room was heated by a closed stove with a pipe which disappeared through the wall. Amongst the little pile of letters, rather to Jere’s surprise, was one in his father’s precise hand-writing. It was not often in these days that Vavasour Strole handled a pen. It was dated about a month back, and had been waiting at the Legation for several days.

*My Dear Jere,—*

*I am glad that upon this occasion of my writing to you my news will not be of so melancholy a nature. No doubt our friends at the*

bank explained to you that the basic cause of the recent check to their prosperity was connected with the affairs of the Goldsmith Motor Company, in which they appear to have had unlimited confidence. That confidence is now becoming justified. At the time when you and I were forced to go through that very unpleasant ceremony in the library the price of Goldsmith Motors had fallen to 44. Five minutes ago, to give you the latest news, I did what I have not done for years—rang up and asked the price to-day. They are a strong market at 207. Practically the whole of the shares are held by the bank, and they appear to have continued to buy them right down to the lowest point—namely, \$40, so the position is now very much altered.

Not to weary you unduly with details, I send you my congratulations upon the fact that your sacrifice now will be reduced at once by rather more than half, and probably eliminated altogether in the near future. I should perhaps explain to you that the Board of Directors have unanimously agreed to use the whole of their profits, which are really colossal, in returning the amounts voluntarily handed over by you, myself, Dimsdale and others at the time of the crisis.

I take this opportunity, my dear Jere, of thanking you for the way in which you faced the position with which we were suddenly confronted, and I trust that your return to affluence will inspire you with some definite ideas as to the conduct of your life.

We may meet before long, for I have an urgent invitation from my old friend Prince Strozzi to visit him in Rome, and as a rule such an invitation is likely to lead to very pleasant results.

I am,

Your affectionate father,

Vavasour Strole.

Jere smiled as he placed a paper weight over the letter. In a sense, it was a veritably human document. Already his father had forgotten the sacrifice he had demanded. The fire of acquisitiveness had re-entered his veins. Jere opened a letter from Mr. Forsythe.

My Dear Jere,—

From the bank and other sources you will receive official and technical notification of the great change which has taken place in the affairs of the bank. You yourself have, no doubt, been following with great interest the marvellous justification of the bank's



*confidence in Goldsmith Motors. I hear that the new models have more than proved themselves and, though I never listen to market talk, there are many confident prognostications that the stock is under-valued at anything less than \$500. I have had an interview with the directors and have ventured to point out to them that, as your very large advance, or rather gift, was to meet differences in Goldsmith Motors, you were entitled now to some share in the very large profit which the bank will handle, and I am glad to tell you that the attitude of the directors is entirely sympathetic.*

*You will receive all official documents from the bank, but I may tell you that the sum of twenty millions out of your advance has already been written in again to your credit, and a proportionately similar sum to your father's.*

*With my best wishes,*

*Sincerely yours,*

*John Forsythe.*

The rest of Jere's correspondence possessed but faint interest for him. He glanced it through and made a separate pile of the reports from his agents, of which he still had four or five at work in the northern parts of the country. He was interrupted by the arrival of Brodie.

"There is an automobile waiting for you, sir, at the hotel," the latter announced. "The man brought this note. I thought that I had better slip across with it."

Jere broke open the seal and read quickly.

*My Dear Friend,—*

*According to what I can hear, the city is full of strange rumours. I do not know how long we shall be left in tranquillity. I beg you, therefore, before you enter upon your duties seriously, to take luncheon with me to-day here in my home. The Baron and Baroness are with me, but for how long I cannot say, for I have just been served with a notice signed by the King and the chief of his Privy Council, ordering me to leave Jakovia within seven days.*

*Marya Pia Jakovia.*

"Where is the car?" Jere asked.

"At the hotel," Brodie replied. "It is only just across the square, and so far as I could understand the chauffeur he was unwilling to present himself anywhere else."

Jere caught up his hat, struggled into his coat and locked up his room.

“You beat the world for discretion, Brodie,” he said. “We’ll show these slow-moving Jakovians what two men in a hurry look like.”

A slow grin broke over Brodie’s smooth face.

“You won’t teach them nothing about that, sir,” he confided. “I’ve seen them seventeen years ago with the bullets at their heels, and I can tell you there were no faster creatures on two legs. All the shop windows were boarded up, and they had machine guns at the top of the square. Four years before the war it was. If it hadn’t been for the Princess Marya’s father, Commander-in-Chief of the army he was in those days, the city would have been sacked.”

They hurried across the cobbled Place, the strangely-shaped houses—some tall, some squat, some residential, some shops—on every side of them. The only signs of life seemed to be in the cafés. They themselves were the objects of a great deal of idle curiosity, but the majority of the people whom they passed seemed either to be in a hurry themselves or too listless to take any notice of the doings of others. Brodie led the way into an alley and up a flight of steps. Almost at the summit they arrived at the hotel. A large car of American make was drawn up outside.

“How far is it to the Princess’?” Jere asked.

Brodie pointed across the river, up a hillside dotted with villas to the base of the mountains beyond. Here on a spur of land was a grey stone building from the top of which a flag was flying.

“That is what they call the Little Palace, sir,” he confided. “The Princess is there with her friends. You can’t make the chauffeur understand anything. If you don’t mind, Mr. Strole, I should like to sit by his side and go along. I shan’t be in the way. There’s a café opposite the Palace where the townspeople go on Saturdays and Sundays. I can wait for you there.”

“That’s all right with me, Brodie,” his master agreed.

The chauffeur descended, and without any change in his expression opened the door of the car with a military salute. Jere stepped in and Brodie clambered up into the front seat. The chauffeur shook his head and began what was probably a protest in a local dialect. Brodie listened with an air of complete non-comprehension, but retained his seat. After a time the man abandoned his protests and drove off.

“He didn’t want me to come, Mr. Strole,” Brodie explained, looking back. “Pretended he had to obey orders literally, and his orders were only to take you.”

“Well, we’re off anyway,” Jere remarked.

They passed the outskirts of the city, tawdry enough but without the disfiguring though wholesome evidences of building and expansion. Then they began to climb to what might have been at one time a prosperous residential quarter. Most of the villas now, however, seemed to be unoccupied, and a great

many of them were almost dismantled. Afterwards they passed through a wood, a district of small allotments where dark, gipsy-looking people were at work upon the land, and finally emerged upon another road. From here they climbed in semi-circular fashion through a sort of park up to the Castle itself, a grim-looking building, with mediaeval-sized windows but a great terrace thrown out in front and glimpses of a flower garden at the side. They drove under a stone arch, on either side of which was a porter's lodge, into a still and empty courtyard. A nail-studded door of oak was, however, opened at the sound of their horn, and a pompous-looking butler prepared to greet them. Brodie took off his hat.

"The café is just across the small Place, sir," he said. "I will be there if I'm wanted."

He hurried away. The butler, to Jere's surprise, addressed him in his own language.

"Her Royal Highness will receive you at once, sir," he said. "Mr. Strole of New York, is it not? I knew your father once, sir."

"What on earth are you doing out here?" Jere inquired.

"I ask myself that question every morning, sir," the man replied, "and several times during the day. I came back with the Baron de Sturgiwil from Washington on one of his trips. We came here to stay, and I married and took a post in the household. Dead as ditchwater, but it costs nothing to live, and it's healthy."

Jere followed his guide across a very fine hall, whose absence of decoration seemed somehow impressive. There were a few banners hanging from the walls and one or two pictures only.

"Our grand reception room, sir," the man whispered to Jere, as he threw open a door. "We generally show guests in this way—gives them a good impression—but Her Royal Highness prefers a suite of smaller rooms."

There must have been at least a hundred chairs ranged round the walls of the first apartment through which Jere passed—an apartment with a fine oak floor and some grim-looking pictures upon the walls. His conductor threw aside some heavy curtains, however, and ushered him into a smaller room. Marya, wearing a dark red dress with fur round her neck, came in from the terrace and closed the window behind her. She had apparently been walking there, for there was the wholesome colour of exercise upon her cheeks and her eyes were bright.

"Welcome to Pletz," she said, holding out her hand. "Don't be afraid. I shall not ask you what you think of us—even though I have been away for so short a time, the appearance of the place shocks me. Will you sit down, please, amongst the ruins of our passing grandeur, and talk to me for a time."

Jere was still holding the hand he had raised to his lips.

"I am glad to see you again, Princess," he said earnestly.

She avoided his eyes, which he looked upon as a good sign.

"You must please be very patient with me this morning," she begged. "I have had rather a shock. I will tell you about it presently."

"My news is all good," Jere declared, as he accepted a cigarette from the box she offered him, and sat down in the gilded, high-backed chair close to her own. "No one has attempted as yet to assassinate me, and the people whom I have seen about look, most of them, half starved but harmless enough. The reports I find waiting for me from my agents concerning your northern provinces are favourable, and I have met a man whom it was worth while coming from New York to talk to."

"Nikolas Grogner!" she exclaimed.

"Nikolas Grogner," he assented. "Worth a dozen of his son, I should say."

"He is a very remarkable man," she pronounced. "He would be of the very greatest help to this country if one only dared trust him."

"He talked like an honest man," Jere observed.

"That sort of bluff honesty," the Princess sighed, "is generally the most dangerous form of subtlety. However, I should not criticise Nikolas Grogner, for I do not understand him. I have known him since I was a baby and I cannot tell you to-day whether he is for the King, whether he is for me, or whether he wishes to be Dictator of a new State."

A servant in grey livery with purple braid, a much older man than the butler who had admitted Jere, made his appearance, carrying a tray which seemed to be of solid gold, on which reposed a very beautiful jug, richly chased, which had every sign of being of the same metal. There were two glasses upon the tray with gold rims, and the remains of a crown emblazoned upon them.

"This is one of our old customs," Marya explained, with a smile. "I no more dare attempt to save you from this ordeal than to lower my own flag. This is a wine grown upon our own estates. It is supposed to represent, in the five hundred years old pamphlet we have, the blood of the people of Jakovia offered for the refreshment of an honest visitor. You must drink, and so must I."

"Won't I!" Jere exclaimed. "What a colour!"

With bent knee the man filled one glass, which he presented to the Princess. He stood upright and filled another for Jere. The wine was a rich old claret colour, almost the shade of a vintage port of great age. Jere instinctively rose to his feet and bowed to the Princess. The old man smiled approval.

"May I wish for better times and greater prosperity to the kingdom of Jakovia," Jere said.

The wine was sweet, potent and alluring. Jere set down his glass upon the

small table placed by his side, and resumed his seat. The man, with the jug and the tray, took his leave with the air of an Archbishop in the Chancel.

“Now you are free of Jakovia,” Marya smiled. “Finish the wine at your leisure. I sent for you to speak of serious things.”

“I am all attention,” Jere assured her.

“It has been reported to Phillip,” Marya went on, “that a company of English and American experts have made an exhaustive survey of the whole of the northern province. These men are some of them English, but most of them American.”

“Quite true, I should think. That has all been done on your account.”

“They are your men then?”

“Without a doubt. I have two Englishmen and a Norwegian over here on the timber business, two Americans looking over the oil country, and a South African up in the mountains prospecting for minerals. I didn’t expect to be able to get to work so soon, but there has been a certain change in my own fortunes. Any time you like to bring your lawyer along, Princess, we can get to work. There is an American lawyer attached to the Consulate who will act for me.”

Marya was obviously agitated. She sat nervously clasping and unclasping her fingers.

“But you did not expect,” she reminded him, “to be able to do anything on your own account for some time.”

“Conditions in America have improved,” he told her. “I am more my own master. I can deal with twenty million dollars almost at once.”

She reflected for a moment.

“Have you spoken of this to Nikolas Grogner?” she asked abruptly.

“I have had no more than general conversation with him,” he replied. “To tell you the truth, Princess, you have left me rather in a fog. I don’t know with whom I have to deal. These lands which I have been inspecting, you tell me are Crown lands and belong to King Phillip, yet it was your wish, I believe, that I should deal with you. How can I? Have you a lien upon them? Can you sign agreements and sell or lease the lands? And where does Grogner come in if the lands do not belong to the State? I am here on your account and your account only, Princess, but I am afraid you will have to bring your lawyer along for us to make a satisfactory arrangement.”

She stopped opposite to him with flashing eyes.

“You do not trust me!” she exclaimed. “You do not believe my word.”

“I would believe anything you told me,” he answered simply, “but you tell me nothing.”

She walked away to the high window and stood there with her back to him, looking down upon the city. Her shoulders were heaving, and he was filled with a maddening desire to hurry over to her to beg for the truth and promise

her everything she wanted in the world in her own way. He resisted, however. Some instinct of common-sense was helping him. So they were—he in the high-backed state chair and Marya fighting out her battle alone at the window—when the door was thrown open and the old butler who had brought the wine stood there, with a queer old-fashioned wand in his hand with a black ivory top.

“Your Royal Highness,” he announced, “His Majesty King Phillip asks to be received.”

## CHAPTER XXVI

Even if there were no signs of welcome in Marya's face as she swung round and advanced to meet her visitor, there were at least no signs of distress. She curtsied and kissed Phillip's extended hand gravely.

"Your Majesty should have apprised me of the honour that was in store for me," she said.

"In which case," Phillip remarked with a smile, "you would probably have flitted with my excellent friends but—alas!—ill-wishers, de Sturgiwil and the Baroness. Our young American visitor too, I see. Mr. Jeremiah Strole, I am pleased to welcome you to my kingdom."

"You are very gracious, sir," Jere replied.

"It is too early perhaps, to inquire as to your impressions?"

Jere hesitated.

"So far, Your Majesty," he said, "I find Jakovia a very interesting place, but with more signs of poverty and distress than I had thought possible."

The King sighed.

"There," he remarked, "we are all in the same box. Ours is a poor country, Mr. Strole. It is useless to deny it. You, as a citizen of a rich one, could not fail to observe the circumstance."

"It is unfortunately apparent," Jere admitted.

The King held a chair for Marya and seated himself by her side.

"Yet neither the country itself nor our capital city are devoid of objects of interest," Phillip proceeded. "The Palace is, if I may say so, well worth a visit. Our Cathedral dates from the year 1100, and our remains of Grecian occupation are in a state of singularly good repair. Furthermore, to descend to these less happy modern days, we possess, native of the place and living here, one of the most beautiful women in the world—the daughter of my Prime Minister. You have perhaps met her, Mr. Strole?"

"I had that honour last night," Jere acknowledged.

The King smiled.

"Old Grogner does not let the grass grow beneath his feet," he observed. "Well, Mr. Strole, if you're looking for a Jakovian bride you could set the artists and illustrators of two hemispheres busy trying to do justice to that young woman. For myself, I admit that I am susceptible. I keep away. Morganatic marriages are very much disapproved of in this country, or I should certainly be the fair Julie's most ardent wooer."

Marya's lip curled.

"Your Majesty's continence in such matters," she said, "is one quality

amongst so many others which have endeared you to your people.”

Phillip indulged in a most un-royal chuckle.

“Dear cousin,” he protested, “isn’t that rather an unnecessary stab? In the matter of morganatic marriages,” he went on pensively, “other rumours have reached me.”

“Your Majesty has honoured me with this visit to discuss such matters?” the Princess inquired coldly.

“By no means,” was the prompt reply. “I came in a spirit of cousinly friendliness to answer personally the letter of protest which I received from you this morning.”

“In that case,” Marya said, turning towards Jere——

The King interrupted with a little wave of the hand.

“I will not have our amiable young visitor from New York interfered with,” he demurred. “We can have a few words together, my cousin, later on. Mr. Strole is a very interesting guest. I should like to ask him whether he has thought further of a certain matter which we discussed in Paris, and concerning which his later attitude became somewhat disconcerting.”

“I have thought of it very seriously,” Jere admitted. “So far as I have gone, my impressions are entirely favourable, provided the legal aspect of the affair is made clear and the transaction is agreeable to the Princess.”

The King stroked his stubbly fair moustache. There was a twinkle in his eyes, but, alas, it was more of avarice than humour.

“Capital!” he commented. “Capital! Let me put the matter to the test, Mr. Strole. Would they be so far favourable, for instance, as to make it possible for my Chancellor of the Exchequer to obtain from you a loan of say two hundred thousand dollars upon the Ben Rolte forests—Her Royal Highness here being agreeable?”

“Absolutely,” Jere replied without hesitation. “Finest seasoned timber they’ve ever seen, my men tell me, and every facility for the prompt erection of sawmills.”

“There would be a—long delay?” the King inquired, his fingers playing with his moustache.

“I don’t see that there need be any,” Jere argued. “The interest would commence, of course, with the first payment, and in the present season of international depression the interest would naturally be high.”

The King moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue.

“There would be no difficulty about the money?” he ventured.

Jere smiled.

“I have much larger sums than that lying to my credit in Paris,” he confided. “At the same time, if Your Majesty will permit my speaking frankly, it seems difficult for me as a possible investor to know exactly with whom to



deal. It was the Princess here who first interested me in Jakovia, it was she on whose account I first came to the country, it is for the pleasure of acceding to a wish of hers that I should feel interested in making investments here, which, let me add, once more, I should only make with her approval. Her Highness admits that the valuable land is all in your hands as Crown property. Your Prime Minister is cryptic upon the subject. I should like to meet with someone who can put me or my lawyer in full possession of all the facts.”

“Lawyer—who is your lawyer?” Phillip asked sharply. “You haven’t brought a lawyer here with you, have you?”

“Certainly I have not,” Jere assured him. “Mr. Wakefield at the Consulate is ready to act for me.”

“Well, there is only one answer to your question,” the King said after a moment’s pause. “The whole of the land which you wish to acquire is Crown property. You would have to deal with my representative, and he is at your disposition the moment you say the word. As to my dearly esteemed cousin, to tell you the truth, Mr. Strole, I scarcely see what Her Royal Highness has to do with the matter.”

The Princess rose to her feet.

“Your Majesty,” she said firmly, “it is better for me to give you notice that I should have something to say, on behalf of myself and the other members of the royal family, before any business was completed between you and Mr. Strole’s representative.”

The King was no longer dapper, the good-humour had left his face, he was an angry, spiteful-looking man.

“You dare to say this to me, Marya, in my own capital?”

“I dare,” she replied. “It is to prevent my doing so, I suppose, that I have received this sentence of banishment.”

The King had risen to his feet. He had first of all looked towards the bell.

“There are other sentences which I have the power to sign,” he reminded her.

She smiled scornfully.

“I do not think that things would go well with you in Pletz,” she said, “if you tried to play the feudal monarch.”

“You would buy yourself out of trouble with American dollars, perhaps,” the King snapped.

“Sir,” Jere begged.

She waved to him not to interfere.

“This becomes undignified,” she pronounced coldly. “Mr. Strole, it would be as well for you to leave us. The King has paid me this visit to explain the reason for the sentence of banishment which I have received. My uncle and aunt would like to hear his reasons. If agreeable to you, Phillip,” she went on,

“I will send for them. Mr. Strole will perhaps renew his visit to me on another occasion.”

“I will not discuss the matter with de Sturgiwil or his meddling wife,” the King declared. “It is useless to send for them. I will not receive them. I came for a friendly conversation with you, but since you wish to call others into it I leave the matter in the hands of my advisers.”

“You shall have your own way as always,” Marya assented. “I beg, however, that you will offer me some explanation as to my banishment from a country which is my own by birth, and in which I spend far more time and money than you do.”

“I signed the edict on the advice of my Cabinet,” the King explained. “They are convinced that your presence here upsets the people and tends to produce disquietude. Furthermore, rumours have reached them from Paris that you were contemplating an action which is unconstitutional according to the laws of this country. There is your reply, Princess Marya of Pletz. I am not here to utter threats, or to withdraw or add one word from or to the document which I have already signed, but it seems to me that you would be well advised to remember that a Princess of the royal house owes the same loyalty and obedience to her sovereign as any citizen of the State.”

There was a brief silence. Jere felt himself confused. The whole situation was beyond his comprehension. Phillip had either inherited or learnt all the tricks of King craft. He spoke with restraint and dignity, his carefully chosen words had the air of being reasonable. Marya stood for a few moments like a frozen image.

“I am properly rebuked, Sire,” she said at last. “It was your unannounced visit which encouraged me. I will address my protest and my question to the Privy Council.”

“I will hear your question,” the King conceded. “I will hear it as a matter of grace.”

“It is this,” Marya said. “I demand to know of what action I am supposed to be guilty which would render my remaining in the country a menace to anybody?”

“It has been reported to the Council,” the King declared, “the rumour has indeed reached my ears, that you are contemplating a morganatic marriage—for, considering your nearness to the succession, it would be morganatic—with this young American gentleman, Mr. Jeremiah Strole.”

Marya received the shock, if it was a shock, calmly.

“There has been no evidence of any intention of such an action on my part, I suppose?”

“No evidence has been placed before me,” the King admitted.

“This sentence of banishment then is entirely founded upon hearsay and

gossip.”

The King shrugged his shoulders.

“You will scarcely deny,” he remarked, turning from one to the other, “that Mr. Strole followed you from Long Island to New York, that he visited you at your hotel in New York, that he crossed to Europe by the same steamer, and that he travelled to this country upon the same train.”

“Your Intelligence Department is correctly informed as to all these facts,” Marya confessed, “but they none of them constitute any intention on my part to break the laws of the State.”

Phillip had the air of a man trying his best to remain reasonable.

“You will admit,” he begged, “that your actions have rather encouraged the rumour.”

“Even if they have done so,” Marya replied, “they are not sufficient to justify a sentence of banishment upon me. You have heard what His Majesty has said, Mr. Strole, and I will appeal to you. Is there any present question between us of any such thing as a morganatic marriage?”

“None at all,” Jere admitted dolefully.

“If there had been,” the Princess continued, “it would not have been the business of your Council to have taken notice of it. So long as I am not actually reigning or proposing to reign, no one has the slightest right to interfere. The Council could have acted afterwards. They could have barred me from the succession if my marriage to a commoner had been accomplished. That is the extent of their powers.”

The King deliberated for several moments, then he rose to his feet as though to give weight to what he had to say. There was a certain dignity about his attitude which was in its way impressive.

“The action of the Council,” he explained, “may possibly have been in excess of their powers, but it was instigated, as I happen to know, by a somewhat singular coincidence. After twelve months’ efforts His Holiness the Pope last week consented to reaffirm the dispensation for which my Privy Council appealed some time ago, and notwithstanding our somewhat close relationship, Marya, to legalise a union between us.”

Marya was speechless.

“But I never consented to anything of the sort,” she protested at last.

“You never consented,” the King agreed, “but you were persuaded to withhold your definite answer until the Papal reply was made known. Very well. It was handed to our representative in Rome only three days ago. It was considered at the time of its discussion to be a wise step for the future of this country. Further than that I remain dumb upon the subject. It is only since the receipt of the last words from the Vatican that it has come within the limits of discussion. You will understand now, however, why, with our young friend

here established in the capital, the sentence of temporary banishment was passed. A morganatic marriage, or any scandal pointing towards such, would render it impossible for you ever to become my consort. That you should become so is the earnest desire of my government, the people of Jakovia and myself.”

Marya sank back into her chair. She had rather the air of a frightened child. There were smouldering lights in Jere’s eyes which indicated clearly enough the suppressed fury from which he was suffering. The last word had lain with the King, and he had spoken it with effect.

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Phillip crossed the floor and rang the bell. He turned to Jere.

“Mr. Strole,” he said, “I have had occasion to send my aide-de-camp away: you will do me the pleasure of attending me to the city. I think it would be tactful on our part to leave Her Royal Highness to reflect upon the disclosure which I have perhaps a little prematurely made.”

Jere glanced towards Marya. She waved her hand in a gesture of hopeless dismissal. The old groom of the chambers was already holding open the door. Jere followed the King to his waiting automobile.

## CHAPTER XXVII

Outside his hotel when Jere arrived was a long two-seater car, scarlet in colour and rakish in design. Inside Julie sat lounging in the easy-chair of his salon, smoking a cigarette and somehow reminding him of her Lancia in the courtyard.

“Half an hour at least,” she complained, as he opened the door. “Nothing to read, not even a newspaper, nothing to look at but your abominable decorations, and here am I come to save your life.”

“If I had had any idea,” he reminded her, “the slightest hint, any sort of whisper of your proposed visit, I should have been back—well, a long time ago.”

“Secretly, I suppose,” she said, “you are very shocked at me for coming.”

“Never entered into my head,” he assured her. “The word shocked has gone out of the American vocabulary.”

“I suppose it ought not to be any concern of mine,” she went on, “but I want to tell you that you have made a very great mistake in coming to Jakovia. If you don’t find someone who has courage enough to tell you the truth and look after you, you may get into very serious trouble.”

He drew a chair to her side.

“I should very much like,” he said, “to find someone to look after me and someone to tell me the truth. Things here do seem in rather a tangle, don’t they?”

“They not only seem to be in a tangle but they are,” she replied. “I hear that you are a multi-millionaire, Mr. Strole. Is that true?”

“Something like it,” he admitted with some hesitation.

“If you want to marry Marya,” she said, “that won’t help you in the least. There is some plain speaking for you. I hope you like it. Anyone who has as much money as you are reputed to have might think it easy, especially an American, to buy anything he wants. You could never buy Marya. At least,” she went on, after a somewhat significant pause, “you could never get her to marry you.”

“Having completely blighted my matrimonial hopes,” Jere remarked, “what next?”

“Well,” Julie proceeded, “supposing we take it for granted that either you would not lend her your fortune or she would not accept it without a *quid pro quo*, there is nothing you could do towards helping this benighted country through Marya. The alternative is to lend money to the King. If you do that you will lose every penny of it.”

“You ungrateful young woman,” he murmured reproachfully. “The King declared not an hour ago that you were one of the most beautiful women in the world.”

“More competent judges than a roué like Phillip have told me that,” she replied contemptuously, knocking the ash from her cigarette. “It does not excite me very much. If it brought me what I wanted in life I might value it. For no other reason though. What I have told you is the truth. If you lend money to the King you will never get it back.”

“Not even if I lent it on the security of the Crown lands?”

“Not even if you lent it on the security of the Crown lands,” she repeated firmly.

“Then it seems to me that I might as well pack up and go home.”

She smiled.

“I happen to know that they tried to stop you getting into the country,” she confided, “but now that you are here you may not find it so easy to get away. I have a greedy relative who is a great friend of the King’s, there is a Chancellor of the Exchequer who has not a florin to play with, and there is the King himself. A visit or two to the bank with you would make them all happy. Why should they let you go?”

“It doesn’t seem to me,” Jere observed, “that it would be very easy for them to keep me here against my will.”

She laughed, and with the faintly voluptuous curve of her beautiful body, the parting of her enticing lips, the flashing of her faultless teeth, Jere began to wonder whether the King was not perhaps right, whether she was not indeed one of the most beautiful women in the world.

“Jakovia has fewer foreign correspondents than any country in Europe,” she said. “Everyone knows that we have neither influence, power nor resources, and we are left to do pretty well what we like. You do not happen to remember, I suppose, the stir there was in the papers a few years ago about the disappearance of André Dracopoulis who was supposed to have gone to Bukharest after having won thirty or forty millions at Cannes?”

“I do remember it,” Jere admitted.

“He never went near Bukharest—at least he never stayed there,” Julie confided. “He came to Pletz. He dined at our house one night. He dined at the Palace. It is true he was reported to have been seen in Paris after that. No one in Jakovia believes, however, that he ever crossed the frontier.”

“I shall cross it all right when I am ready to go,” Jere assured her.

She smiled.

“You might with me. I doubt whether you would alone.”

“Why are you trying to scare me?” he complained.

“Does it scare you to think of leaving the country with me?” she asked.

There was something almost caressing in her tone. Jere moved uneasily in his chair. It was not the sort of badinage at which he was particularly good.

“I wonder that you care to go on living here,” he remarked in somewhat stilted fashion. “There doesn’t seem to be any social life for you to speak of.”

“Where should I go to?” she demanded bitterly. “I haven’t a relative in the world or any particular interest in life. I couldn’t act or paint or write, so I couldn’t set up as being an artist. I just want to live. One can’t do that alone.”

“That’s a fine car of yours outside,” Jere ventured.

She looked at him for a moment steadily. Then she laughed.

“Yes, it is a very fine car,” she admitted. “I have also some quite wonderful jewels, a rather extensive wardrobe recently replenished in Paris, and in fact most of the luxuries a wealthy young woman is supposed to possess. I do not find them very satisfying.”

“As a matter of curiosity,” Jere asked, “don’t you derive a certain amount of interest or pleasure in life from your appearance?”

She laughed scornfully.

“In what way? How could I? It is no particular pleasure to have a beautiful body which is unpossessed, I might almost say undesired.”

“I can’t believe that that is the case with you.”

“If you stay here long enough you will understand,” she replied. “The men who might be any good are slipping away one by one. However, I didn’t come here to talk about myself. I came here to warn you. Have you any papers or letters in your possession which would get you into trouble if they were found?”

“Nothing that I know of,” Jere answered. “Why?”

“The police here think that you have. To be perfectly frank they believe that the Princess has given a document of great importance into your charge. They believe that she took it with her to America and when she came across my brother at Long Island she lost her nerve and passed it on to you.”

“She hadn’t known me twenty-four hours,” Jere remarked drily.

“Most women can tell in twenty-four minutes whether a man is trustworthy or not. However, this is what I wanted to tell you. Within the next twenty-four hours your rooms will be searched.”

“It won’t be for the first time,” Jere scoffed. “I can’t think why anyone should persevere. I don’t know any secrets, no one has ever entrusted me with any, and the only papers I have are papers prepared by my own agents—reports upon the Crown lands.”

There was a slight cloud upon her beautiful face. Her eyes were searching his questioningly. In the end she appeared to be satisfied.

“Then if I were you,” she suggested, “I should let anyone who wants to go through your things. It can’t do any harm if you’ve nothing to conceal. The

search would have taken place at the fortress on the frontier if they had had the message in time.”

“Why should I submit to such a thing?” Jere demanded. “After all, I’m attached to the American Legation here. No one has any right to touch my belongings.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“It might save trouble,” she said.

“When is this outrage to take place?” he asked.

“Probably to-night.”

“Then I shall load both my revolvers and sit here waiting for anyone who is rash enough to enter my room without an invitation,” he declared.

She laughed.

“You won’t do anything of the sort,” she assured him.

“Why not?”

She glanced at the clock.

“Because in less than half an hour,” she confided, “you will have received an urgent command to dine at the Palace.”

“To get me out of the way?”

“How clever of you!”

“Well, I shan’t accept,” he decided. “I shall have a headache and stay at home.”

“You can’t do that,” she told him. “Your friend Mr. Homan wouldn’t allow it for one thing. A command is a command. You’d have the Court Physician here to examine you. He’d soon discover there was nothing wrong, and then who knows what might happen? The State of Jakovia might consider itself insulted and declare war against America!”

“Say, wouldn’t that be too bad!” he observed. “Look here, Miss Julie, it’s been very good of you to come and warn me about this visitation. Why don’t you carry your kindness a little further? Why don’t you tell me what these people expect to find amongst my belongings? They searched at Long Island, they searched in Paris, and now you tell me they’re coming again. I’m not far enough in this diplomatic business to be entrusted with draft treaties or anything of that sort, and besides there’s the Legation safe here.”

She smiled at him enigmatically, perhaps a trifle insolently.

“Don’t you ask rather a great deal for nothing, Mr. Jeremiah Strole?”

“What is there I could offer you?” he asked rashly.

“What have you to offer?” she demanded. “Has the Princess Marya your whole devotion?”

There was an urgent knocking at the door, for which at the moment Jere was not altogether sorry. The hall porter from the Legation presented himself. With a word of apology he held out an envelope. The ‘IMMEDIATE’ underneath



his name was underlined. Julie nodded her assent and Jere broke the seal. He found, as he had expected, that it was from his chief.

*My Dear Strole,—*

*We are commanded to dine at the Palace to-night at 8.30. I hope this will be convenient to you. I will call for you at about a quarter past eight.*

*Sincerely,*

*James S. Homan.*

*P.S.—His Majesty’s secretary apologises for the unusual nature of the invitation, but it leaves us, so far as I can see, no alternative but to accept.*

“Tell Mr. Homan I’ll be ready,” Jere enjoined.

The man took his leave. Julie suddenly crossed the floor until she stood almost at his side.

“I am much better-looking than Marya,” she said abruptly. “I am more desirable in every way.”

She had a marvellous gift of making her near presence felt without conscious effort. Jere began to wish that he had detained the messenger on some excuse. Julie was leaning against the back of an easy-chair, her hand resting upon its top, her seductive lips parted in the slightest of smiles, those dangerously beautiful eyes of hers all the time questioning him.

“I’m a fool,” Jere admitted, “but you’ve got it right about me. I’m crazy about Marya. I don’t think she’ll ever marry me, but I shall try all I know how to make her.”

“You might as well try to pull down the minarets of her Palace,” Julie warned him.

Jere shook his head and took her hands in his. The moment of danger had passed with the dimming of her eyes.

“You’re a fine girl, Julie,” he said. “I’ve never seen anyone half so beautiful in my life, and you are real kind. You’ve just got to think of me as a chump. I can’t change. Let me see you start off in your Lancia.”

## CHAPTER XXVIII

The dinner that night was somewhat of a surprise to Jere. It was served in the State dining-room, which was an apartment of some magnificence, but apart from the liveries of the servants, which were unusual and picturesque, there was an entire absence of ceremony and it might have been a dinner given by any of his friends. The guests were confined to men and they were seven in number. Nikolas Grogner and his son, Colonel Grogner, whom Jere had not seen since his arrival in the country, a Swiss, Monsieur Huber, who was a director of the principal bank, a Baron Senn, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer, General Grindler, the Commander-in-Chief, Homan and Jere himself completed the party. The only unusual feature of the function was that the introductions were effected by the King's private secretary and that Phillip himself did not enter the room until just before the announcement of dinner. The latter, as he shook hands with his guests, explained in a few words that this was an entirely informal gathering, a fact to which he once more drew attention as he invited Jere to sit on his right hand.

"Our conversation this evening should be, I imagine," the King said, as the meal commenced, "of the United States of America, in compliment to our distinguished visitor. I propose to reverse the situation, however. Let us talk about Jakovia. I should like very much to interest our visitor in the country."

"Nothing would suit me better, sir," Jere declared. "I am already interested in Jakovia. I should like to hear more about it."

"It is your first visit, Mr. Strole?" Baron Senn inquired.

"Sure," Jere admitted.

"That, of course, is unfortunate," Phillip regretted. "Pletz is not at its best in these days. I am afraid we must admit that. Until we can get our public works in better shape and our industries re-established, there must be poverty, and where there is poverty there must be discontent."

"I have been taking the liberty, sir, of making technical inquiries into the natural resources of the country, and my agents are quite enthusiastic," Jere confided.

Phillip smiled benignly.

"It could not be otherwise," he declared. "We have minerals, we have timber, we have a rich soil. What we are asking of the capitalists of the world is their interest and their support."

"Capitalists just now are unfortunately a little shy of new ventures," Baron Senn remarked.

Nikolas Grogner, for the first time, spoke, and immediately everyone else

at the table was overshadowed. Their talk became like the chirping of canaries. It was the eagle who had ruffled his feathers.

“The capitalists deserve all their misfortunes,” he boomed out. “A few years ago they turned themselves into a company of shark speculators, and what they deserved came to them. They were like the swine of the Gaddarene. They rushed blindly to folly. We want none of them in Jakovia.”

“Nikolas Grogner is right,” Phillip declared approvingly.

“We want no inflation of already money-stinking enterprises,” the former continued. “His Majesty will forgive my plain speaking.”

“His Majesty approves of it,” was the graciously spoken comment.

“We want the gifts of nature planted in our country for the good of the people brought into the markets of the world. We have enough of them to make of Jakovia a happy and prosperous country and to bring an ample and honourable return to the genuine investor.”

“The only trouble is,” Baron Senn pointed out, “that now the matter has become sensationally urgent. For months the people have been quiet enough. Now there is the appearance of a change. A stone broke the window of my automobile to-night as I turned in at the Palace gates. We only just missed a mob of at least a hundred singing and shouting in the Place du Roi.”

“It would be interesting,” Nikolas Grogner suggested, “to hear the views of our distinguished visitor upon the situation.”

There was a murmur of agreement. Everyone seemed anxious to hear how the matter presented itself to Jere.

“I am afraid that I am in rather a false position with regard to Jakovia and my interest in the place,” he confided, after a moment’s hesitation. “It is perfectly true that I have sent agents up into the northern provinces and that their reports are so satisfactory that I am prepared to invest a certain sum in buying timber and building saw mills and sinking machinery in the oil country. At the same time, it is very difficult to hurry proceedings of that sort, and my interest in the place is purely personal. It was the Princess Marya, as Your Majesty knows, I think, who first interested me in the possibilities of the country, and it is in accordance with her advice that my investments will be made.”

There was a moment’s rather uncomfortable silence. Then Colonel Grogner intervened.

“What Mr. Strole says is perfectly true,” he admitted. “I happened to be at the same house party in America when our Princess and Mr. Strole met. The country will always feel enormously indebted to her for having enlisted the sympathy of a man willing to help us, but at the same time, it is the country which counts and not the person. I believe I am right in saying that the Princess Marya is not at all a large landowner here. None of the lands, for

instance, which you, Strole, have been considering, belong to the Princess at all. They are Crown lands—the property of the King.”

“To me, of course,” Jere pointed out, “that is a matter of minor importance, but if what you say is true, one scarcely sees how the country would be so greatly benefitted by their development.”

The King indulged in a gesture.

“My country and I,” he declared, “are linked together.”

Nikolas Grogner set down his wine-glass from which he had been in the act of drinking.

“If I may be pardoned for saying so, Sire,” he suggested maliciously, “it would be a great thing for Jakovia if you would step out on to the balcony and tell the people so. This delay in making use of our resources has created an unfortunate impression in the capital.”

The King regarded his Prime Minister coldly.

“The fault has not been mine,” he declared. “That you should know yourself, Grogner. I am willing to make a public announcement at any time you think the moment has come. Until the financial resources of my country are in better order, I am willing to accept fifty per cent of the proceeds of the sale of any of the Crown lands, or fifty per cent of the profits accruing from any works that may be established thereon.”

“The capital will need taking care of,” Jere observed.

“Those details are not for me,” the King remarked grandiloquently. “Gentlemen, with your permission, we will take our coffee in the King’s Hall.”

They all rose to their feet. A national toast was drunk with something like acclamation, then the seneschal threw open some great doors and, led by the King, they passed into what seemed to be a chapel transformed into a living apartment. On the way, however, a servant slipped a note into Colonel Grogner’s hand, and he quietly disappeared.

“Trouble in the town, I am afraid,” his father muttered to Senn.

The latter nodded.

“If we can get anything definite out of this young fellow,” he suggested, “we had better have some of the King’s proclamations struck off.”

The King turned and faced them all as they entered the high vaulted room, tapestry-hung and magnificent architecturally, but with many reminiscences of a splendour that had passed.

“Gentlemen,” he announced, “this is a private dinner party and you are all my friends. It is perhaps an opportune moment to take you into my confidence concerning certain news which has only just reached me, and which may facilitate any financial transactions with regard to the Crown lands. His Holiness the Pope has at last consented to waive his objections to a union between myself and my cousin the Princess Marya. There remains therefore

only the matter of obtaining Her Royal Highness' consent to the marriage, and I think together we shall be in a position to bring back prosperity to Jakovia."

The King's rather small eyes had been darting restlessly about the room while he had made his announcement. They ended fixed upon Jere, who remained motionless.

"I have ordered on this special occasion," the King concluded, "a few bottles of our famous Jakovian wine which has lain undisturbed in the cellars for fifty years. I shall ask you, my friends, to raise your glasses, as soon as they have been filled, and to wish me success in this enterprise of obtaining the Princess Marya's consent to our union."

Jere's glass was filled with the others, and he felt the King's eyes upon him as he made pretence of raising it to his lips. He left the wine untasted, however, and his glass went back on to the table brimming over. If the others had noticed his abstention, no one made any comment. In the King's eyes, however, there was a gleam of anger as he looked across the room. At any moment Jere expected an outburst. None, however, came. The King let the incident pass.

"Now, let us sit down at this table," the latter suggested. "Let us turn ourselves into a Round Table Conference. We have been very frank and open with our young friend, Mr. Strole. Let us invite him to treat us in the same fashion."

"Why, sure," Jere replied, taking the chair which had been pointed out to him. "I am prepared to invest twenty million dollars in Jakovia, either in the purchase of forest land or the leasing of it, and to erect the necessary sawmills. I am prepared also to advise my firm to take up the matter of Jakovian development on a very much larger scale. There are only two conditions, and they scarcely amount to conditions. My lawyers must be thoroughly satisfied as to the whole situation, and the transactions must be approved of by the Princess Marya."

The door was thrown open in the usual formal fashion, and Colonel Grogner was re-announced. He entered with his customary stereotyped smile, but as soon as the servant had left the room he allowed his agitation to be seen.

"I regret to inform Your Majesty and gentlemen that the city is in a very disturbed state," he announced. "Every man in the force has been called up and I have been obliged to telephone to the barracks for assistance. My Chief Inspector reports that a number of the malcontents are gathered together outside the gates of the Palace as though with the idea of attacking your guests as they leave. I suggest that, for some considerable time at least, everyone remains at the Palace."

"What is the latest trouble?" the King asked with some irritation.

"That fool of a master printer has evidently misunderstood his instructions,

which were to keep the whole affair in abeyance for a time,” Grogner replied. “The walls of the Opera House are placarded with announcements of a season of light opera beginning next month with Suzanne Delage singing three nights a week.”

There was a significant silence, broken at last by the King.

“What business is that of the people’s?” he demanded angrily.

Grogner shrugged his shoulders.

“The people unfortunately know,” he pointed out, “that the Opera House is subsidised by the State.”

“‘Subsidise’ is an egregious word,” the King objected. “What is it—some hundred thousand kronen?”

“They complain,” Grogner continued, “that Suzanne Delage has no place in opera, that she sings like a cuckoo and that her tour is only arranged to put money in her pocket and bring her to the capital.”

His Majesty frowned.

“That is the affair of the director,” he said sharply. “I imagine there are not many who talk like that. In any case one cannot listen to them. I have known days in the past when the opera announcements were sufficient to stop a revolution.”

“Opera—yes,” Grogner observed sarcastically, “but you cannot call *la belle* Suzanne’s stuff opera or anything like it. They would hiss her off the stage in Vienna, if she attempted anything outside musical comedy.”

The King shrugged his shoulders.

“It is possible,” he remarked, “that the director may have other and more pleasing announcements to make presently. I gave him a list of names. It is, of course, hard to get artists to visit the country when they are scarcely sure of being paid. Listen!”

This time there was the ominous sound of rifle fire close at hand. The Chief of Police, with a word of excuse, hurried once more from the hall.

“If you will permit me to make a suggestion, sir,” Jere ventured, “It seems to me that you are all rather splitting straws instead of attempting to reassure the people. I saw a revolution in South America two years ago, and I know how difficult it is to stop. We cannot, of course, get down to absolute business at the present moment because I should scarcely know whom I was dealing with, but there is one tract of forest land up north—the Ermadein Forest——”

“Mr. Strole is right,” Nikolas Grogner pronounced. “It is about three hundred miles due north from here, and it fringes the river.”

“I will take a chance,” Jere proposed. “I will buy a million acres at your price. The machinery, of course, although some of it is obtainable in Europe, will take a little time to set up, but I could use twenty thousand men right away doing the rough clearing. Why don’t you let the Prime Minister announce the

proposed purchase to-night, and I should think the State could offer the men who wanted to go north and work, free railway transport.”

“And the money?” the King asked very softly.

“My lawyer at the Consulate would need to look through the deeds,” Jere replied. “That might take him half a day. Before the bank closes I could give a draft for a million dollars. I will also be responsible for the wages of the men you send up there until it is decided in what fashion the deal can be completed.”

The King stroked upward his small moustaches. There was an air of complete satisfaction on his countenance.

“Our young friend has given us a lesson,” he declared, “as to how business should be done. Grogner, see to it that by noon to-morrow the announcements are out. Work for twenty thousand men! Why, they will bawl their heads off!”

The windows of the room were high and the casements ill-fitting. In the distance they could hear the sulky, intermittent rifle fire, the occasional tumult of voices. The King laid his hand on Nikolas Grogner’s shoulder.

“Find some means of spreading the news earlier, my friend,” he enjoined. “If the printers have gone home fetch them back to work. The people must wake to-morrow to find the announcements staring at them from the walls.”

Grogner hurried off. The King turned to his other guests.

“My friends,” he said, “I think that the advice given by our Chief of Police was good. You had better stay here for another hour at least. The bridge and billiard-rooms are prepared. Mr. Strole, as this is your first visit to the Palace, I should like you to see some of the more picturesque parts of the building and such few treasures as we have left. If it will not bore you I will be your guide.”

Jere rose at once to his feet.

“Very kind indeed of Your Majesty,” he acquiesced. “I should be very much interested.”

## CHAPTER XXIX

The King was a trifle out of breath. This personally-conducted tour of the Palace was not a task that he often undertook. He appeared to be almost as bored as Jere, when at last they reached a corridor guarded by a sentry in the full-dress uniform of the King's Guard within the Palace walls. The man saluted and stood on one side. The King selected one from a bunch of keys which he had been carrying all the time for no apparent purpose, and opened the strong oak door, which rolled creaking back. They passed along a stone passage, and Phillip opened another door on the right. Here was a small salon hung with faded tapestry and adorned with veritable Jakovian furniture, Victorian in bulk and design. There was a huge fire burning in the stove, however, and the place had all the air of being ready for immediate occupation. Jere ventured upon a mild protest.

"Say, this has been awfully nice of you, sir, and mighty interesting, but I don't want to get you all tired. If I might be excused, I think it is time I was taking my leave."

Phillip's behaviour was a little unusual. First of all he closed the door, then he took up a position just inside the room, and his hands went slowly into his trousers pockets. There was a peculiar twinkle in his eye.

"Mr. Strole," he said, "you are likely, so far as we can see, to be a very valuable friend to Jakovia. Nikolas Grogner and I have both decided that you cannot be allowed to face the risk of making your way home while this mob is parading the streets. We have decided to beg you to accept the hospitality of the Palace. This suite of rooms has been prepared for you."

Jere was at first a little slow.

"But really, sir," he protested, "it is quite unnecessary. I have a car waiting, and I can take care of myself. I do not think your people would be likely for a moment to interfere with a foreigner."

"It is so difficult to tell," the King observed. "They might not and again they might. For instance, they have a very clever leader—Maropello his name is—who follows the ridiculous profession of an ironmonger. If he had an idea," Phillip went on, "that you were likely to throw any obstacles in the way of the immediate development of the country by plotting against my marriage with the Princess, or if he thought——"

"Let us leave Maropello, whoever he is, out of it," Jere interrupted. "You are going to be guilty of the darndest folly I ever heard of, if you contemplate trying to keep me here against my will!"

"Not against your will, I trust, Mr. Strole. I think when we have had a little



chat and you have thought things over you will see that you are very well placed here for the moment.”

Jere rose slowly to his feet. He was not particularly tall—five foot eleven at the most—but he was several inches taller than the King, and his attitude was scarcely friendly. Phillip, however, showed no dismay. He stood with his hands in his pockets, his rather high forehead slightly wrinkled, his smoothly brushed hair undisturbed, the ominous beginnings of a stomach effectually concealed by his well-cut waistcoat.

“You don’t suppose this sort of thing is possible in real life?” Jere demanded. “What is to prevent my throwing you out of that window? We are five stories up, aren’t we?”

“There are several reasons why I am quite sure you would not dream of such a folly,” Phillip replied with composure. “In the first place a single call from me would bring in the sentry and a single word would ensure your being riddled with bullets. You are not carrying a weapon, as I can tell by the fall of your clothes. Neither am I. A physical struggle between us would be too hideously undignified to think of. Any slight advantage you might gain through being a younger man and probably in better condition would be discounted by the fact that we should be overheard, and my guards have something left of the old spirit with regard to anyone who lays violent hands upon their sovereign. Furthermore,” Phillip concluded, “I don’t think your servant would approve of it.”

“My what?”

“Your servant,” Phillip replied, touching a bell. “He is a Jakovian, you know, and Michael Grogner reports that he has been very useful to him.”

The communicating door of the suite was opened, and Brodie in his usual dark clothes presented himself. He bowed to the King and a little more tentatively to his employer.

“Do you wish for me, sir?” he asked.

“Certainly,” the King intervened. “Bring a bottle of the special whisky my people have told you of, and some Schweppes soda, two glasses and ice. We will have what you call a highball together, Mr. Strole, and discuss this situation as two men of common sense should discuss it.”

Jere, for the moment, ignored even his host’s presence.

“Brodie!” he exclaimed sharply.

“Yes, sir.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I was brought here, sir. His Majesty’s orders. I understood that you had accepted an invitation to stay at the Palace for a few days.”

“Why didn’t you wait for orders from me?”

“I beg your pardon, sir. It didn’t seem necessary,” the man protested.

Jere resumed his seat. There was something about his host's manner which, despite his ingenuousness, was convincing. Phillip strolled to the sideboard cupboard and produced a large box of cigarettes.

"Home made," he remarked, as he placed them upon the table, "but excellent tobacco. Try one."

Jere accepted the invitation. The situation in a sense was ridiculous, but the lack of a definite issue during the last few days had been so bewildering that he was scarcely sorry to meet it.

"You are in a position, Mr. Strole," the King confided, throwing himself into an easy-chair, "to render me a great service."

Jere listened without comment. It occurred to him to remark that he could think of no reason why he should be willing to render his host any service at all, but he refrained from mentioning the fact.

"With regard to Suzanne, I mean," Phillip continued. "You see, I am not altogether ignorant of the fact that Suzanne was attracted by you in Paris, that she was, I am afraid, if she got the chance, inclined to deceive me. Whether she had the chance or not I do not know—a very fortunate thing for many of us in my position, or married men, that we very seldom do know."

"If the affair is of moment to you," Jere volunteered, "I have never had the privilege of enjoying Mademoiselle Suzanne's favours."

"Well, well," the King murmured, "lack of opportunity, without a doubt. Anyhow, I do not flatter myself that it is solely on my account that Suzanne has insisted on coming here. She has placed me, as you may have been able to gather from the comments this evening, in a very difficult position even with my own Ministers. It is a position from which you could relieve me with, as I should imagine, a certain amount of satisfaction to yourself."

"You are suggesting," Jere inquired, "that when she arrives, I take her off your hands?"

"This western acumen is amazing," the King declared. "You have got to the whole end of the matter, Mr. Strole, with one leap. She will be expensive, of course, but you can afford it. Furthermore, these affairs, as you doubtless know, are not permanent."

"Well, I'm sorry to seem ungracious," Jere said, "but we are making a bad start, sir. I don't want to have anything to do with Suzanne Delage or anyone of her class."

"You have scruples?" Phillip queried sarcastically.

"Do I look as though I were that sort of a mutt?" was the scornful reply. "Nothing of the kind. A very attractive young lady, I should think, from what I saw of her. I happen, however, to be very keen on someone else."

"Dear me," the King meditated, "how exceedingly unfortunate! You would like to confide in me with regard to that someone else, perhaps——"

“My business entirely,” Jere interrupted brusquely.

Phillip smoked for a minute in silence. Some of his geniality had already departed. There was a hard look about his mouth.

“In many respects, Mr. Strole,” he said, “for a young man of your birth and extraction, you have comported yourself since your reception into a circle whose ways are strange to you, with a certain amount of discretion—one might almost say of dignity. You are beginning to weaken, however. You force me to remind you that it is contrary to the laws of etiquette, accepted throughout the civilised world, to interrupt a reigning monarch.”

“Sorry,” Jere apologised. “You asked me here informally, you commenced our conversation as one human being to another, and I have met you on the same footing. I have not the tricks of courts. I cannot jump backwards and forwards. You have introduced the question of Suzanne Delage. I have dealt with it. Is there anything else, sir, you have to say to me?”

“It was also my intention to speak to you during your visit here,” the King confided, “upon the subject of your infatuation for my cousin, the Princess Marya. Pray settle yourself to listen patiently, Mr. Strole. I am the Princess’ nearest male relative. It is therefore within my right to address you upon the subject.”

“But what is there to be said?” Jere demanded. “There is unfortunately no question of my engagement to her or anything of that sort.”

“Nor will there ever be,” the King declared sternly. “My cousin has none of the laxity of some of the less important royalties of Europe. Her name means precisely the same to her as the name of the Hohenzollerns, or the Hapsburgs, or the Guelphs to them. She is just as likely to marry a commoner as she is to commit suicide.”

“Or to marry you, sir,” Jere added with purposeful emphasis.

It was one of those moments in which Phillip did not look at his best. The high colour mounted to his forehead, his eyes almost disappeared through their narrow slits in a sudden venomous glare.

“Your comparison is unfortunate,” he said. “The betrothal of Her Royal Highness to myself will be announced within the next few days.”

Jere remained unperturbed.

“That seems to me a little improbable,” he remarked. “The Princess has no affection for you, and I don’t believe that she has any intention of marrying you.”

“Yet she will do so,” Phillip confided, tapping a fresh cigarette upon the table, “because, unless she does, the kingdom of Jakovia will go phut!”

“Is it my fancy,” Jere asked, after a brief hesitation, “or is not your conversation, Sire, a little on the romantic side this evening?”

“No romance about my cousin, I can assure you,” Phillip declared amiably.

“She hates the sight of me, hates the ground I tread on. All the same, I think she will marry me all right.”

“I can understand,” Jere reflected, “that your position in the estimation of your subjects might be vastly improved from the fact of your alliance with the Princess, but what I cannot bring myself to believe is that she would ever consent to marry you.”

The King had the air of a school-master condescending to the intelligence of a backward pupil.

“Mr. Strole,” he said, “you are, I believe, a fairly representative member of the new world of young men. You are, shall we say, one of the moderns. You are too wealthy to have to subscribe to a library, but you buy all the new novels and you study at second hand the emotions of your fellow human beings. Am I right?”

“You are amusing, at any rate,” Jere replied. “As a matter of fact, I meet a good many of them, you know. I have never been a recluse.”

“Better still,” Phillip continued. “You read books and you study such phases of life as present themselves to you, but you never come across the few remaining great figures who walk across the real canvas of life. You meet no women, for instance, who have the soul and the will and the greatness of my cousin, the Princess Marya. I have been very frank with you. I have put aside my vanity completely, as I proved to you when I spoke of Suzanne. For some reason, you are more attractive to Suzanne, the cocotte, and to the Princess my cousin, than I am. Let it be so. Suzanne is any man’s for the buying—yours more easily than most perhaps—but my cousin Marya is no man’s unless she chooses to give herself, and she will not give for love, she will not give for preference, she will give for the sake of duty or her ideals. There are women like this whom, perhaps, Mr. Jeremiah Strole, you have not met in your studies of life.”

“I will grant that the Princess might be capable of any act of self-sacrifice,” Jere assented, “but in this case is it necessary?”

The King’s hand shot out, a strangely shaped hand it was, thick at the wrist, short, pudgy fingers, over-beringed, the nails short but fantastically manicured.

“Stop, my young friend,” he insisted. “You speak of things of which you know nothing. The Princess’ sacrifice is necessary. She knows it. I know it. You are the only ignorant one. That is why you have gone blundering on your way.”

“I am willing to be converted from my blundering,” Jere declared. “Tell me why it is necessary.”

The King shook his head.

“It is not my secret,” he pronounced solemnly. “It is not hers. It is not the

secret of my Right Honourable Prime Minister, yet we all three know it. Which one may disclose it to you I cannot say. I do not think that any one of us will do so. I think we shall gain our purpose without. In the meantime, however, you are very well where you are in this disturbed city.”

Jere’s eyes flashed.

“You are afraid of me,” he taunted. “You are afraid that I shall break down this high purpose of the Princess’, which even now I do not believe in.”

The King smiled as he rose to his feet.

“We live in a ridiculous age,” he sighed. “Ten centuries ago a King of Jakovia would have thrown your carcass from this window for a lovesick woman to ponder upon, and she would have gone to Church to say her prayers and to bed afterwards dry-eyed. We have to manage things differently now, however I might be inclined to follow the example of my revered ancestor. Honestly, Jeremiah Strole, I do not like you very much, but I have to play the game according to the new rules which the moderns have ordained. You are my prisoner, but your servant will bring you what you wish, he will call you when you please. Your clothes are here. Your promenade is bounded by the sentries at either end of the corridor. When occasion arises, you can send for your man of law, but you are perfectly right in your surmise. The Princess Marya, notwithstanding her fundamental magnificence, has imbibed just enough modern sentiment to render you two much safer apart. It is better she should believe, as she will believe, that you have gone to meet Suzanne. It is better that your amiable Mr. Homan should believe that you have gone to inspect another tract of forest country. Many people will believe that you are in different places, but for the present you will remain my very honoured guest.”

The King took his leave without undue haste, even with a certain amount of dignity. Jeremiah Strole thought of many things. He thought of the shelf of Anthony Hope’s novels which he had accumulated in his college days. He thought of the Racquets Club. He thought of his favourite golf course. He thought of the crowd at Long Island. Last of all he looked around him, tapped his very solid walls, examined his quaint surroundings, and realised that the whole thing was, after all, no jest, but that he was indeed the guest of the King of Jakovia!

## CHAPTER XXX

Jere was awakened the next morning by an unfamiliar sound. He sat up in bed and listened.

“What’s that, Brodie?” he asked.

Brodie, who had just set down the tea tray by the side of the bed, looked very grave indeed.

“Maxim guns, sir,” he reported. “They have got them behind sacks all the way round the Palace Square. They are only firing with dummy cartridges, though, and it will take more than that to scare this crowd.”

Jere looked at his henchman curiously. One side of Brodie’s face was disfigured with sticking plaster, his arm was in a sling and he walked with a decided limp.

“You seem to have got a little of what was coming to you, Brodie,” he observed.

“That’s right, sir,” the man agreed. “I deserved it all right and I got it. I hope you will always remember this, though, sir. I was the only man who had a real chance to put you out. They would have made me a rich man more than once if I had done it, but I wouldn’t. If you had had what they thought you had from the Princess, I should have taken it from you all right, but I stuck by you through a good deal of the dirty work——”

“We’ll go into that later,” Jere observed grimly. “Tell me how you got knocked about like that.”

“They saw me coming out of the Palace early this morning, sir,” Brodie explained. “I was going to fetch your letters, and they wouldn’t believe that I was a Jakovian myself. They’re coming into the city too, from the outlying parts. They’ve seized the railway line and the electric cars. There will be trouble before the day’s out.”

“They’re fighters, are they, then?”

“Not so much fighters as scrappers. There are times, you see, when any sort of a worm will turn. I hate to see a mob fired on, but I think His Majesty is wrong this time.”

“In what way?”

“There’s been nothing used up to now but blank cartridges and a few shots fired into the air,” Brodie confided. “The King has been up all night and he is dead set against any bloodshed. As I came back they were pasting placards all over the town. Perhaps it’s something to soothe them down.”

Jere drank his tea, bathed, dressed and read his letters. He had scarcely completed his task when callers were announced. Nikolas Grogner, robed from

head to foot in an astrakhan coat and with a round astrakhan cap on his massive forehead, made abrupt entrance, accompanied—to Jere’s immense surprise—by Julie, also almost invisible in her sables. There were flakes of snow upon Nikolas Grogner’s beard. He glowered at Jere and broke in upon his attempted greetings with Julie.

“Why the hell don’t you take my advice?” he demanded.

“Why should I?” Jere retorted. “I prefer to go my own way.”

“An ignorant young fool like you would,” Nikolas Grogner grumbled. “You will get what you deserve before we are through with this, if you don’t mind. There is a rumour already in the city that you are interfering in some way with what the people want. If they get you they will tear you to pieces.”

“They shan’t do anything of the sort,” Julie declared fiercely.

“Pretty hard lines if they did,” Jere remarked. “It seems to me I am doing more for Jakovia than anyone has done for generations.”

“You are standing in the way of the only thing that will save the country,” Grogner asserted savagely. “You know what that is.”

“I suppose you mean the public announcement of the King’s engagement to the Princess Marya,” Jere said. “Well, I am not standing in the way of it. The Princess will do as she thinks best.”

Grogner threw a letter upon the table. Jere picked it up quickly.

“For me?”

“From the Princess.”

Jere tore open the envelope. There was neither commencement nor ending.

*I hear from the Council that you are prepared to buy the Ermadein Forest lands, or at any rate to advance the money for having them worked. If you are serious in your desire to help the country, will you give Nikolas Grogner some money at once. It is needed to finance the men for their journey up to Ermadein and to find them food. I ask you with the deepest reluctance of sheer and cold necessity. Monsieur Huber, the manager of the bank here, reports that he has received very large credits on your account and would be prepared to join with you in any scheme to stop this trouble.*

Jere read the letter, then glanced up at his visitor. Nikolas Grogner was not looking his best. He was wearing a rough, double-breasted blue serge suit which badly needed pressing, and he had forgotten his tie. He had also omitted to shave, and his masses of grey-black hair gave him a fierce and unkempt appearance.

“Where is the Princess?” Jere asked.

“The Princess is at her Palace,” Grogner replied. “She is safe enough. The people won’t touch her.”

“She entrusted you with this note?”

“Indirectly.”

“Where does she think I am?” Jere demanded.

His angry caller’s eyes flashed.

“How the hell should I know or why should I care?”

“Is it true that I am supposed to have gone to the frontier to meet Suzanne Delage?” Jere asked shrewdly.

“That may have been the idea. What does it matter? At any rate, no one is worrying about that. The notices have been taken down from the Opera House. There is only a half-page newspaper issued this morning, but one of the items of news is that the opera season has been abandoned.”

“Would it be possible for me to go up and see Monsieur Huber at the bank?”

“It would not,” was the unhesitating reply. “Apart from being impossible, it would be madness. There has been nothing but a gabble of tongues in the city for the last forty-eight hours, yet the people seem to have come to the idea somehow that you are mixed up with the Princess’ hesitation to marry the King, and that if only she would consent to do so the country would be saved. If you had only behaved like a sensible young man, you and Julie could have been driving through the city this morning. You could have had all the welcome you wanted then. Julie is wife enough for any man on earth. The Jakovians are peculiar—they don’t want American tourists playing about with their Princesses.”

“You are very old-fashioned, Mr. Nikolas Grogner,” Jere declared.

“You go to hell!” was the prompt retort. “I thought you were a clever young man when I first met you. I find you are just one of the products of this cooked-up civilisation, half-digested, as obstinate and narrow-minded as a country clerk. You have no outlook, Jeremiah Strole. You have no sense of values.”

“I am beginning to fear,” Jere observed, “that you don’t like me, Mr. Grogner.”

“You would be even a bigger fool than you are, if you thought I did,” was the unflattering reply. “I should hate you for a son-in-law, except that I think Julie might make a man of you.”

“Whoever marries your daughter will be a very lucky man,” Jere rejoined, “even though he has to put up with you as his father-in-law!”

Julie laughed softly.

“You two are very amusing,” she remarked, “but you, my father, seem to have rather forgotten what you came about.”



Grogner tugged at his beard for a moment.

“That’s right,” he admitted. “What about the Princess’ note, young man?”

“I have a few questions to ask first. What about Homan? Where do they think I am at the Legation?”

“They think you started late last night with an engine and a special carriage for the northern provinces,” Grogner grunted. “Brodie arranged that. It seems that you were even fool enough to have a Jakovian for a servant!”

Jere lit one of the cigarettes which the King had brought him on the previous evening and, walking to the window, looked out. The snow was falling heavily, and most of the people in the boulevards and side streets were clustering as far as possible underneath the awnings in front of the shops and cafés. There were a great many of them about, however, and there was something menacing in the absence of all traffic in the streets. Down in the great square there were several fatigue parties of troops gathered round fires. The palings had been heaped with sacks behind which was a long range of Maxim guns.

“Not a pleasant sight,” Jere observed.

“It is nothing to you. It is hell for a citizen of Pletz,” Nikolas Grogner muttered.

“Where is your son?” Jere asked. “I don’t see a policeman on the streets.”

“My son is in hospital with a bullet in his chest. He went round the cafés last night almost alone, just to tell the people that help was coming. That is what he got for it. At the principal café in the city, too.”

“I am very sorry,” Jere sympathised. “Whatever made them turn on him?”

“Ignorant gossip! Partly because he has been about so much with Phillip, they think he is responsible for advertising Suzanne Delage’s coming here. Hell, I wish she would come! The people would have spat at her. Serve the harlot right!”

“You seem out of sympathy with your townspeople.”

“I am not. I am with them. I am for them. I would have wrung her neck myself as soon as looked at her. I am against the world who are trying to force Jakovia out of existence, against the bankers who keep their pockets tight and their money rusting. I am against your blasted country and France—they have all the gold in the world and they have locked it up. They paralyse the banks, they have thrown grit in the wheels of the world. We have sent envoys out to seek for money to Paris, to London, to New York. Every one of them has come back empty-handed. The Princess Marya, who is true Jakovian, swallowed her pride and went herself. All that she found was you, and your price—you would have your price, wouldn’t you?—should have sent you home with a wreath on your coffin. There is the letter. Give me your reply.”

Jere sat down at the huge and cumbrous writing table, drew out his cheque

book, and after he had filled it in, handed the oblong strip to his visitor.

“There is a cheque for a million dollars,” he said. “That can be cashed anywhere, but Paris has a large floating balance, if Monsieur Huber gets into difficulties.”

Nikolas Grogner uttered no word of thanks, but he sat down and scribbled a few lines of acknowledgment.

“There you are,” he said, passing over the paper. “On behalf of the Privy Council of the country we acknowledge receipt of a million dollars from you to the credit side of your future transactions with regard to the Forest lands of Ermadein. You will get your money unless the revolution comes and the new government repudiates, and if the revolution comes it will be as much your fault as anyone’s!”

“It is really refreshing,” Jere admitted, “to receive a visit from anyone in such a pleasant and courteous humour. It is, I fear, too early to ask you to drink with me. Will you sit down and smoke one of those abominable cigars, and exchange a few more amenities?”

“If I did what I should like to with you,” Grogner told him savagely, “I would throw you out of the window. Come on, Julie.”

“You can go and find the King by yourself,” his daughter replied. “No one knows where he is, and I’m not going to hunt round the Palace. Mr. Strole does not hate us all so much that he will not allow me to sit in front of this stove for a few minutes. If he knew what an icy wind was blowing along those stone corridors, I am sure that he would not hesitate.”

“You are very welcome indeed, Mademoiselle Julie,” Jere assured her promptly. “I like you almost as much as I dislike your father. You are very welcome.”

Grogner strode in sullen silence to the door, which he slammed behind him. Nevertheless, they heard his footsteps in the corridor, heard the clump of the rifle butt on the floor and his muttered response to the sentries’ salute.

“Father can be very uncouth sometimes,” Julie sighed.

“The oftener I talk with you,” Jere confided, “the more I respect your command of languages. Uncouth expresses your father perfectly.”

“I was at school in London for three years,” Julie reminded him. “Father was not Prime Minister then, and it was not one of those schools where you pay a fortune and learn how to smoke cigarettes and fall off a horse gracefully. . . . What a ridiculous person you are, Jeremiah Strole, not to play the copybook game. You ought to fall in love with me, leave the Princess free to marry Phillip, and for my sake become the patron saint of Pletz. We could start the Polo Club again, and all the young men at the Embassies used to say that the golf course was one of the best in Europe—there are plans out even now for a Country Club. You could make yourself so agreeable.”

Jere looked at his visitor thoughtfully. The short drive through the stinging snow and the additional heat of the stove had given a brilliant flush to her perfect complexion and a sparkle to her deep violet eyes. Her sable turban was amazingly becoming. She seemed to have acquired a new slenderness under the fur coat which she had thrown open.

“You people have it all wrong, you know,” he declared. “It is not because of me that the Princess hesitates. It is simply because she has a streak of Puritanism in her and she does not approve of the King. We men are a poorish lot, of course, but would you yourself like to marry a man who had notoriously been playing about with cocottes for fifteen years—a man in his position, too?”

Julie shrugged her shoulders.

“Marya could amuse herself afterwards,” she observed.

“Her ideas don’t sort of run that way,” Jere replied. “Get it into your head once and for all, though, Miss Julie, I am not the stumbling block. Besides, I do not see why a marriage between the Princess and the King should make all the difference in the world, however devoted the people are to her.”

There was a silence. For a moment or two nothing was to be heard but the hiss and roar of the stove.

“They have not told you everything, Jeremiah,” she sighed. “I wish that they would. It might make it easier. Tell me, what would be your attitude if the door opened at the present moment and the Princess came in?”

“I should first of all ask her to sit down,” Jere confided, “and then, in case she had changed her mind during the night, I should ask her again to marry me.”

Julie laughed softly but a little sadly.

“There you are, you see,” she pointed out. “Positively hopeless. The people are right. You do stand in the way of the betrothal. Phillip was wise to have you smuggled in here.”

“Phillip may yet catch it in the neck for that, some day,” Jere observed with a chuckle. “I have no definite duties, but after all, I am in the American Diplomatic Service, and they are not used to having their representatives kidnapped.”

“You cannot even frighten me that way,” Julie smiled. “You know perfectly well that you are here on a private adventure, and whatever happens to you is not of any international importance.”

“Julie,” he said, “if you were not the most beautiful girl in the world, I could bring myself to marry you with joy, because you are certainly one of the brightest.”

“Fall in love with me, then,” she begged, holding out her arms. “I am a good girl. I am nearly faultless. I can play the violin until you feel the music in

your heart, my singing master told me that I could make a fortune with my voice, my dancing master told me that I could do the same thing with my feet. I like you already so much that if you said the right thing in the right way, I should love you for the rest of my life in a manner that Marya could never know anything of. Why are you so perverse, Jeremiah Strole?"

"Don't blame me," he sighed. "There must be some god who escaped the little trouble in Greece behind the curtains of the years, and still plagues us, some Puck-like person who runs these things and takes a malicious pleasure in turning our faces the wrong way. I could imagine the finest man in the world crazy about you, Miss Julie, and I could understand it and sympathise with him, but I do not feel it myself."

"You want that other girl?"

"Yes."

"You really believe that Marya could give you what I could?"

"Perhaps not," Jere admitted, "but the small half of what she gave me—even the crumbs—would be my happiness."

Once more the clatter of the rifle butt upon the stone floor, Grogner's growl and surly entrance. Julie rose to her feet. Her eyes were like stars. For some reason or other, Jere felt an uneasy dread of looking into them.

"And Phillip?" she asked her father.

"Resting. Hanz was there, though, the Minister of Transport. I have sent him up to the station to prepare some trains. Senn is waiting downstairs. We will get over to the bank."

"There is one question I should like to ask before you go," Jere said, rising to his feet. "The King seems in a reasonable frame of mind. Why won't he sign a proclamation bequeathing the Crown lands, or a portion of them, to the people? If he did that, you could follow with another one announcing the sale, or the lease, if you will, of the forests to an American bank. Money would flow into the country."

Grogner turned round—bulky, his vulture-shaped face darkened with unfriendliness.

"Because the King is almost as damned a fool as you are, Jeremiah Strole," he said.

He strode out, muttering to himself, a menacing, terrifying figure. Julie, however, turned a mocking face around and kissed her fingers to Jere.

## CHAPTER XXXI

At one o'clock the snow began to fall more heavily and the clouds from the mountains rolled down in thick billowy masses over the city. A servant came into Jere's room and lit the huge censer-like swinging lamp. A footman came in and laid the cloth for luncheon. Jere noticed that there were two places.

"Who else is lunching here?" he asked the man.

"His Majesty, sir."

"Lunching here with me?" Jere exclaimed.

"Those are the orders, sir," the man replied.

In due course Phillip arrived. He was in the undress uniform of a Colonel of his own Guards, shaven and perfumed, with his moustaches closely clipped and his thick hair brushed smoothly from his forehead. He held in his hand a large cocktail shaker, and he was followed by a servant carrying a salver and glasses.

"I invite myself to the dungeon chambers," he observed, "but I bring recompense. This is the King's cocktail that I shall serve. There are few who have drunk it made by my own hands, and there are fewer still who have stood upright after the second or third. What of our weather, my amiable guest? Are your spirits high this morning?"

"Positively filthy," Jere growled. "I don't want a drink, and with Your Majesty's pardon, I am very much better left alone."

"Now that is unfortunate," Phillip observed, shaking vigorously and filling the two glasses upon the tray. "I myself have transacted much business this morning and have had nothing but one cup of coffee and one dry rusk. To enjoy the goulash which the chef is sending us, I need at any rate a partial restoration to my former spirits. You will do me the courtesy, my guest, of moistening your lips."

Jere acquiesced and did a great deal more. The cocktail was one of the best he had ever drunk in his life.

"Do you reserve this brew for snowstorms and revolutions?" he asked.

"For times of crisis generally," the King said airily. "There is more to come, but not much more. Two of these are sufficient."

A servant entered with a steaming silver dish, urn-like in shape, with a crown and heraldic designs emblazoned upon it. Phillip looked round the table and waved his hand. The servants left the room. He seated himself in one high-backed chair and pointed to the other.

"We wait upon ourselves," he announced. "If there is anything lacking upon the table we must fetch it from the sideboard. I do not wish for

attendants. I hear you have shown signs of reasonableness this morning. Money has flowed from your pen.”

“I also hear,” Jere observed, “that Your Majesty continues as unreasonable as ever. I have an offer I was prepared to put before Grogner for the whole of your oil-bearing territory—six hundred square miles, it is.”

“I cannot part with any more of the Crown lands until the Princess has given a definite answer to my proposals,” the King said.

“But what is the good of them to you or your people if your timber is not sawn and your oil is not coaxed up from the earth?” Jere pointed out. “That is why I like to talk to the Princess. She is so much more reasonable than you.”

“She is a foolish young woman,” Phillip pronounced. “She cannot make up her mind to marry me. With her signature added to mine, I would be willing to dispose of the whole of my kingdom if necessary.”

“Since I arrived in Jakovia,” Jere said earnestly, “I have not found a single person willing to talk sense with me. I hear nothing but a flood of most confusing statements and hints at unspeakable mysteries.”

“Have some more stew,” the King begged.

Jere passed his plate. The stew was indeed excellent.

“People often talk of revolutions,” the King remarked. “Very few know anything about them. If we could fill the stomachs of ten thousand of these loiterers with stuff like this, there would be no more bombs thrown into my dining-room.”

“Has anything of that sort been happening to-day?” Jere asked.

Phillip nodded.

“My beautiful table is ruined,” he sighed. “My chair can be repaired, but it is damaged. Fortunately, I was a quarter of an hour late.”

“Hence, I suppose, your lunching with me,” Jere observed.

“The revolution is sharpening your wits,” his companion rejoined. “I object to taking my meals alone. Michael Grogner is in the hospital, Monsieur Huber, whom I invited to talk finance, excused himself—I notice he generally does when I ask him to do anything—so there remained only you.”

“I am flattered,” Jere murmured.

The King poured out wine from a wicker-covered flask and handed it across the table.

“Jeremiah Strole,” he said, “you are the most obstinate, pig-headed Anglo-Saxon I ever came across in my life, and I have come across many. There are ways of dealing, however, with young men even of your disposition and temperament. Do you know who occupies the suite very nearly next to yours in this wing of the Palace?”

“No idea,” Jere replied. “I have not had the chance to cross the threshold of the place since you brought me here.”

“Suzanne Delage,” the King announced. “The beautiful, the maddening, the adorable Suzanne!”

“Don’t talk nonsense,” Jere replied. “How could she have arrived here?”

“She did not arrive,” the King remarked with a grin. “She came. She came with Colonel Grogner and me. We flew part of the way, of course—nothing like flying to distract people’s attention—and we arrived in the capital, when we did arrive, in a hired car and without servants, late at night.”

“Do the people know?”

“Not a soul.”

Jere looked out of the window, already almost obscured.

“She must have a great affection for you, Your Majesty,” he observed.

“Not at all,” Phillip denied. “The affection is for you. It is you whom she has come to see. She told me so in an exceedingly stormy interview a very short time ago.”

“This seems to me to be rather a threadbare sort of scheme,” Jere announced. “I cannot follow your psychology. You expect me to help your country in your troubles—in fact, I have begun to already—and you are trying at the same time to push the burden of your misdeeds on to my shoulders. I am not going to be your scapegoat. Is that clear enough?”

The King sighed.

“What a troublesome young man you are!”

“You ask too much of your acquaintances,” Jere complained.

“You had a flirtation with the girl in Paris,” Phillip reminded him peevishly.

“Paris is not Pletz anyway, and my flirtation was not meant to last longer than a few minutes.”

The King sighed again.

“I did not want to bring her here,” he confided. “I never thought it would work somehow. It was Grogner’s idea. A rotten one as most of his ideas are! She hates the cold and she hates the place, so she will be a raving lunatic when she knows she is not going to sing, and you do not present yourself. However, let us forget her for a few minutes.”

There was to be no forgetfulness of Suzanne Delage that day, however. Almost as Phillip spoke they heard a sound which brought them to their feet with a sudden start of horror. It seemed amazingly near at hand. Notwithstanding the thick tapestry-covered walls, that cry—the cry, indeed, of death—was horribly and mercilessly distinct. It left Jere without comprehension. Phillip, however, understood. He ran for the door, tugging at a heavy cavalry revolver as he went.

“Turn to the right,” he shouted. “Second door on the left.”

Phillip sped along down the corridor, Jere close on his heels. The cry of

terror had been taken up by another voice, also feminine. The King flung himself through a door which stood ajar. They were in a bed-chamber furnished very much like Jere's, only that the dressing-table was covered with the gold and platinum articles of a lady's toilet. Suzanne lay stretched upon the floor, half dressed, a knife still quivering in her side. Her eyes were wide open and distended with terror, there was a slight froth of blood upon her lips, which seemed to have uttered that one cry and gone silent for ever. On the other side of the communicating door someone was battering with their fists.

"There's someone behind the curtain," Jere shouted. "Look out!"

The King emptied his revolver at the invisible shape, which, at the first discharge, fell crumpling to the ground. The two stood there as though paralysed, the groans of the dying man—as yet unseen—in their ears, the terrible silence of the murdered woman numbing their very senses. Phillip was the first to recover.

"Shout to the sentry down the corridor," he told Jere. "Tell him to call up the guard."

He unlocked and flung open the communicating door, whilst Jere did his bidding. Suzanne's maid came stumbling in. She gave one look at her mistress and collapsed upon the floor. From outside in the corridor came the tramp of soldiers. They marched into the room—half a dozen of them—and stood to attention at Phillip's sharp word of command. He pointed to the curtain.

"There is someone behind there."

They rushed forward. A man lay doubled up. He turned away on his side, but they dragged him back. He was gasping for breath. Jere gave a cry of horror.

"Brodie!" he exclaimed. "What on earth—Brodie!"

The man's face was as white as death, his hands were clasping his sides, his eyes were terrible.

"I got mine, sir," he gasped. "Never mind——"

Phillip was kneeling over the dead woman. The soldiers formed a solid, impenetrable background. Jere dropped on his knees.

"Brodie," he cried, "what brought you here? What was the idea, man? Were you after the murderer? Who was it?"

Brodie's head was lolling, but he forced words from his lips.

"I done it," he declared. "He would never have got away from her," he went on, moving his hands towards Phillip. "She was in his blood. I know his race. A woman who gets what she got from him has him for ever."

"But what business was it of yours?" Jere asked.

The man's lips were contorted into what might almost have been a ghastly smile.

"I was born in the damned country," he faltered. "So we all were, right



back as far as the King himself. I didn't want to come back. I knew how it would get me. I would have told you if it would have done any good. I would have told anyone. But it was easy enough to see he would never do the right thing by the country with Suzanne alive. I knew—I killed her.”

“Is there anyone you want me to give money to—to let know?” Jere begged. “I am afraid it's all up with you, Brodie.”

“I know it is,” the man groaned. “I'm going.”

“Was it worth while?” Jere asked.

“Perhaps not,” the man replied. “Perhaps not, sir. Give them a leg up if you can. I was always a sham American. Jakovia—I was confirmed in the Cathedral—lived across the square there—listened to the bells—God!”

He fell over, dead. Jere leaned over him for a moment, then rose to his feet. The King was standing up, red-eyed. He gave rapid orders to the soldiers in their own language, then he leaned on Jere's arm and the two made their way back to Jere's salon. Although it was still only early afternoon, darkness seemed to have fallen upon the city. There were lights in the streets, banks of clouds still rolling down, snow and rain falling together and icy cold everywhere.

“I brought her here,” Phillip muttered. “I dragged her here. She didn't want to come—I promised she should see you.”

## CHAPTER XXXII

The city that night was lit with flares—huge torches bound to the iron railings and the electric standards. The storm had suddenly abated. No more clouds came rolling down from the mountains, the sky was as clear as in midsummer, and the stars had never been brighter. The moon was crawling up from southwards, although still hidden. With the dropping of the wind the icy cold seemed to have passed. An hour before midnight a Colonel of the Guards had presented himself before the King.

“We have no more blank cartridges, Sire,” he announced. “The people appear to know it: they are only fifty yards away from the Palace railings. One volley would send them to their holes for a week.”

“Bring in the guns,” the King ordered.

The Colonel stood perfectly rigid, motionless, his expression blank.

“Retire the guns,” the King repeated. “Throw open the gates. If the people wish to speak to me, I agree. Maropello can enter the Palace with a safeguard, or I will address the people from the balcony without one.”

“Those are your orders, Sire?” the man asked.

“Those are my orders.”

“Your Majesty has been informed as to the temper of the people?”

“Their King should understand it,” was the curt reply.

The Colonel, who was a patriot, a lover of his King, but a lover also of life, said his prayer to death and took his leave. The King turned back into the Conference Chamber. For five hours his Privy Councillors had been seated there, indulging for the greater part of that time in fruitless arguments with their sovereign, Grogner every now and then making spasmodic and passionate interruptions. There was Baron Senn, red-eyed and worn out, his head fallen wearily upon his folded arms. Grindler was seated fiercely erect, stroking rapidly his short beard, furious at the order just given out by the King. There was Monsieur Kramer, Mayor of Pletz, a thin, attenuated-looking man with heavy glasses, and Prince Marziwil, the Speaker of the House of Deputies. At a round table, a little apart, sat Jere, and with him the Baron de Sturgiwil. A typist with her machine sat a few feet away, temporarily unoccupied. At another table, seated entirely alone, with folded arms, thick black hair, impeccably neat in person, unmoved in expression, sat the envoy of the people—Maropello. It was he who spoke first as the King resumed his seat.

“Your Majesty and Privy Councillors,” he said, “the King has done a wise thing. He has done a thing which may check the fury of the people. Let me do something to supplement it. Let me tell them from the balcony that within an

hour our discussions will be at an end and that the King himself will make an announcement.”

The Mayor turned gravely round.

“Your Majesty,” he said, “I suggest your prompt assent.”

The King indulged in a grimace of transient displeasure.

“No one but their ruler has addressed the people from that balcony within my memory,” he said. “However, say your little speech, Maropello. The people shall know what there is to be known within an hour.”

Maropello stepped out on to the balcony. Outside, that strange tumult of voices and growls and shuffling feet suddenly ceased. There was silence. They could even hear the speaker’s voice and passionless words. Presently he stepped back again.

“They will wait,” he announced. “It remains only for His Majesty to face the inevitable.”

The King leaned back in his very magnificent high chair, on the back of which was emblazoned in black and gilt a replica of the Crown of his country. He lit a cigarette and thrust his hands into his breeches pockets. The action and the gesture were alike unusual, but this was an unusual night in the history of Jakovia. To some of the others, who thought the scene over afterwards, it seemed as though he were deliberately trying to divest himself of the dignity which he was quite able at times to assume.

“My decision is already given,” the King said. “I shall not change it. The Crown lands of Jakovia belong to the Crown. Of my own free will in a time of stress, I might do what I have already done—make a gift to the people—but to sign away the whole of the Crown lands would be an act of treachery to my successors which I decline to entertain.”

“Your Majesty will have no successors,” Nikolas Grogner muttered, “if the people once find their way into the Palace.”

“You are in a gloomy frame of mind, my friend,” the King declared. “You have worked yourself into an unreasonable state. The scheme proposed to us by our young American friend has turned your head. For my part I await the arrival of the Princess. Princess Marya of Pletz is next in succession to the throne, and even if I had the right, I would not dispose of her privileges and fortune in her absence.”

Maropello, who had left the Council Chamber for a time, came hurrying in.

“Your Majesty,” he announced, “the people are in great humour to receive your announcement favourably. Light has come back to the city and the trains are leaving every hour for the north, the cafés and streets are illuminated. Women and children are thronging them and waiting for the return of the deputation. Send their men back with the right message, and I can promise you the loyal devotion of a unified and faithful people.”

“We await only the arrival of the Princess Marya,” the King replied.

“Remember, Sire, in making your decision,” Maropello went on, “that your people, the people of this city and the people of the country places, have only sniffed at the evil wind that blows from the east. One after another, the Soviet agents have been driven from the place. We have scarcely a dozen men who can be called Communists in the whole of our population, but we want and we must have the right to live and to develop on the principles which are everywhere accepted to-day. I beg Your Majesty to be very careful before you give an unfavourable reply to those who wait below.”

“That all sounds very nice, Maropello,” the King approved. “Very well spoken—sixth form top of the class business and all that, but you have got to remember, my friend, that it is not your pocket-book the people are asking for.”

From outside came the three thundering knocks upon the door, without which no person who had not been summoned could enter the Council Chamber. Grogner, as Prime Minister, answered.

“Who is there?”

“Her Royal Highness the Princess Marya of Jakovia,” a voice answered.

“Her Royal Highness may enter.”

Marya came quietly in, followed by the Baroness de Sturgiwil. She wore a plain black frock with astrakhan trimming and an astrakhan coat and turban hat. To Jere, leaning forward and watching her eagerly, she seemed somehow to have changed. She carried herself, as always, with dignity and self-possession. Her head was held even higher than usual, but there was a serenity about her expression which it sometimes lacked. At a gesture from the King his seneschal had placed by his side a chair almost similar to the one in which he himself was seated. A murmur passed through the assembled company of men as the significance of the action dawned upon them. Marya, without a moment’s hesitation, accepted her place. Grogner rose to his feet, waving back the King, who had seemed about to speak.

“Your Majesty,” he begged, “as Prime Minister of the country I claim the right in this hour of crisis to put the vital matter at issue before Her Royal Highness.”

The King shrugged his shoulders.

“Please yourself, Grogner,” he assented. “You will take much longer about it than I should have done. However, perhaps Her Royal Highness will listen to you with more confidence.”

“For a hundred years, Your Royal Highness,” Grogner said, striking the table with his left hand and brandishing a sheaf of papers in his right, “for longer than a hundred years, Jakovia has been kept an impoverished and pauperised country, because all the treasures of her soil have been lands

accumulated in ancient days and added to whenever opportunity arose by the sovereigns of the country. Well enough a thousand years ago, Your Royal Highness. Well enough five hundred years ago, perhaps. To-day—finished! You hear the people outside? You can talk to Maropello if you will, their representative. They have educated themselves to the truth. His Majesty was brought to see just a particle, just a vestige of the truth. A young American here offered to deal with a small portion of the lands—a very small portion of them, but still a start—and to finance the turning of the products of a certain strip of forest lands into the gold for which this country starves. The King has signed—on terms yet to be arranged, but with money already advanced by the firm of Vavasour Strole, Incorporated, of New York; trains laden with workers are departing now every hour for the north. So much to the good. But with the coming of that has come also knowledge to the people. Those Crown lands, Your Royal Highness, must be ceded back to the country, and the Parliament of which this Privy Council, hastily summoned here to-night, is in some measure representative, must arrange suitable allowances and incomes for the sovereigns of the country.”

There was a cynical twinkle in the King’s eyes, a curve of his lips half malevolent, half humorous. He twisted thoughtfully upwards his small moustaches.

“Here is a brilliant exposition,” he pointed out, turning to Marya, “of the new doctrine of *meum et tuum*. The people are poor. The King, of course, is always rich. No one would venture to take away the private hoard of a farmer, a tradesman or a manufacturer, but because I am a King, because I am supposed to possess millions instead of thousands, a hundred thousand grasping hands are stretched northwards and a very ugly-looking document is thrust into my hand to sign.”

Maropello rose from the background.

“Your Majesty,” he said, and his thin, acid voice seemed to have found new rasping qualities, “the time has gone by for sneering ethics or the drawing out of moth-eaten puppets. The northward lands belong to the starving people. They grant the King his share. They will take what it is right and well for them to have. There are plenty of statesmen here to arrange that. You have not yet told Her Royal Highness that this firm of American bankers has drawn up a complete scheme for the reorganisation of the country, based upon the ceding of the Crown lands to Parliament for the use of the people. In their name I demand it. I demand the King’s signature to that document. Outside your gates there are a hundred thousand men, who, like myself, have known what it is for years to go hungry to bed, who also demand it. But mind you, it is in their hearts and in their wills to make this, as you could make it too, not a night of bloodshed but a night of rejoicing. The cafés are all open. Our one gun is fixed

in the square. The moment those papers are signed the gun will be fired, and there will be no more scenes of violence. There will be a happy and a hard-working populace, all toiling together to make Jakovia prosperous and contented under its King or whatever ruler Providence may place over us.”

Marya looked upwards to the King. He rose slowly to his feet.

“My Councillors,” he said, “I am being urged by all of you, by Nikolas Grogner in particular, to sign this renunciation which will make a pauper of me for the remainder of my days and will shut me out from all participation in the wealth which will certainly flow into this country. Very well. I agree. I will sign. But on one condition. The Princess Marya shall also affix her signature to the deed jointly with mine.”

Grogner rose in his place, his eyes aflame, his tone shaking with anger.

“The signature of the Princess counts for nothing,” he declared. “You know that well enough. The only thing that it might do is to invalidate the document. You alone, Phillip of Jakovia, will write your name upon that space. You will do it or I shall announce your refusal from the balcony. As to your being a pauper, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has already agreed that you shall receive one third of all that the lands bring in. The one urgent and necessary thing is that you sign.”

“Very well,” the King decided, “I refuse to sign.”

There was a hoarse murmur in the room—not a pleasant sound—the slow and increasing anger of thwarted men. Nikolas Grogner left his place. He drew nearer to the King. There were livid streaks of passion in his face. More than ever he seemed like some wild beast of prey.

“I shall never sign at your command,” the King assured him scornfully, “you—a middle-class Jew notary, who have become one of the Ministers of my Crown simply through cunning and craft. Get back into your place, Grogner. In these days of crisis you are useless.”

Grogner’s talon-like finger was extended.

“And you,” he cried. “What about you refusing to do your master’s bidding? You—King of Jakovia—are no more King of Jakovia than I am. You are——”

Phillip was very quick. No one’s mind, or it seemed even their vision, had been able to keep pace with what was happening. The stab of flame and the sharp spit of the bullet, however, spoke for themselves. Grogner collapsed, half on the table, half on the floor. There was death in his face, death as sudden as the lightnings of heaven had ever dealt out. Then the King’s voice, scarcely raised above its natural key, calm, a little bitter.

“There is one word at least you shall never utter,” he said, half to himself, half to the fallen figure.

No one stirred. The King only rose to his feet, pulled the great bell rope

and addressed the servants who hurried in.

“The Prime Minister has shot himself,” he announced in a perfectly equable tone. “Let his body be placed in the next room, and send for a doctor.”

No one appeared to be able to make any protest. Only as the door was closed Maropello rose to his feet.

“This must be the end of the matter,” he insisted. “Shall I address the people from the balcony, Sire, or have I your permission to leave?”

“Neither,” the King answered. “Stay where you are unless you want to share Nikolas Grogner’s fate.”

Maropello, too, seemed under the spell. He resumed his seat. The King took up the pen, drew the document towards him and studied it for several moments. Then he pushed it away. He turned towards the Princess.

“You alone, now,” he said, “of all living people know, or should know, why I cannot sign these papers. I shall announce instead my abdication. The throne is yours, Princess. When once you are seated there, take my advice and tear up those few lines of venom which may carry you to the summit of your ambition, but have cost that huckster his life.”

Marya rose to her feet. Everyone now was bewildered. Everyone was wondering what she was about to do. She moved over until she stood near the open stove, between Jere’s table and the chair where the Baroness de Sturgiwil was seated. Her hand stole inside the bosom of her coat and stayed there. She looked thoughtfully around the room. Electricity had not yet arrived, and in the light of the swinging oil lamps, the faces of the few men gathered round the table and seated in the dim corners of the room, seemed strangely inhuman and unreal. The King alone gained. A great anger had robbed him of the sometime pettiness of his expression. Marya looked at them thoughtfully one by one, then she drew from the bosom of her coat an envelope covered with great seals.

“This,” she announced, “is a letter written in his dying moments by Pope Clement VII and addressed to my uncle, King Peter of Jakovia. It is a wicked and malicious document, although it consists of three lines only. It declines to recognise the marriage between my uncle, Phillip’s father, and his wife, although she was a Princess of Spain, declines, for a paltry and malicious reason, which heaven forbid that I should drag back from the coffin. There is no copy of this letter, there is no witness that it was ever written. . . . The first document signed by Pope Clement VIII on his ascension to the See was a document legalising in due form the marriage between Phillip of Jakovia’s father and his wife, the Princess Maria Luculla di Cartagena. The one thing that might seem unfortunate which, if it were known, would create a cataclysm, was that Phillip was born in the three weeks’ interval.”

There was a silence inconceivably intense. The drama was creeping into

shape. It was inconceivable and yet—Marya held out her hand towards the stove.

“This black and deadly secret,” Marya said, “was bequeathed to my mother, who was too zealous and devout a Catholic to do other than treasure it almost as a relic. There remains in the whole world no form of proof of any sort that it was ever written, and there it goes into the ashes.”

The paper slipped from her fingers. Within a second it was consumed. Some instinct had brought Jere to his feet, some instinct perhaps brought him a little nearer to her as her hands went out.

“I have decided,” she announced, facing for the last time the Privy Councillors of her country, “that I have no desire to be a Queen.”

Both her hands were in his, the serene fire of a great happiness shone out of her eyes.

“I am tired of fighting,” she whispered. “I am glad that I have lost.”

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A minute later a roar of cheering from the people below greeted the King’s appearance upon the balcony. Maropello, whom he had summoned from the background, was by his side.

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“Queer goings on in some of these small European countries,” Vavasour Strole murmured to his friend and guest, Daniel Littlecote, as he read the paper which his butler had spread out before him a few mornings later. “Jakovia, for instance, the country which seems to have turned Jere’s head—a Prime Minister shoots himself at a Privy Council, and the firm of Vavasour Strole of New York recreates a monarchy!”

“You’re missing half the news,” Daniel Littlecote, with another paper in his hand, pointed out. “Listen to this—

*“Amidst scenes of wild enthusiasm and rejoicings, the marriage was celebrated yesterday in the Cathedral of Pletz, by special licence, between Jeremiah Vavasour Strole, the brilliant young New York financier and diplomat, and the Princess Marya of Pletz.”*”

“A surprising lad, that,” his father murmured.



## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *Jeremiah and the Princess* by E. Phillips (Edward Phillips)  
Oppenheim]