

**MR. BILLINGHAM,  
THE MARQUIS AND  
MADELON**

E. Phillips Oppenheim

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E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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# PREFACE

Publishers, as we all know, are men with special and easily distinguishable qualities. They are as a rule astute, highly intellectual, brilliant in commercial enterprise as well as in letters, but inclined to be rash and ruthless. I tremble when I think what the result of their present experiment may be. Do they realise, I ask myself, that within the same pages they have enclosed Michael, the fearless Evil Doer, a Sinner on the grand scale but a veritable sinner,

Peter Ruff, the Detective and Criminal in turn, the man who knew both worlds and made use of both,

Aaron Rodd, the stern Detective, harsh in his methods, a keen, unforgiving hunter of criminals, and

Mr. Billingham, a genial lover of humanity, a searcher after adventures, tender towards women, a man amongst men, lovable but often dangerous?

What is going to happen when Aaron Rodd, impatient of this forced companionship, calls upon his neighbours, when Mr. Billingham returns the call? Who will see through the other when Michael slips into Peter Ruff's office to exchange amenities? What would happen if Madelon, in a wave of hero-worship, should desert Mr.

Billingham and follow Michael in his last great climb through the pine woods and up the ravine-cloven slopes of the Pyrenees?

A very dangerous experiment, it seems to me; but so long as the royalties flow in—who cares?

E. Phillips Oppenheim

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# MR. BILLINGHAM, THE MARQUIS AND MADELON

## 32: THE BAMBOOZLING OF MR. GASCOIGNE

Mr. Samuel T. Billingham of New York, recently landed from the great liner anchored a few miles out, walked along the Terrace at Monte Carlo, serene, light-hearted, beatifically content. His yellow shoes and his variegated socks might be described as a trifle vivid, but the rest of his attire—his well-pressed grey suit, his irreproachable linen, and his well-shaped grey Homburg hat—was beyond criticism. He was a man of medium height, thick-set, inclined a little, perhaps, to *embonpoint*. His complexion was pink, his flaxen hair only slightly streaked with grey, his eyes filled with the light of good-humour. He was possibly about forty-five years of age, but he walked with the spring of a young man. In his pocket was his *carte de saison* for the Cercle Privé and card of membership of the Sporting Club, taken out an hour or so before. In the same pocket was also a well-filled money case, and in his mind the consciousness of pleasant quarters in his favourite hotel, and the knowledge that he was in the spot which he loved more than any place on earth. Furthermore, he was pleasantly aware of the fact that he was in the immediate neighbourhood of various interesting little *rendezvous* where restrictions as to any refreshment he might deem advisable for his welfare were nonexistent; where compatriots were always to be found and amusement

plentiful. Mr. Samuel T. Billingham, brimming over with good-humour, was certainly an agreeable circumstance in a wonderful setting.

At half-past-eleven o'clock—Mr. Billingham was a man of regular habits—he quitted the promenade, crossed the Place in front of the Casino, and selected a table outside the Café de Paris. He selected it simply because it happened to be the nearest empty one and without even a glance at his neighbours. It was nevertheless, without a doubt, by the direction of that mysterious influence called fate that he should have chosen that particular chair and ordered his champagne cocktail with that clear and pleasant directness of speech which caused the two people at the adjacent table to turn and focus their attention upon him.

“A champagne cocktail,” he enjoined confidently, frankly ignoring the fact that he was addressing a foreigner, “and some of them little salted nuts—and say, get a move on!”

The waiter hurried off. Mr. Samuel T. Billingham looked around him genially and met the faintly amused, gently enquiring gaze of his neighbours. Mr. Billingham smiled back again but at that moment no words were exchanged.

The man and the girl were of ingratiating, even distinguished appearance. The former seemed to be about fifty or perhaps fifty-five years of age. He was tall and thin, dressed in dark clothes from which the first freshness had gone, and though no fault could have been found with his linen or the less important appurtenances of his toilette, it was noticeable that his shirt cuffs were a little frayed, his

patent boots a little cracked, his coat a little shiny at the seams. His face was gaunt, his eyes were deep-set, but his mouth had a most attractive and humorous outline. The girl with whom he was seated, and at whom Mr. Billingham had permitted himself a single glance of admiration, was young enough to be his daughter, but bore him no resemblance. Her hair was of a most attractive shade of brown and her eyes were of the very darkest shade of blue. She seemed pale from the absence of all cosmetics, but her lack of colour was, as a matter of fact, healthy and natural. There was something a little insolent about her expression, as though she were one of those often at war with the world and circumstances, but amongst the cosmopolitan little crowd by which they were surrounded she preserved an air of distinction which a keen student of his fellow-creatures, such as Mr. Billingham, was not slow to recognise. He waited for his cocktail without impatience and with the air of one entirely satisfied with himself and this particular corner of the world. Meanwhile the man and the girl talked—the former in broken English—and, although they never seemed to raise their voices, every word they said was audible to their neighbour.

“It is incredible, Madelon,” her companion exclaimed irritably, “that you should have been so careless! Our day is spoilt.”

“I am very sorry,” she replied humbly. “It is not often I forget such things. As you told me, I put three mille notes in my little sac early this morning. Then, alas! the sun came out, I wore a different dress, and I brought the other sac. There it is upon my dressing-table!”

“And here are we,” the man grumbled, “without a penny to pay for our *consommation*, to say nothing of luncheon. Furthermore, there are the Rooms and perhaps a fortune waiting. Last night I dreamed of fourteen, three times following.”

“It is not so wonderful,” she declared a little pettishly. “You always dream of fourteen, but it never arrives.”

The champagne cocktail, well frosted and with a thin line of sugar around the rim of the glass, was brought to Mr. Billingham, who accepted it with an air of content. The eyes of the man and the girl rested for a moment upon the glass with a veiled expression of envy. Mr. Billingham lifted his hat and leaned forward.

“Sir,” he said, addressing the man, “I am blessed, or should I say cursed, with acute hearing. From what you were saying to the young lady I gather that you have left your money at home.”

His neighbour, also with his hat slightly uplifted, listened with an air of grave embarrassment.

“Sir,” he rejoined, “I regret that, in some temporary excitement, owing to the discovery of my niece’s carelessness, my voice was a little raised. May I venture to suggest, however, that my conversation was not intended to reach the ear of a stranger, nor can I—pardon me—understand what significance it can have for him.”

“That’s very well put,” Mr. Billingham commented approvingly. “I’m rather a plain-spoken man myself, but what I figured out in my own mind was that this being my first morning in Monte Carlo after an absence of a good many years, and this being my favourite spot upon the earth, and the sun shining and my cocktail looking pretty good, I thought perhaps I might take the liberty of inviting you and the young lady to join me.”

The elderly gentleman rose to his feet, hat in hand, and bowed.

“Sir,” he said, “we shall accept your courtesy in—may I say—a spirit of reciprocity. Permit me to present my niece, Mademoiselle Madelon de Félan. I myself am known as the Marquis de Félan.”

Mr. Billingham rose also to his feet, lifted his hat, fumbled in his pocket and produced a card.

“Samuel T. Billingham is my name, sir,” he announced. “I come from New York and I’m interested in linoleum—that is to say, I was, only I’ve recently sold out. Pleased to meet you both. . . . *Garçon!*”

Their prospective host accepted an invitation to bring his chair to the table of his new acquaintances, and the succeeding half-an-hour passed agreeably enough. Certain orders concerning champagne cocktails were given and repeated whilst the usual amenities of general conversation were exchanged.

“I was thinking of moving on to *Ciro’s* presently,” Mr. Billingham announced, glancing at his watch. “We might try one there and, say, why shouldn’t you and the young lady join me in a bite of luncheon.”

The girl laughed at him pleasantly—and it was a very pleasant laugh indeed.

“I’m so hungry,” she murmured.

The Marquis was touched.

“Really, sir,” he said, “your kindness is astounding. We will join you on the distinct understanding that we are allowed within the course of the next few days to reciprocate your hospitality.”

“Good enough!” Mr. Billingham assented. “That goes, then! We’ll move on as soon as the *garçon* has brought me my change. Now promise you won’t go back on our luncheon engagement, whatever happens.”

“Not a chance,” the girl assured him, with that twinkle in her eyes which Mr. Billingham was already beginning to love. “I’m far too hungry, and *Ciro’s* is my favourite restaurant.”

“Very well, then,” Mr. Billingham concluded, drawing his chair up a little closer. “So long as it’s understood that you don’t take offence, I just want to ask you one thing. Do I look such an almighty hayseed that you should pick me out to try that old wheeze on?”

There was a moment's silence. The orchestra rattled on, corks still popped, a pleasant murmur of conversation swelled and flowed around. The man and the girl, however, remained speechless. The latter had lost that smile of pleasant anticipation; her face was suddenly a little drawn and troubled. The man seemed older. His manner, however, preserved its dignity.

“Sir,” he began——

“Cut it out,” Mr. Billingham begged. “I know pretty well what I look like, but you see it's my job to look like it. Any one would think I was what I want them to think me—an American traveller, over here, probably for the first time in his life, with plenty of the stuff. Well, I ain't. I'm from the United States all right, but I'm looking after a little bit of that stuff myself. Perhaps that's why I sized you two up so easily.”

The Marquis half rose to his feet. Mr. Billingham pulled him back into his chair.

“Look here,” he insisted genially, “cut out the starch. I'm a bit of a crook—I'll admit that—but I'm not a bad sort and I've taken a fancy to you two. We're going on to *Ciro's* and we're going to have that little lunch together. I can pay for it all right, and dinner afterwards most likely. No reason why we shouldn't have a pleasant day together. We might even get to talking business.”

The Marquis coughed. He was beginning to recover himself.

“We will certainly accompany you to Ciro’s—er—Mr. Billingham,” he assented. “In the meantime tell me, I beg of you, why you arrived at the conclusion that my niece and I were—er——?”

“I figured it out this way,” Mr. Billingham interrupted. “You are both French. What did you want to talk in English for except that you wanted me to understand? That was enough for me to be going on with!”

“Our story is a sad one,” the Marquis commenced.

“Say, we’ll have that after luncheon,” Mr. Billingham suggested, rising to his feet. . . .

The cocktails at Ciro’s were equal to Mr. Billingham’s anticipations, and the luncheon which he presently ordered was entirely satisfactory. Conversation, so far as his two guests were concerned, was a little stilted and diffident. Their host, however, was absolutely at his ease.

“I guess you wouldn’t believe it, you two,” he recounted, as they attacked a wonderful selection of *hors d’œuvres*, “but I was once a rich man, and I never got such fun out of life in those days as I am helping myself to now. I figure it out like this. When you’ve got your money in the Bank, and the bits coming in, you’re kind of tied up with respectability. Now, since I was a lad I’ve always been for adventures, and there’s only one sort of adventure that counts, and that is the adventure which sets your brain against another man’s and brings you in the stuff if you come

out on top. It don't seem to me that a rich man has got any fighting outlook on life. . . . Do you get me, Miss de Félan?"

"I understand what you mean," she replied, a little dubiously, "but I am afraid I do not agree with you. You see, I have always been poor, and I hate poverty."

"Might be kind of different for a young woman," Mr. Billingham conceded thoughtfully, "but for a man, to go about the world doing no one any particular harm but living by his wits and what he can make by being a trifle smarter than other people, that's my idea of a happy time! I don't mind telling you that my present job over here is to swindle a man out of half a million of dollars."

"Half a million of dollars!" the Marquis gasped. "It is incredible!"

"What an imagination!" the girl sighed. "What courage!"

"I guess I'm not out for pinching old ladies' reticules," their host confided. "I like a big deal. And," he went on, leaning a little across the table, "if I can make up my mind that you two are to be trusted—I'm not saying I mightn't let you in on this little affair. I need just the sort of help you might be able to give, and that's a fact!"

The Marquis concealed his impatience with all the restraint which was doubtless an inheritance of his breeding. He polished a worn and scratched horn-rimmed eye-glass with a clean but frayed handkerchief and prepared to listen with tolerant partiality. The girl, however, was

frankly eager. She leaned across towards her host, her elbows upon the table, her chin supported by her two hands. There was a light in her very beautiful eyes which was almost adoring.

“Tell us about it, Mr. Billingham,” she begged. “We are so very poor and I am tired of being poor.”

“My niece has the natural desire of the young for luxuries,” the Marquis observed. “Frankly, I have outlived the necessity for wealth. My modest *déjeuner* here or at the Hôtel de Paris, my dinner, my bottle of Burgundy, my choice of brandies, *carte blanche* at my tailor’s, a mille or two to play with when the fancy seizes me, are all I wish for.”

“You don’t aim at putting together a pile for later on in life?” Mr. Billingham queried.

The Marquis sighed.

“That is beyond my hopes,” he admitted.

“And you, mademoiselle?”

The girl was terribly in earnest.

“If I had the chance,” she said, “I would save. I love all the things which go to making life here so delightful, but more than anything else on earth I should love my independence. I should love to feel that it was no longer necessary for me to worry to-morrow as to how I was going to pay the next day’s bills.”

“Good spirit!” Mr. Billingham approved. “Good spirit, that!”

“Madelon is more practical than I,” the Marquis sighed. “And now concerning that little affair of business, Mr. Billingham, you were about to place before us.”

Mr. Billingham’s attention, however, had wandered. He was watching the approach of an obvious compatriot—a man the very antithesis of himself, but with equally distinct transatlantic attributes; a small man with a sallow face and little hair, teeth stopped plentifully with gold, a wizened expression about the mouth, a short-sighted squint, neat clothes and square-toed shoes. Mr. Billingham welcomed him as a long-lost brother.

“Say, if this isn’t Joe Gascoigne!” he exclaimed. “Well, well, when did you come along?”

Mr. Gascoigne’s reciprocating smile was frosty. His manner showed him to be a man of reserves.

“Paris, last night,” he answered. “How’s oil?”

Mr. Billingham shook his head gloomily.

“Can’t say those new lands are panning out quite as we expected,” he admitted.

“No gushers?” Mr. Gascoigne enquired.

“Nothing of that sort reported up to the present,” was the cautious but somewhat depressed reply. “Still, one never

knows. Where there's oil there's hope! Where are you staying?"

"Hôtel de Paris."

"Fine!" Mr. Billingham commented. "Sold your option yet, Joe?"

"I guess I didn't come to Monte Carlo to talk business," the other rejoined, as he turned to pass on his way down the room.

Mr. Billingham was thoughtful for a moment or two after his friend's departure. The fact, however, did not impair his appetite.

"Why did you not present your friend?" the girl enquired. "I thought Americans always introduced everybody."

Mr. Billingham smiled.

"That," he explained, "is the man whom we are going to rob. In case you come into the game, I didn't ask you to shake hands with him. He's as near-sighted as a clam and too vain to wear spectacles."

"He is presumably wealthy," the Marquis ventured.

"He is of the genus known as 'millionaires,'" Mr. Billingham acquiesced.

The Marquis nodded approvingly.

“To rob the rich,” he murmured, “is a reasonable hobby.”

“When you add to that,” Mr. Billingham continued, “that Joe Gascoigne is the doggonest, meanest cuss that ever drank water and preached prohibition, you’ve got him sized up about right.”

“To rob such a man,” the Marquis suggested hopefully—“or shall I say to assist in the redistribution of his wealth—would seem to be a charity. Five hundred thousand dollars, I think you said, sir?”

“Maybe more,” Mr. Billingham assented. “It’s like enough I’ll take you two in, but we’ll quit it now until later on. I’ve got to size you up a bit more first. . . . Some salmon, this!” he added, almost reverently, as he laid down his fork. “The sauce tastes good to me, too!”

“Loire salmon,” the Marquis confided. “Very good fish, but short season.”

“Supposing you get on with that sad story of yours, Marquis,” Mr. Billingham proposed, as they waited for the next course. “I don’t say as I’m going to believe every word of it, mind you, but I’d like to hear your own account of yourself and the young lady.”

The Marquis was a little stiff at first, but he gradually warmed to his task. He came, it appeared, of a noble but impoverished family, and his various attempts at earning an honest living had met with a singular lack of success. He had been, in turn, a vineyard proprietor, a vendor of wines, an

insurance agent, and had interested himself in a cigarette business. In all of these undertakings he had suffered from lack of capital. A year ago the daughter of his only brother, who had married an Englishwoman, was left with practically no one else to look after her. They had lived in Paris for some short time upon the very trifling sum of money which she had brought with her. A small investment in a lottery business had been a failure. Behold them at Monte Carlo, practically destitute! It was becoming indeed a question of money sufficient for a meal between them. Mademoiselle Madelon was ready to give French lessons, and she had some knowledge of typing. The Marquis had even gone so far as to offer himself as a sort of super-guide to strangers of wealth to whom the best restaurants and manifold pleasures of the place were unknown.

“Ever any trouble with the police?” Mr. Billingham asked.

“Not in these parts,” the Marquis hastened to explain. There had been some slight misunderstanding in Paris, he added, with reference to his mismanagement of a gambling club, and the investigation into his lottery business had made a hurried departure from the city advisable. Here, however, they had a clean sheet; had modest rooms at an unpretentious hotel, and so far had paid their way.

“I sized you both up as being amateurs in this crook business,” Mr. Billingham observed. “You may make good at it, of course, but I am not so sure about the young lady—kind of dangerous, with her appearance!”

“Sir,” the Marquis replied, “I am a man of honour, but frankly I think that my niece should make more use of her undoubted attractions. She receives many invitations to lunch or dine with acquaintances, all of which she refuses. I think that she is wrong.”

Madelon remained undisturbed. The frank admiration with which her host was contemplating her brought only a slight tinge of colour into her cheeks.

“My uncle thinks always,” she explained, “of some millionaire or nobleman who will invite me to lunch and find me so charming that he will propose marriage to me. Our acquaintances, unfortunately, are of the bar or the Casino, and I do not fancy that they are quite of the class likely to propose marriage to an honest but impecunious young woman.”

“One never knows,” the Marquis grumbled. “This is the land of chance, and in case of trouble you have always me to protect you.”

Madelon preserved a tactful silence and the luncheon drew on to its close. After he had paid the bill, Mr. Billingham produced a five-hundred-franc note.

“What about dining with me to-night?” he enquired.

“Two good meals in one day!” the girl exclaimed blissfully.

“We shall be charmed,” the Marquis assented, with a courteous wave of the hand.

“I have only one evening dress,” the girl observed thoughtfully.

“One will be all you need,” was her prospective host’s cheerful rejoinder. “I’ll get a corner table in the Sporting Club. And if I can see my way to letting you in on this little job of mine I’ll tell you about it. In the meantime if five hundred francs——”

“As a loan, my dear sir—a loan!” the Marquis interrupted, stretching out his hand eagerly.

“Precisely,” Mr. Billingham agreed. “Three for you, sir, and two for the young lady.”

The Marquis clutched his three without hesitation; Madelon made no movement.

“I do not think that we ought to take this money until we are sure that there is something we can do to earn it,” she said, looking at Mr. Billingham with doubt in her beautiful eyes.

“It is for—how you say it?—a lien upon our services,” her uncle declared, thrusting the notes deep down into his pocket. “We are now at Mr. Billingham’s commands. You look at the affair in that light, I am sure, my dear sir.”

Mr. Billingham lit a cigar and smiled.

“I guess that’s the idea, sir,” he acquiesced. “Don’t let me keep you. I see you are kind of fidgety to be off.”

The Marquis rose to his feet; Madelon laid her hand upon his arm.

“Not to the Rooms, just yet,” she begged.

“My dear,” he replied tolerantly, “have no fear. I shall play carefully; start with the little gold pieces, force my luck as I win. Later on I will show you something!” . . .

“Meanwhile,” Mr. Billingham reminded them as he took leave of his guests, “at eight-thirty at the Sporting Club.”

Perhaps because of the smallness of the room and the absence of any orchestral music, the babel of conversation at the Sporting Club was that night almost deafening. Under its cover Mr. Samuel T. Billingham took his two guests into his confidence.

“It ain’t worth while,” he began, leaning forward so that the three heads nearly touched, “to try and put you wise to all the details, but, as a business proposition, this is how the matter stands. That swab of a fellow, Joseph Gascoigne, whom you saw at luncheon time, has got an option on ten thousand shares in an oil tract out in Arkansas—the ‘Great Divide,’ they call it. He lent ’em some money for a new plant a year ago and insisted on the option in return. The option’s up on Saturday. Last month they struck oil in eleven different places. Luckily the boss of the company was down there and he had all work stopped at once. It’s a big find, though, and if Joe Gascoigne gets to hear of it and exercises the option, it means that he’ll buy ten thousand shares at a hundred dollars

that are certainly worth a thousand dollars and maybe worth twice as much.”

“What happens to the shares if Mr. Gascoigne does not exercise his option?” the girl asked.

Mr. Billingham looked at her with a smile of admiration.

“A cute question,” he admitted. “Those shares are divided equally amongst the five directors—or, rather, they are allowed to buy them at a low price. Now, I’m well in with the boss of this company and he knows I don’t mind a bit of crooked work occasionally. If I, or we, can stop Joe Gascoigne cabling to America before Saturday and taking up his option, there’s fifteen thousand dollars coming to me.”

“Fifteen thousand dollars!” the girl murmured.

The Marquis rolled his eyes in silent ecstasy.

“An affair of two hundred thousand francs!” he gasped.

“What makes me look for a trifle of help in the matter,” Mr. Billingham continued, “is that Joe is kind of wise to my being in with the crowd, and if he sees too much of me he’ll be suspicious.”

“You have some sort of a plan?” Madelon demanded abruptly.

“I’d like his code,” Mr. Billingham confided. “It’s the simplest affair—two typewritten pages inside blue cardboard covers with just paper-fasteners through. There

ain't more than twenty or thirty sentences there, and the only other man who has a copy is his partner in New York. I know he means to sit tight until the last moment, and I know he's moving heaven and earth to discover whether there's any truth in the rumours of a gush, or whether it's a rig to make him buy the shares. He's getting cables most days, and he won't send his off until Friday. I had a man on the boat," Mr. Billingham went on reflectively, "who could have had the code in a minute, but Joe was too artful for him. He handed it over to the purser with his valuables directly he boarded the steamer. In Paris he changed his hotel, so we didn't get a show there. That didn't worry me any, though, for I knew he was coming here. He's in room number 246, Hôtel de Paris, and he uses the code book every day. What I want is to get hold of the book for an hour without his knowing, and then replace it."

"You don't want the book destroyed, then?" Madelon enquired.

"Not on your life," was the prompt response. "Joe would tumble to it right away that there was something doing, and he'd cable out directly for the shares."

"It is a deeficult matter," the Marquis mused.

The girl said nothing. She was looking down at her plate with a thoughtful smile upon her lips. Mr. Billingham watched her. He had noticed that smile once before during the last few minutes.

"You have an idea, mademoiselle?" he ventured.

She nodded.

“This morning,” she confided, “I went to a bureau here to try to find a post as lady’s companion or secretary. There was nothing of the sort to be had. The only vacancies were for chamber-maids at the Hôtel de Paris.”

The Marquis burst into excited and fluent French. Madelon stopped him with a superb little gesture.

“You have perhaps made a fortune this afternoon with the money lent you by monsieur?” she demanded.

Her uncle’s excitement subsided. He sighed mournfully.

“I chose the wrong tables,” he confessed. “My numbers were everywhere all around me, save at the table where I played.”

“That means,” the girl pointed out, “that you have lost everything. We have no money, we cannot pay monsieur what he has advanced us. I find that situation more humiliating than to figure as a chamber-maid for a week at the Hôtel de Paris.”

“It’s an idea,” Mr. Billingham admitted, “but the Hôtel is a big place. How do you know, supposing they take you on, that you will be anywhere near Joe Gascoigne’s rooms?”

“I have spoken several times to the housekeeper,” Madelon explained. “I may be able to arrange it. It seems to me worth trying. I can think of nothing else.”

“To-day is Monday,” Mr. Billingham reflected. “We have until Friday at least. Joe has promised to cable on Friday. He’ll wait until then for the latest information. What I’d like to see you do, mademoiselle, is to go back to your rooms, change that very becoming frock, put on your old clothes, and try and land the job at the Hôtel de Paris. There’s no sense in wasting time.”

“Supposing I get the book, what do I do with it?” Madelon enquired.

“You will bring it right to me in room number 114 of the same hotel,” Mr. Billingham replied. “You will let me have it for about half an hour. Then you’ll fetch it away again and try to leave it where you found it.”

The Marquis sighed.

“I much regret the fact,” he said, “that my niece is subjecting herself to indignity and perhaps trouble in this affair. I wish very much that it were possible for me to take a more active share in the business.”

“You may do your bit yet,” Mr. Billingham promised him, dryly. “Now, say, how much have you left of that five hundred francs?”

“Not a centime,” was the dismal reply. “My niece, however \_\_\_\_\_”

“I have a hundred francs,” the young lady interrupted, “and I am sorry, uncle, but I mean to keep it. I cannot go to this place penniless.”

“Of course not,” Mr. Billingham agreed, drawing out his pocket-book and extracting from it a five-hundred-franc note. “You can have that for your evening’s amusement, Marquis, on account of what may be coming to you when we succeed. When you have lost that, however, nothing doing! Remember that!”

The Marquis’ smile was one of superb confidence. The note was already buttoned up in his pocket.

“I shall win!” he declared.

Mr. Joseph Gascoigne, although not in the strict sense of the word a susceptible man, was not wholly insensible to feminine attractions. Seated at his desk with a pile of cable forms before him and an open manuscript code book on his left-hand side, he heard the soft ingress of his very attractive-looking chamber-maid into the bathroom. He laid down his pen and listened. It was she beyond a doubt. It was an occasion to progress a little in the flirtation which he had already essayed. He crossed the room.

“Hullo! Late this morning, aren’t you?” he remarked, looking into the bathroom.

Madelon glanced at him from behind a barricade of towels.

“There is so much to do,” she complained. “One fatigues oneself here terribly.”

Mr. Gascoigne smiled palely. It was an opening.

“The work is too hard for you,” he declared. “How would you like to leave it and let me find you something easier?”

“Ah, monsieur!” she sighed.

He advanced a little nearer.

“I’ve had my eye on you all this week,” he confided. “You’re too good for this job. Give ’em notice. Leave right away. Say where you live and I’ll come round this afternoon, and I bet you we fix up something a good deal better than this.”

Madelon was half-distressed, half-overcome by some sort of emotion. Mr. Gascoigne smiled and drew out his pocket-book.

“Say, do you know what this is?” he asked. “Guess you don’t come across many of them. It’s a mille note! Put it in your pocket, drop those towels, give me a kiss, and go and tell the housekeeper you’ve found a better job.”

Madelon gazed at the mille note ecstatically.

“But monsieur is generous!” she exclaimed.

Monsieur’s telephone-bell rang. He turned away with annoyance.

“Wait one second,” he begged. “I’ll be right back. . . . Well, what’s the matter?” he demanded down the telephone.

It was the hotel clerk who spoke. A gentleman was below begging that Mr. Gascoigne would spare him five minutes on a matter of urgent importance. The gentleman declined to mount. He would only say that his business had some connection with America.

“I’ll be right down,” Mr. Gascoigne announced, and hastened back to where Madelon was still engaged with the towels.

“Say, you’re not in a hurry, are you?” he enquired.

“I do what you tell me,” she assured him, clutching the mille note tightly in her fingers and smiling at him bewitchingly. “I go home now—15, Avenue de Mimosas. I wait until you come.”

Mr. Gascoigne hesitated. Madelon was looking very attractive, but the door was open and the visit of the gentleman downstairs intrigued him. He patted her on the shoulder.

“I’ll be round directly after lunch,” he promised. “We’ll fix up something right away. . . .”

In the hall the hotel clerk directed his attention to the Marquis, who, with sundry of the slightly shabby details of his toilet now amended, presented an impressive appearance. His manner, however, as he stepped forward to accost Mr. Gascoigne, was a little furtive. He had the air of not being entirely at his ease.

“Mr. Gascoigne, I believe,” he murmured.

“That’s my name,” was the somewhat surprised admission.  
“What can I do for you?”

“I am the Marquis de Félan,” the visitor announced. “I desire a few minutes’ conversation with you—not here, if possible. Will you step across with me to the Café de Paris?”

“But I don’t know you,” Mr. Gascoigne objected. “What business can you have with me?”

“Business of little importance to myself, perhaps,” was the guarded reply, “but of the utmost importance to you. I can put you in possession of information with regard to some business which you propose to transact to-day or to-morrow—very important information.”

A light began to break in upon Mr. Gascoigne.

“Say, didn’t I see you lunching with that fellow Billingham?” he demanded.

“You did,” the Marquis acknowledged. “It is in connection with something which transpired at that luncheon——”

“I’ll come right along with you,” Mr. Gascoigne interrupted. “I’ve got a hat in the cloak-room here. One moment! . . .”

The two men left the place together, the Marquis still with the air of one desiring to escape observation. He glanced to the right and to the left in constant disquietude. At the Café de Paris he led the way to a corner of the bar. Then he sat down with an air of relief.

“Now let’s get to business,” Mr. Gascoigne begged.

The Marquis glanced towards the bar-tender. His companion accepted the hint and ordered refreshments.

“My business,” the Marquis commenced, “is that I have been insulted by a person who is, I believe, a fellow-countryman of yours.”

“Samuel Billingham?” Mr. Gascoigne muttered.

“That is his name,” the Marquis admitted. “You will understand, sir, that I am not a man of wealth, that I am indeed a very poor man. Under circumstances which I need not detail, I invited Mr. Billingham to oblige me with a small loan—no more than ten mille. It is there that he insults me.”

“Wouldn’t part, eh?” Mr. Gascoigne queried.

“On the contrary,” the Marquis rejoined, “he offered to increase the amount, but on a condition so loathsome that to mention it gives me pain. He wished me to join in a plot to deceive you concerning the value of some shares in Arkansas.”

“The devil he did!” the other exclaimed. “Say, this is interesting!”

“To me it was a situation most humiliating,” the Marquis declared. “Tears were in my eyes as I listened to his infamous proposition. I made no promise. I left him. He confided in me the value of those shares and all about them. I say nothing. I make him no promise. He tempted me with the

money. It is a terrible thing, Mr. Gascoigne, to be poor. Then I asked myself what an honourable man would do. I decided to come to you.”

“How much did you say that loan was to be?” Mr. Gascoigne enquired.

“Ten mille—a paltry ten mille,” the Marquis groaned.

Mr. Gascoigne was not a man who loved parting with money, but there were times when he was prompt in action. He opened his pocket-book, counted out ten mille, and folded them up.

“Look here, Marquis,” he said, “I’ll be on the square with you. Tell me just what Samuel Billingham said about those shares and you can accept the loan from me instead of from him—accept it, too, with nothing on your conscience.”

The Marquis finished a cocktail and made signs towards the bar.

“I will disclose the situation to you,” he promised. “It gives me pain, but it is just retribution. One month ago, oil—how you say that? gushed—from eleven wells on this property. The chairman of the company was there. He ordered everything concealed. No one was to work, the secret was to be kept until after Monday. I know why—Mr. Billingham told me why. It is because you have the right to buy most of these shares at a low price.”

Joseph Gascoigne leaned back in his chair. He thrust both hands into his trousers pockets, turned over his keys, and

chuckled. He remained chuckling until the waiter directed his attention to the cocktails which he was serving.

“Say, this is great!” he declared, as he banished the man with a twenty-franc note. “I don’t mind telling you, Marquis, that I couldn’t get any definite information, but I had a sort of a feeling there was something doing down there. So old Samuel was going to do me out of my little deal, eh? Do you know what I shall do, Marquis?”

The latter shook his head politely.

“I shall go right back to my sitting-room,” Mr. Gascoigne continued, “and send that cable straight away. I shall take the whole of the ten thousand shares. I’ll risk your information being O.K. I believe in it anyway. Stick that ten mille in your pocket-book, Marquis, and if this comes off there will be another ten mille on the top of it, and you can pay me in the year two thousand.”

The Marquis buttoned up the money; his expression was one of chastened content.

“It will remain for long on my conscience,” he confided, “but I have felt it right to adopt this course. I regret it—I regret the disappointment to Mr. Billingham very much. Still, he should have known better than to have made suggestions to me of so infamous a nature.”

Mr. Gascoigne sipped his second cocktail—an indulgence which he seldom permitted himself—and the world seemed a very pleasant place to him. He leaned still further back in his

chair and listened to the music, and he thought of that other very pleasing little adventure soon to be prosecuted. It was quite some time before he and the Marquis parted; the Marquis on his way to the Casino, Mr. Gascoigne to his sitting-room. Arrived there, he found everything as he had left it, but there was a little note addressed to him. He tore it open.

*“Would monsieur kindly come to 15, Avenue de Mimosas, on Monday—not before. My aunt is there. She leaves midday Monday and I shall be alone.*

*“Thanking monsieur for his generosity and anticipating,*

“MADELON.”

Mr. Gascoigne’s first impulse of disappointment hastily passed. After all, it was not long to wait. He drew the code book towards him, ran his finger down the first page, and selected a phrase.

*“HUNGERING. . . . Have decided to avail myself of option in Great Divide shares. Secure the whole ten thousand on my account.”*

Mr. Gascoigne smiled. He wrote the word “Hungering” upon the cable form and took it himself to the office.

“What a dinner!” exclaimed François, the chief *maître d’hôtel* at the restaurant of the Sporting Club.

“What a prince!” murmured his assistant, glancing at the hundred-franc note in his hand.

There was a great cluster of red roses in the centre of the table; a magnum of Cliquot in an ice-pail by its side; an amazing menu on each of the three plates. Behind the screen an emissary from the bar waited with a cocktail shaker in his hand, ready to rush out at the psychological moment. There was caviar in ice, *langouste* from the Mediterranean, pheasants which had known no cold storage, a *vol au vent* of which the *chef* had spoken with tears in his eyes.

Nevertheless, the Marquis and Madelon entered the room a little anxiously. One glance, however, at their host’s face and all was well. Mr. Samuel T. Billingham was very happy, and when he was happy he showed it.

“Mademoiselle, no guest so charming has ever graced my table,” he murmured, as he bent over her hand. “If dresses like this are to be bought ready to wear in Monte Carlo it is indeed an amazing place. Marquis, success! The time has passed. I have my cable. To the surprise of many people in New York, Mr. Joseph Gascoigne cabled his decision not to exercise his option on those ten thousand shares.”

“You relieve my mind greatly,” the Marquis confessed. “I was afraid of some slip at the last moment.”

They took their places. The details of the repast unfolded themselves. The Marquis and his niece exchanged ecstatic glances. Madelon, also, in her way—like most well-brought-up young women—approved of good food and the best wine.

“It is a feast of celebration, this,” Mr. Billingham declared, scarcely able to take his eyes off his beautiful guest. “We have achieved a veritable triumph. We have perpetrated a swindle for which the law cannot touch us. We have robbed a miserable, mean, miserly old skunk of what I think in the end may turn out to be the best part of a million dollars. Let us see how we stand.”

The Marquis’ fingers shook as he lit a cigarette and sipped his wine.

“Your *douceurs*, up to the present,” this prince of adventurers continued, “are insignificant. The few francs I have advanced we will forget.”

“There was my tip as chamber-maid,” Madelon murmured. “He gave me a mille note.”

“A stingy business!” was her host’s criticism. “We take no account of that either.”

“I did a little better,” the Marquis confessed. “I got ten mille for betraying your secret and informing him of the worth of his option.”

Mr. Billingham waved his hand.

“You introduced a note of humour into the situation, Marquis,” he declared. “It was a brain-wave, that! That ten mille, also, we ignore. You are welcome to it. The *douceur* which I receive is fifteen thousand dollars. I myself will retain five thousand, there will be five thousand for you, mademoiselle, and five thousand for you, Marquis.”

“It is princely!” Madelon gasped.

“It is seventy-five thousand francs,” the Marquis faltered.

“It is some money,” Mr. Billingham admitted, “but I tell you right here that without mademoiselle I might have found great difficulty in getting hold of the code. Of course, all that I did was to alter the terms. You, Marquis, kept Mr. Gascoigne engaged at the Café de Paris whilst I worked hard with my typewriter. I can say no more than that I consider myself highly fortunate to have come across two assistants of such intelligence and,” Mr. Billingham concluded, with a sigh, “such charm.”

“You are what we used to call in England ‘a great dear,’” Madelon whispered. “I hope before long you will find something else for us to do.”

“Sure,” Mr. Billingham assented fervently. “Five thousand dollars is a pretty good sum, but it don’t carry a man very far in Monte Carlo, and apart from the money there’s the adventure. I don’t look the part, but I guess I was born to be a pirate. I’m all for taking chances, for looking out for some skunk or another who’s got more of the stuff than is good for

him. I guess something else ought to turn up before very long.”

“And meanwhile,” the Marquis suggested, watching the refilling of his glass, “I think that we should drink a toast to our very dear friend who must now be in great distress of mind.”

“Poor old Joe!” Mr. Billingham murmured, as he raised his glass.

The first glimmering of uneasiness came to Mr. Joseph Gascoigne when he demanded a *petite voiture* and asked to be driven to 15, Avenue de Mimosas. The driver looked blank, and appealed to the concierge, who shook his head.

“*Je ne le connais pas,*” the driver declared.

“*Ni moi non plus,*” the concierge echoed.

“What do you mean? What’s the trouble?” Mr. Gascoigne demanded.

“There is no such street, sir,” the concierge announced. “I have lived in Monte Carlo for many years and I can assure you that there is no such place as the Avenue de Mimosas.”

Mr. Gascoigne hesitated for a moment, bestowed an inadequate *pourboire* upon the coachman, and stepped back into the hotel. Was it possible that the girl was fooling him—had taken his mille and gone off? He ascended to his room and made cautious enquiries of the valet. Yes, the young

woman had left unexpectedly. She had made no complaint but simply stated that she could not continue the work. As for her address, she had given none. The valet was quite sure that there was no such street as the Avenue de Mimosas in Monte Carlo. . . .

Mr. Gascoigne opened a cable, brought in at that moment, with eager fingers. As he read it his face grew first bewildered, then white and evil.

*“Am astonished that you have decided not to exercise option but have acted according to your instructions. Venture assure you that you have made great mistake.”*

Mr. Gascoigne almost snatched at his manuscript code book, and tore open the pages. There it was, without a doubt:

*“HUNGERING. . . . Have decided to avail myself of option in Great Divide shares. Secure the whole ten thousand on my account.”*

He sat down at once and wrote a cable:

*“What the hell do you mean? Cabled HUNGERING. Word for word translation, ‘Have decided to avail myself of option in Great Divide shares. Secure the whole ten thousand on my account.’ Reply.”*

It was about twelve o'clock next morning when the reply came. It was given to him just as he was leaving the Hôtel de Paris for a restless stroll along the Terrace. He tore it open and read:

*“Exact translation HUNGERING, attested here by whole office. ‘Have decided not to exercise option on shares in Great Divide. Please inform Company.’”*

Mr. Gascoigne clutched the cablegram in his fingers. He looked across the Square with vacant eyes. Such a mistake in transcription seemed incredible. And then there turned the corner Mr. Samuel T. Billingham, resplendent in a suit of light grey, with a carnation in his button-hole, and a cigar in his mouth. On one side walked the Marquis, looking very spruce and smiling, and on the other, very becomingly dressed, and not in the least like a chamber-maid, was Madelon. Suddenly something in one of her graceful movements, or perhaps the ripple of her laughter, was startlingly reminiscent of Mr. Gascoigne's disappointed hopes. A hideous clear-sightedness seized him. He remembered the manuscript code book open upon his table, his absence for the best part of an hour with the Marquis, some slight surprise at the freshness of the type the next time he had consulted the code book, and finally Mr. Samuel T. Billingham's connection with the Great Divide Oil Company and his reputation. They passed him; Mr. Billingham with a little wave of the hand and a solemn wink, Madelon with a frank laugh into his face, and the Marquis with a patronising nod. He looked after them and he shook his fist. He was cold

with fury, but with a mighty effort at self-restraint he remained silent.

For, although it was very certain he had been robbed, there was really nothing he could do!

### 33: THE NUMBERS OF DEATH

When the mists roll down from La Turbie and the grey clouds hug the sides of the mountains, Monte Carlo is very far from being itself. The red-coated members of the orchestra at the Café de Paris move inside the building, the waiters stand like wraiths amidst a deserted wilderness of tables. Even a winner leaving the Casino—most easily recognisable of all human beings—forbears to whistle as he descends the steps. But when the sun shines down from a cloudless sky of perfect blue, and the women have trooped out like butterflies to drink apéritifs under the umbrella-sheltered tables, and the orchestra is playing an Italian love song, and there is a lively murmur of conversation and the chink of ice against the glass, all is well with life, and Monte Carlo is a very different place.

Mr. Samuel T. Billingham, with Madelon de Félan for his companion and a pleasantly clouded wineglass on the table by his side, submitted cheerfully to the relaxing influence of his surroundings. He even viewed the approach of the Marquis, Madelon's uncle, with toleration, if not without some apprehension.

“I can't say that I like that fixed smile on your uncle's face,” he remarked.

She watched her troublesome relation critically, and sighed.

“Jaunty, too,” she murmured—“always a bad sign.”

The Marquis came up with a wave of his hat. Mr. Billingham made signs to a waiter.

“Just one cocktail, perhaps,” the new-comer conceded, “although it is a little early for me. . . . I foolishly came out this morning with almost empty pockets. Have you such a thing as a mille, Madelon?”

She laughed scornfully.

“Am I the sort of girl,” she asked, “who goes about with milles in her pocket? I have no money at all with me.”

“Perhaps Mr. Billingham,” the Marquis proposed tentatively.

Mr. Billingham considered the matter.

“How much have you lost this morning?” he enquired.

The Marquis coughed.

“Very little,” he declared, straightening his tie. “I brought very little with me. My numbers are turning up, though. I have fixed upon a table where my luck seems to have definitely established itself.”

Mr. Billingham withdrew a five-hundred-franc note from his pocket-book and handed it to the Marquis, who departed

hastily, after gulping down his refreshment.

“Seems to me that game’s got quite a hold upon your uncle,” his benefactor observed thoughtfully.

“It is the one curse of the place for us,” Madelon assented, with a sigh. “It keeps us always poor. If he cannot go to the Casino he is miserable—like a child in trouble or disgrace. If he goes, he loses. It is always the same. If we had not met you a month ago I cannot imagine what would have become of us.”

It was not often that Mr. Billingham’s attention wandered when Madelon was speaking, but at this moment he certainly had a lapse. His eyes were fixed upon an approaching figure—a man, tall and thin, with a long, hatchet-shaped face, a terrible mouth, and deep-set eyes. He was dressed with unusual sombreness, in clothes of a transatlantic cut, surmounted by a black Homburg, and he walked towards the outskirts of the scattered company, looking neither to the right nor to the left. Mr. Billingham half-rose to his feet.

“Hullo, Ned!” he exclaimed in welcoming fashion.

The behaviour of this presumed acquaintance of his was, to say the least of it, singular. He scarcely even glanced at Mr. Billingham, whose hand was already outstretched, and passed on, ignoring his greeting. His right hand was in his jacket pocket, and Mr. Billingham, who had formed the habit of quick observation, saw something menacing in the fact.

“Who is your friend who doesn’t know you?” Madelon enquired.

Mr. Billingham, recovered from his first surprise, was deeply interested.

“That’s Ned Gunby, the biggest man they’ve got in the New York police,” he confided. “I’ve never known him abroad before. I’d like some to know who he’s after!”

“I should be sorry to be that person,” Madelon confessed, with a little shiver. “I think he is an awful man.”

“Ned hands out the goods all right,” Mr. Billingham affirmed. “They say that from the start he has arrested more dangerous criminals than any man in the police force.”

“He seems to be very much in earnest about something just now,” Madelon observed.

They both watched his progress with riveted attention, whilst he threaded his way through the maze of tables. At the furthest table, close to a shed in which was displayed an automobile for which lottery tickets were being sold, a man was seated alone, leaning back in his chair and with his face half concealed by a newspaper which he was reading. He showed no signs of being aware of the detective’s approach, and even Mr. Billingham failed to catch that surreptitious movement of the paper and stealthy glance. What followed was a matter of seconds. The detective, with his hand half-withdrawn from his jacket pocket, had reached his destination.

“Jim Robin,” he said, in a harsh, unpleasant voice, “throw ’em up! Quick as hell! I want you!”

The answer was a tiny flash of fire, a sharp report and an empty seat. Ned Gunby, for once in his life late in the draw, spun round like a teetotum and collapsed against the table. For a single second conversation all around was entirely suspended. There was a tense stillness, with only the music as a background. Then there was a rush from all quarters. A gendarme from across the road was actually betrayed into running. A few women screamed. Every one asked breathlessly what had happened. Mr. Billingham shook his head as he leaned over the body of his acquaintance.

“He’s sure got his,” he decided. . . .

The authorities at Monte Carlo are adepts at wiping from the face of the earth all traces of tragical events. In a few moments the body of the wounded man was whisked away in a closed motor-car. A functionary in plain clothes, who seemed to have arrived by magic, patiently interviewed the few spectators, with indifferent results. No one appeared to have seen the fugitive distinctly. He had, without a doubt, escaped by passing behind the shed where the car was exhibited and mingling with the crowd of people entering the Casino, but, although several had seen him disappear, there was not a single credible item of information as to his later movements. The hand of justice was temporarily, at any rate, baulked.

Late that afternoon, Mr. Billingham, in response to an urgent message, was driven to the little whitewashed hospital on the slopes of the hill and listened to the last words of a dying man. The bullet had found its way into the detective's lungs and speech was difficult. Nevertheless, he said what he had to say.

“Reckon I'm too old for the job, Mr. Billingham,” he confessed, “but I'll hand it to him that it was the quickest draw I ever saw.”

“It was that, Ned,” was his visitor's sympathetic assent. “You don't want to talk too much. Tell me who he was, what you wanted him for, and what I can do for you.”

“That was James Robin, who murdered Hammon, the banker, last year—got him fixed on that Bundell poisoning case, too,” the detective announced. “I've got all the papers on the table there—the extradition warrant, and there's this,” the suffering man added, lifting his badge from under his pillow and passing it across. “You've puzzled me more than once, Billingham, but if you're a crook, you're a straight one. Take this on for me. James Robin ain't got no right to live. He's a white-livered skunk. Gave his own pals away in the Bennett case, or he'd have been sent to the penitentiary then.”

“I guess that's so,” the other acquiesced. “I remember the whole affair. Anything you know likely to help about his movements here?”

“He’s been going by the name of Braund—James Braund,” the detective confided. “There’s a woman with him—picked her up on this side, I reckon. They had rooms at the Boston Hotel, up at the back. The police here are watching it, but I’ve told them you’re in the force and will take over. Shake hands, Billingham. Glad to have an American round, anyway.”

The two men shook hands solemnly, and the nurse, who saw the things which Ned Gunby felt, hurried up. Mr. Billingham stepped back into the world of sunshine and flowers and music, with a mist before his eyes. Death in such surroundings was so unrealisable. There was suddenly a chill in the air and a note of discord in the music, which seemed to have become blatant. Mr. Billingham entered upon his task with a heavy heart.

With Madelon’s help as interpreter, Mr. Billingham had several long conversations with the local functionaries, and was enabled to make certain arrangements towards the prosecution of his mission. He spent that night seated in an easy-chair in the bedroom which had been allotted at the Boston Hotel to Monsieur and Madame Braund, and which had remained unoccupied since the time of the tragedy. At three o’clock, however, there was the sound of feminine footsteps outside and the turning of a key in the door. Mr. Billingham switched on the lights, and the woman who had entered screamed.

“Don’t disturb yourself, madame,” he begged. “I’ve taken over Ned Gunby’s job. Where’s your husband?”

The woman, after a moment's hesitation, slipped off her cloak, seated herself in an easy-chair, and lit a cigarette. She was a person of somewhat flamboyant type, with hair of an almost startling shade of red, and eyes unnaturally darkened.

“Who are you, anyway?” she demanded.

Mr. Billingham disclosed his badge.

“I'm out to get Braund,” he declared, “and I'm going to have him.”

She shrugged her shoulders, crossed her legs, and leaned a little further back, with her hands clasped behind her head.

“Seems to me you're looking for trouble,” she remarked.  
“What do you know about Braund?”

“Your husband,” Mr. Billingham observed.

She laughed shrilly.

“Not much,” she scoffed. “If you want to know the truth, I picked him up at the Carlton three weeks ago.”

Mr. Billingham was silent for several moments. He took out his cigar-case.

“Guess I'll smoke, too,” he observed. “Anything to drink up here?”

The woman went to a chiffoier and produced a bottle of brandy, a bottle of whisky and some soda water. She helped herself liberally to brandy, and Mr. Billingham mixed himself a whisky and soda.

“So you ain’t his wife?” he said at last.

“Thank the Lord I’m not,” she answered. “I shouldn’t care to be, in this mix-up. I’ve come here to get my things, and I’m going to move into a little flat round the corner.”

“Where is Braund?” Mr. Billingham asked abruptly.

The woman laughed.

“How should I know?” she retorted. “And if I did know, can you see me telling you?”

“You might avoid a heap of trouble that way,” was the suggestive rejoinder.

The lady smiled.

“Look here,” she said, “I’m no chicken, Mr. Billingham—or whatever your name is. There’s nothing wrong with me, except that I took up with a man who turned out to be a criminal. That don’t make me one. There’s nothing coming to me from you or any one else.”

“What sort of a chap is he, this Braund?” Mr. Billingham enquired.

The woman hesitated for a moment. Her tone was a little more serious.

“A devil!” she answered. “Hard as they make ’em!”

“Treat you well?”

“No better than he ought to,” was the somewhat indifferent reply. “I shouldn’t call him a spender.”

Mr. Billingham sipped his whisky and soda.

“I want Braund,” he confided. “I want him badly.”

“How’s the detective he shot?” the woman demanded.

“Dead,” Mr. Billingham told her solemnly.

The woman was a little shocked.

“I suppose it had to be one of them,” she mused. “They tell me that if my friend had been arrested it would have been the chair for him.”

“It certainly would have been, and it will be,” Mr. Billingham assented.

“You think you’ll get him, then?” she asked curiously.

“I do,” was the confident reply, “and you’re going to help me.”

She stared at him.

“Seem to have got me sized up,” she remarked. “Do you think that I’d give him away if I knew where he was?”

“You’re not a fool,” her companion argued. “You’re a woman of the world. Braund’s no more use to you. You’re through with him all right. Sooner or later we shall get him. Why not have your bit out of it?”

The woman shivered. It seemed as though Mr. Billingham was being wilfully callous.

“You must think I’m as cold-blooded as Ned Gunby himself,” she muttered, throwing away her cigarette.

“I sized you up as having some sense,” Mr. Billingham answered slowly. “This man ain’t been anything special to you, and you can take it from me he’s a real out and out, downright bad un’. He’d throw you or any other woman on the dirt-heap if it helped him any. He’s not going to worry any more about you. All he’s thinking of is his own skin. As for you, the thing’s come your way. You haven’t been out to look for it. Why not put a matter of five thousand dollars in your pocket?”

The woman sat for a moment transfixed. Mr. Billingham, watching her closely, found it difficult to follow her train of thought. Presently she sat up a little in her chair, helped herself to another cigarette, and drank her brandy slowly and deliberately.

“I’ve never done any one a dirty trick like that,” she said.

There was a gleam in Mr. Billingham's eyes. She knew, then!

"It isn't a very dirty trick," he protested. "James Braund in Monte Carlo is like a rat in a pit. He can't get out. We shall have him all right, but the sooner the better. There's ten thousand dollars reward for him. I'm offering you half."

"Cash?" she demanded.

"Cash," he assented, tapping his pocket-book.

She had the air of a woman tortured by ugly thoughts. Presently she helped herself to more brandy.

"It doesn't matter what you say," she declared. "It's a dirty piece of work."

"Life here," Mr. Billingham reminded her, "is expensive for a woman like you who needs jewellery and swell clothes and that sort of outfit. Bit anxious sometimes, eh? Why not make yourself sure for a time? Five thousand dollars at to-day's exchange is a lot of money."

She sat for a moment looking at her over-manicured fingers.

"What is it you want me to do?" she enquired, in a voice to which she seemed afraid to listen.

"You know where Braund is," Mr. Billingham said. "Help me to put the irons on him."

"You are sure he'll go to the chair?" she asked with a queer little quiver in her voice.

“He’ll go there anyway,” was the confident reply.

“The only question is whether you make five thousand dollars out of it or whether you don’t.”

“Five thousand dollars!” she repeated slowly.

She seemed to be thinking about the sum. Presently she picked up a piece of paper, and, with a gold pencil which hung from her reticule, she worked out the amount in francs. There was a covetous gleam in her eyes.

“I’ll do it,” she decided.

“Of course you will,” Mr. Billingham observed, in a tone which was almost matter-of-fact. “You’d be stark, raving mad if you hesitated. . . . Go on!”

She looked at him curiously.

“I’ve heard of you,” she reflected. “Samuel Billingham, isn’t it? You’ve been mixed up in some queer cases, but no one seems to know whether you’re on the straight or the other side of the fence. How’s your nerve?”

Mr. Billingham smiled.

“I guess that’s all right,” he assured her.

“Got your gun handy?”

He tapped his hip-pocket.

“Would you like to take him right now,” she asked—“in a quarter-of-an-hour’s time, that is?”

“Suit me O.K.,” Mr. Billingham acquiesced. “I’ve handcuffs in my pocket and a car on the other side of the Square.”

The woman rose to her feet. She seemed in some subtle sort of way to have changed, to have lost her airy—almost brazen—ease of manner, to be anticipating already grave things. Mr. Billingham watched her and it seemed to him that she was still hesitating.

“Five thousand dollars,” he said reflectively, “at to-day’s rate of exchange, is seventy-five thousand francs.”

She sighed like one who faces the inevitable. Then she glanced at the watch on her wrist.

“Braund,” she confided, her voice lower and thicker, her eyes fixed upon the ground, “has papers or money—perhaps a large sum of money—in this room, which he would not trust me to fetch. I came on to see whether the coast was clear. If I lift that blind at four o’clock and turn on the electric light, he will ascend.”

“They will be waiting for him below,” Mr. Billingham reminded her.

“The front-door is locked,” she told him, “and we all have latch-keys. The concierge is not on duty. I have seen to that—I and a hundred francs. At four o’clock he will enter if I turn the lights on and lift the blind, but when you hear his step on the stair, be ready.”

Mr. Billingham nodded.

“What about you?” he asked.

She shivered.

“He is watching now,” she replied. “I dare not try to get away. I shall hide in the corner there, behind the wardrobe. Remember that if you make a mess of this,” she went on anxiously, “it will be my life as well as yours. You know what sort of man James Braund is. You know how he treated Ned Gunby. You get no more mercy from him than from a stone.”

“Nor he from me,” Mr. Billingham assured her grimly.

They compared watches. It was ten minutes to four. The woman helped herself feverishly to more brandy. Mr. Billingham followed suit with another whisky and soda. Then he took out his gun and looked at it, laid a pair of handcuffs on the table, and lit another cigar. The woman watched him and apparently she was satisfied. The fingers which held his match did not once quiver, his face seemed somehow to have hardened and tightened. He had all the air of a man who expects to confront a crisis and is prepared for it. Of the two, the woman was by far the more nervous. Nevertheless, when four o'clock came she turned on the other switches of electric light, touched the spring of the blind and threw open the shutters.

“Good luck!” she muttered—“to both of us!”

The seconds passed, perhaps a minute—then the step upon the stair. The woman crept into her hiding-place. She had dabbed her face plentifully with powder, but little drops of perspiration had broken through on to her forehead, her lips were vivid streaks of scarlet, in her eyes was fear. Mr. Billingham stood with his left hand upon the bed-post, and in his right hand was his gun. The footstep was nearer now. The door was suddenly pushed open and Mr. Billingham's voice rang out, crisp and terse.

“Hands up—right up above your head! Up, I say!”

For a single second the man who stood upon the threshold seemed as though his right hand would dive downward. Then he looked into that tiny black space, saw the lights flash upon the plating of the revolver, and saw behind, Billingham's face. His hands went up.

“Who the hell are you?” he demanded.

“Billingham of New York, and I've taken on Ned Gunby's job,” was the quick reply.

The man with his hands upraised was still a formidable-looking person. He was of little more than medium height, but strongly built, dark, with crisp, black hair, olive complexion and eyes with violet rims underneath, which spoke of sleepless nights. There was about him, somehow or other, an air of fastidiousness, although his linen was crumpled and his boots ill-brushed. All the time it seemed as though his brain were working—his eyes searching the room.

“Where’s Anna?” he enquired.

Mr. Billingham ignored the question. With his left hand he picked up the handcuffs and came a step nearer.

“Lower your hands slowly,” he enjoined, “until they point towards me. Keep your wrists together!”

The man obeyed. He was breathing heavily.

“Stop there,” Mr. Billingham ordered.

He stopped, but his eyes seemed filled with a tortured light. He seemed to be wondering, speculating. Suddenly, with a movement incredibly swift, he was in Mr. Billingham’s grasp, Billingham’s left arm underneath his hands to keep them from that downward dive. A moment later there was a click, and the handcuffs were on. Mr. Billingham coolly produced the gun from the man’s hip-pocket and thrust it into his own.

“That seems all right,” he said. “What did you come back here to look for, Braund?”

“Find out,” was the contemptuous reply.

There was a sob from behind the chiffonier. The man turned his head slowly. The woman crept into sight. Braund only nodded quietly.

“Like all the rest,” he muttered. “You couldn’t be trusted. Do you know, woman, that it is my life you’ve given away—my life for a few dirty dollars.”

“I’m sorry,” she gasped. “You shouldn’t have killed him, James. They’d have got you, anyhow.”

Mr. Billingham, with the situation arranged to his liking, felt completely at his ease. He took out his pocket-book and, from a wonderful pile of bills, counted out seventy-five mille notes. Notwithstanding the tenseness of the moment, the woman could not keep the covetous gleam from her eyes.

“I guess those are yours,” Mr. Billingham said. “You needn’t worry that you’ve done anything dirty, either. He was my man from the start. Come along, James Braund. We’ll put you somewhere until we can arrange to get you across the pond.”

The woman fingered the bills and watched them depart, Mr. Billingham holding his captive by the arm. As they passed through the door, she called out.

“I am sorry, Jim,” she cried. “I’m sorry I did it.”

“You can go to hell!” was the bitter rejoinder. . . .

The two men walked down the narrow stairs and across the darkened hall, Mr. Billingham with his revolver in his hand, and every sense alert. They reached the street, however, in safety, reached the automobile, and drove to the stern-looking police-office down in Monaco, where a little crowd of functionaries was awaiting them. Mr. Billingham remained until the iron door of a very formidable-looking cell was locked upon his captive. Then

he drew a sigh of relief, mingled with some other less comprehensible emotion.

“Well, well!” he exclaimed. “Some evening!”

The trio—Madelon, her uncle, the Marquis, and Mr. Billingham—were seated at their favourite table in front of the Café de Paris. An unusual silence had reigned for some minutes, which was broken at last by Madelon.

“I am dissatisfied with life,” she sighed, sipping her Dubonnet.

Her uncle glanced at her reprovingly.

“My dear Madelon!” he protested. “Surely that is ungrateful to our kind friend who has provided so generously for our entertainment.”

She made a little grimace.

“I have a complaint against him,” she declared. “He provides me with no one to flirt with and he ignores me himself. He has become a hero and he is all the time distrait. I think that his head is turned.”

“Why should I provide you with any one to flirt with?” Mr. Billingham objected. “I guess that’s my privilege.”

“It might have been,” Madelon admitted, “if you had been persistent, if you had shown rather more desire to be in my company, to whisper things in my ear, to look as

though my presence made the difference to you of happiness or misery. But behold, for five minutes this morning after my arrival, you sat and you looked towards the Casino and you said nothing. You might even have held my fingers—I purposely let them stay in your hand. And there are other things.”

Mr. Billingham groaned.

“Go on with it, then,” he begged. “Let me know the full extent of my misdeeds.”

“Your passion for me,” she complained, “has given way to another. You are as bad as my uncle. You spend your time in the Casino. You have become a gambler. When you might be taking me for a little drive to the hills—I love motoring so much that there is no telling how gracious I might be—you stay in that terrible Casino, gambling—not even like a man who seeks the great things, one who deals in maximums in the Cercle Privé or at the Sporting Club, but playing for louis in the ‘kitchen.’ Bah! It is incredible! Why do you do it? I demand an explanation!”

Mr. Billingham’s attention had wandered away. His eyes were fixed upon the little crowd entering the Casino. For once in his life he was almost indifferent to his charming companion.

“I guess I’ll go and play a coup or two before luncheon,” he announced, rising to his feet. “Don’t wait for me if I’m late. Henry will see that you are well served.”

He rose to his feet. Madelon made one last attempt to understand.

“Is it possible,” she demanded, “that you have embarked upon another adventure without our aid?”

“If I do not return for luncheon,” was the evasive reply, “I will tell you everything at dinnertime.”

He crossed the Place—a trifle burly in appearance, but walking with the spring of a young man; erect, self-confident. A commissioner saluted him, the cloak-room attendant recognised him as a generous donor of *pourboires*, the ushers at the door bowed at his coming. He staked a coup or two at the table on the right. Then he turned to the table on the left. Every place was occupied and there was a row of people standing looking on. Mr. Billingham took his place amongst them. This time he staked nothing, however. He stood behind the chair of a slim, elderly man, who wore dark tortoiseshell spectacles and who had just taken a vacant place. By his side sat Anna, the woman who had betrayed her lover.

“*Faites vos jeux, messieurs,*” the croupier invited.

The man in front of Mr. Billingham threw four louis on the table.

“*Sept, quatorze, vingt-huit—vingt-neuf, vingt-neuf en plein,*” he said.

Mr. Billingham glanced meaningfully towards a tall, dark man who had moved stealthily to his side. A quick nod was

exchanged. Then a singular thing happened. Mr. Billingham, whose arms were almost as powerful as the arms of a prizefighter, suddenly gripped both wrists of the man seated in front of him and held them together as though in a vice. The tall, dark man leaned over and touched him on the shoulder.

“In the name of the police, monsieur,” he whispered.

The woman looked round, recognised Mr. Billingham and shrieked. The man turned towards her. His teeth were suddenly parted. He seemed about to rise, making no movement of resistance. The woman thrust her hand into her handbag, her fingers towards his mouth. His teeth closed with a snap. Then he rose calmly to his feet.

“If you have a car or anything,” he said, “you had better get me into it. A person of brains, Mr. Billingham. I congratulate you.”

Mr. Billingham’s grip upon the man’s wrists was never for a moment relaxed. Play had ceased and people were crowding up only to be kept away by two plain-clothes gendarmes who had suddenly made their appearance, and a small army of the Casino functionaries.

“The gentleman is taken ill,” some one announced. “Make way, please.”

The handcuffs clicked upon the man’s wrists, but he only shrugged his shoulders. He commenced his passage towards the door with Mr. Billingham on one side and the man who

had arrested him on the other. His steps, however, became uncertain. He turned and looked back at the woman. She was standing, a terrible figure of misery, a few yards off. He forced a little smile into his face.

“Don’t take her money away, Billingham, even if she fooled you,” he begged. “You’ve come out on top, you see.”

“What’s wrong with you?” his captor demanded suspiciously.

“Cyanide of potassium,” was the grim reply. “Anna had it ready for me in case we didn’t make a get-away. You’ll have to carry me down the steps. What about it, Billingham? If she fooled you, it was life or death for me.”

“That’s all right,” Mr. Billingham promised. “I’ve nothing against her. I guess she can keep what she’s got.”

Madelon and her uncle had finished their *hors d’œuvres* and commenced the grilled chicken when Mr. Billingham joined them. He took the vacant place opposite Madelon and signified his pressing need of some alcoholic refreshment. He was looking very grave and he had lost a good deal of his healthy colour.

“Something has happened!” Madelon exclaimed.

“We have just arrested Braund,” Mr. Billingham confided. “Touch and go it was, too. They were off this afternoon.”

“Arrested Braund?” Madelon repeated incredulously. “Why, you arrested him ten days ago! The papers said they were taking him back to America to-morrow.”

Mr. Billingham was slowly recovering himself. He was still, however, very grave.

“I haven’t let you two in on this,” he explained, “because there was nothing you could do. I had to play, as it were, a lone hand. When I promised Ned Gunby I’d see this thing through, he gave me a little pile of papers about Braund and a note of a few of his weaknesses. He didn’t tell me much about the woman, though, and I honestly believed that she was on the straight when she offered to sell me Braund for half the reward.”

“But the man you arrested at the Boston Hotel——”

“Braund’s brother-in-law,” Mr. Billingham interrupted —“the decoy whilst Braund made a get-away. He didn’t run any particular risk. There were dozens to identify him the moment he was hauled up in New York. I thought it was all right until I had the handcuffs on him. Then I saw that he wasn’t anything like the description of the man I wanted, and besides he put up no sort of a fight. I pretended to be fooled all right, and we’ve kept him in prison. In the meantime we’ve watched Madame. She’s been damned artful, pretended to be playing the restaurant game at the Carlton and those places, but she was continually disappearing. Then I got her dossier. She was Braund’s wife right enough, but wherever he was hiding in Monte Carlo she never went near him. I noticed, though, that she spent a lot of

time at the Casino, and amongst Gunby's papers was a little note that the passion of Braund's life was roulette, and that if anything could bring him out of his hiding it would be to gamble. He played on four numbers only—seven, fourteen, twenty-eight, and twenty-nine. I sort of hung around and waited for some one sitting near Madame who backed those numbers. We very nearly brought it off yesterday morning, but this morning it was a cert. They entered almost at the same time, went to the same table, sat side by side. I gave 'em the office outside and pretty soon—well—seven, fourteen, twenty-eight, and twenty-nine. I got him by the wrists so that he couldn't move whilst they took his gun away—got him from behind.”

The Marquis looked longingly towards the Casino.

“And we missed it!” he murmured.

“I shouldn't have let you be there,” Mr. Billingham assured him. “There's no knowing how those things are going to turn out till they're over. After all, in a way he tricked us.”

“How?” Madelon asked.

“The woman again! A common-looking bit of goods, but Braund was her man and she saw him through it. The moment they realised that he was done she handed him the poison—put it into his mouth herself, in fact. It was all over before they got him into the auto.”

“Horrible!” Madelon exclaimed with a little shudder.

Mr. Billingham ordered his lunch.

“Horrible it is,” he admitted, as he laid down the menu, “but there is just one thing that makes me glad of my morning’s work.”

“One thing?” the Marquis murmured politely.

Mr. Billingham inclined his head towards the hill.

“That little hospital,” he confided. “Poor Ned Gunby with a bullet in his chest, shot on sight for doing his duty. I guess Braund has got what was coming to him.”

Nevertheless the shadow remained—the shadow of tragedy, which never leaves the atmosphere of sudden death. Mr. Billingham called for the wine-list and revised his order.

“I should like our next adventure,” Madelon confided, a few moments later, “to end in a laugh instead of a tragedy.”

Something of the grimness passed from Mr. Billingham’s face. He watched the pouring out of the wine.

“I guess I have an idea of that sort myself,” he agreed.  
“Supposing——”

## 34: MRS. BLOCK CONTRIBUTES

“That horrible woman!” Madelon exclaimed, gripping Mr. Billingham’s arm, as they sat in a retired corner of the Sporting Club bar.

“She is indeed deplorable,” the Marquis agreed, from the other side. “To-day, at one of the tables in the Casino, before the opening of the Cercle Privé, she created a scene. She plastered the board with plaques. She utterly failed to remember. She claimed everything. Her voice—a horrible memory! The croupiers had no choice. They gave in. She took what she wished. When she departed every one was overjoyed.”

“She carries some of the stuff about her,” Mr. Billingham observed judicially. “Fine woman in her day!”

The woman to whom they referred, Mrs. William Block, of Leeds, England, stood looking around for a seat, and finding none, scowled. She was florid, fat, notwithstanding the desperate efforts of a world-famed costumier, and vulgar. She swung in her hand a gold bag, adorned with precious stones. She wore upon her person two pearl necklaces, a pair of large diamond ear-rings, a succession of diamond bracelets, and several glittering hat-pins. Her costume was

white and bulgy. She was a well-known *habitante* of the Hôtel de Paris, whose friends were sycophants and whose acquaintances fugitive, and she was reputed to be the widow of a leather merchant who had made a million pounds in hides.

“She is one of the people,” Madelon confided, “who upset all my ideas of conventional morality. I should like to rob her.”

The Marquis dropped his eyeglass and twirled the corner of his moustache.

“It is an idea,” he admitted.

Mr. Billingham considered the matter.

“If one could hatch out a deal,” he confessed, “I guess this is a case where one wouldn’t need to be too darned particular. That woman don’t deserve to be allowed to go about alive, looking the way she does, and with half-a-million dollars’ worth of jewels missing their opportunity in life.”

Madelon smiled up at him in intriguing fashion.

“Do something about it, Mr. Billingham,” she begged. “You are already in favour with her. Do you not remember giving her your seat yesterday evening?”

“Say, that don’t count for much,” Mr. Billingham protested. “She was leaning over me with a kind of blend of lily of the valley and patchouli scent, pretty well stifling me, brushing my hair the wrong way, pushing her plaques on and shouting out her stakes till I was glad enough to make myself scarce.”

“Nevertheless,” Madelon reminded him in a whisper, “you gave her your place, and she is smiling at you now.”

It was an incontrovertible fact. Madelon rose to her feet with a sudden graceful movement.

“I have an idea that there is a place for me at my favourite table,” she confided. “I go to see.”

Mrs. William Block advanced a few steps and beamed at Mr. Billingham. He rose at once.

“*Vous désirez une chaise, madame?*” he demanded.

“I’ll sit down all right,” the lady replied, dropping heavily into the chair, “but I ain’t French. Waiter, I’ll have a gin fizz.”

“An excellent drink!” Mr. Billingham murmured.

“I like a glass of champagne most times,” the lady confided, “but I’ll have to drink so much for dinner that perhaps I’d better lay off for a while. I’m dining with the Higginsons—Jim Higginson and his wife. You know them, I dare say.”

The Marquis felt himself included in the query. He shook his head.

“I have not the honour,” he murmured.

“Can’t say that I know them,” Mr. Billingham confessed.

“Jim’s father made his money in woollens at Huddersfield,” the lady explained, “and Jim got into that cotton scheme somehow. . . . Why,” she went on, smiling at Mr. Billingham, “you must be the gentleman who gave me his seat yesterday evening.”

“I had that pleasure,” Mr. Billingham admitted.

The Marquis rose stealthily to his feet. He was fond of his friend, he was very fond of his niece, but like all real aristocrats he was in his way a snob. He did not care to sit next Mrs. William Block.

“I wait for you,” he explained, with a wave of his hand. “I have an affair.” . . .

“Jumpy little person, your friend,” Mrs. Block remarked. “Never mind! All the more room for us. Where are you staying, Mr.—Mr.—what is your name?”

Mr. Billingham produced a card.

“My name is Billingham, ma’am,” he said—“Samuel T. Billingham of New York. I was interested in linoleums, but I’ve sold out.”

“Retired, eh?” the lady remarked.

“That’s how you put it over here,” Mr. Billingham conceded cautiously. “I’m not saying that I’m right out of the game yet.”

“My name’s Block,” the lady confided—“Annie Block. My husband was in hides. Nasty dirty things, I always thought, but he made a cool million at it.”

“Pounds?” Mr. Billingham enquired, in an awed tone.

“Pounds sterling,” was the definite reply. “None of your silly dollars!”

“I trust,” Mr. Billingham continued, “that your husband remembered to whose inspiration his success was due?”

“I don’t know what you’re getting at,” Mrs. Block observed, “but if you want to know what he did with his money, I’ll tell you straight, he left it to me. It will cost you one bob at Somerset House to find out that I ain’t a liar, and if you happen to know a word or two of French, just rub it into that flunkey there that a lady doesn’t want to wait for a gin fizz half the evening.”

Mr. Billingham proved equal to the occasion. The gin fizz was produced, and the lady, notwithstanding her colossal inheritance, showed not the slightest objection to her companion paying for it. They conversed for a time with growing intimacy.

“Are you married?” she asked, a little abruptly.

Mr. Billingham scorned the suggestion.

“Put it off till too late, I guess—a great mistake!”

She sighed, and scrutinised him benignly.

“What do you mean by ‘too late’?” she demanded.

“You’re in the prime of life.”

Mr. Billingham shook his head gloomily.

“I am healthy,” he admitted. “I’m only just round the corner of fifty, but I guess I’m still a little particular. The women I care for seem to want something younger.”

“Rubbish!” the lady asserted.

“Take your own case now,” he went on earnestly. “You are a widow, I understand. You are bound to marry again—any one can see that. You wouldn’t care to have anything to do with a man of my age.”

Mrs. William Block laid four chubby fingers and a fat thumb upon his arm. So far as her double chin would allow her, she looked arch.

“You are a funny person!” she declared. “Come on—I dare you! Ask me, now. I might be tempted.”

Mr. Billingham bore the assault stoically.

“If I did make such an idiot of myself,” he observed, “I know very well what would happen, and so do you.”

“I’d have you,” she assured him.

Mr. Billingham contemplated that wonderful array of jewellery with which she was decked, remembered his

pledge to Madelon, heaved a deep sigh, and permitted himself to touch the massive arm which leaned against his.

“What are you doing for luncheon to-morrow?” he asked.

“That depends upon what you want me to do,” was the brilliant reply.

At the end of a week Mr. Billingham had lost half a stone. He escaped one morning from the Hôtel de Paris at an early hour and met his friends, the Marquis de Félan and Madelon his niece, at one of the smaller cafés at the back of the town.

“Some one else,” he complained, “will have to take a hand in this game.”

The Marquis stroked his moustache.

“My turn, I gather,” he observed, “is to come later.”

“What can I do, dear man?” Madelon asked, patting his hand. “I am here. I am anxious to help. I must confess that at first I watched your sufferings with heartfelt sympathy. Lately I am not so sure. You are either getting callous, or you are becoming an admirer of the gargantuan in my sex.”

Mr. Billingham groaned.

“Listen,” he announced; “we approach the end. I am veritably the accepted suitor of Mrs. Annie Block, widow of a defunct dealer in hides. The million is in her own name.”

“It is incredible!” the Marquis declared.

“A million? It is worth the trouble?” Madelon murmured inscrutably.

Mr. Billingham smiled for the first time for days; a smile that spread and extended to the wrinkles around his eyes.

“Well,” he continued, “I guess I’m about through with my part. It is your uncle who takes the floor now.”

The Marquis coughed.

“But supposing the lady should object to this—er—substitution of attentions?”

Mr. Billingham’s smile broadened.

“I should worry,” he murmured. “Play your part as I have played mine, Marquis—and there must be no shirking, mind—and the thing is accomplished. This morning we meet at the Café de Paris and I shall present you. Then I talk to Madelon. The rest—well—some cinch, I can tell you!”

The Marquis was a little uneasy. He was haunted with visions of a magenta dress which the lady had worn on the previous evening.

“I am not sure,” he ventured, “whether my methods may appeal.”

Mr. Billingham struck the little table with his fist.

“See here,” he announced, “it’s a closed pocket-book on this trip if you show the white feather. The game’s as easy as Boston pie. You’ve got to sail right in. I come alone with the finesse later. Madelon!”

She nodded understandingly.

“Uncle,” she warned him, “remember that everything depends upon your playing your part properly. You want to have something to take to the Casino to-morrow, don’t you?”

The Marquis breathed a deep sigh. He seemed to be able to visualise the moment of suspense, the click of the ball falling into its niche, the croupier’s monotonous announcement. He drew himself up.

“I am a man of honour,” he declared. “I shall not fail you. Let us start at once. . . .”

Outside the Café de Paris, seated before the most conspicuous table, and looking larger than ever, they found the lady of whom they were in search. Mr. Billingham marched boldly up.

“Mrs. Block,” he said, “my friend, the Marquis de Félan, has asked me to present him. The Marquis de Félan—Mrs. Block—also Miss de Félan, the Marquis’ niece.”

Mrs. Block was fluttered but gratified. The Marquis rose splendidly to the occasion. He kissed her pudgy fingers with an air which evoked her wondering admiration, and accepting a chair by her side he plunged at once into a

conversation of a more or less intimate nature. He played the host to the little gathering, ordering refreshments and paying for them with an air of great liberality. After a time Mr. Billingham rose tentatively to his feet.

“I guess Miss de Félan and I are going to walk along and see about that table for dinner,” he announced. “We’ll find you here when we come back, or else meet in the Casino.”

Mrs. Block smiled gracefully; the Marquis for a moment felt his heart sink, but he stuck to his guns.

“A very delightful man, Mr. Billingham,” the lady remarked, looking after his departing figure.

The Marquis nodded without enthusiasm.

“Why not?” he replied. “He has in the world all that he desires. He has money, and above all he has a facile disposition. It is a great thing, that! He makes friends easily. He never suffers from loneliness.”

“And do you?” the lady asked softly.

The Marquis sighed. He looked dreamily away towards the hills. He was quite at his best.

“All my life,” he confided, “I have been lonely. I lost my wife when I was young. I was foolish not to remarry. Now, alas! when it is too late, I feel the need of a companion.”

“Why is it too late?” she enquired tenderly.

“The women of to-day,” the Marquis complained, “all prefer young men. Where should I find a woman attractive enough to be agreeable to me who would be willing to marry a man of fifty?”

“Very easily, I should think,” Mrs. Block declared with portentous emphasis. “But of course if you want one of these young fly-away hussies——”

“But I do not,” the Marquis interrupted. “I prefer a woman of—of experience. A woman,” he went on, leaning a little towards her—“may I venture to say—of something like your age—thirty-eight or so.”

It was a moment of ecstasy for Mrs. Block. She was wearing a gown in which she fondly believed that she resembled the mannequin from whom she had bought it. She was sitting alone with a Marquis and quite casually she had been taken for thirty-eight.

“How did you know my age?” she asked, almost archly.

“I am a great diviner of ages,” he replied. “It is very seldom that I make a mistake.”

“Well, then, I think there are very few women of my age, Marquis,” the lady confided, “who would not be glad to try and bring a little sunshine into your life.”

The Marquis sighed once more.

“A beautiful way of putting it!” he murmured. “You cheer me up, dear lady. May I,” he added significantly,

“do myself the honour of calling upon you?”

Mrs. Block was more and more fluttered.

“Come this afternoon,” she invited. “I have tea in my sitting-room at four o’clock. Mr. Billingham sometimes drops in, but this afternoon I shall say that I am engaged.”

“Mr. Billingham is a great friend of yours, is he not?” the Marquis enquired gloomily.

“Nothing special,” was the indifferent reply. “We’re friends in a way, of course, but he’s not quite my fancy. By the by,” she went on, “are you and your niece doing anything to-night?”

“Nothing of any consequence,” the Marquis confessed.

“Come and dine at my hotel—the Hôtel de Paris,” the lady begged eagerly. “Mr. Billingham’s coming, and to tell you the truth, I’d just as soon not dine with him alone. He is very nice, but people do talk so, and when you’ve made up your mind as I have—well, I don’t want to seem to be encouraging him. You *comprenez*?”

“*Parfaitement*,” the Marquis assured her with a little inward chuckle. “About half-past eight, I suppose. Permit me to escort you across the Place. . . .”

The Marquis strolled down the terrace to Ciro’s a little later with the remains of a smile still lurking about his lips. He handed his coat and cane to an attendant and crossed the

room confidently towards the table where Madelon and Mr. Billingham were already seated.

“My friend,” he announced, “you no longer exist. I have achieved a great success. La belle Block is no longer for you. I take tea with her in her *salon* this afternoon. You are to be told that she is engaged. We dine at the Hôtel de Paris to-night—Madelon and I. A million pounds! It is incredible! One might be disposed to take this affair seriously.”

Madelon shook her head.

“Impossible,” she insisted. “You may eat her dinners and rob her if you will of that staggering jewellery, but more would not be possible.”

The Marquis shivered a little as he glanced down the menu.

“You are right,” he assented. “Besides, even if one had the courage, there would be disagreeable people like executors. You might find that there were difficulties about the money and settlements.”

“The man who marries a woman like that,” Mr. Billingham declared firmly, “would deserve what he got, and I guess we’ll leave that out of the question. She’s one of the people in the world, though, the Lord meant to be robbed. She goes about asking for it.”

“The scheme itself is as yet scarcely clear to me,” the Marquis murmured.

“Nor to me,” Mr. Billingham confessed, attacking his *hors d’œuvres* vigorously. “The stuff’s there all right, though, and we’re going to touch it. Make the running as strong as you can this afternoon, my son. We’ll get to work before the week’s out.”

The Marquis played with his eyeglass a little nervously.

“You will not suggest, of course, anything in the nature of—er—direct larceny?”

“Not I,” Mr. Billingham acquiesced. “Jewel lifting’s too difficult, and besides, we ain’t professionals. Something a little more subtle. I haven’t got it quite fixed yet, but I’m not worrying any.”

The Marquis escaped from his afternoon tea entertainment, still triumphant but shattered. He drank a large whisky and soda at the bar of the Sporting Club before he felt sufficiently recovered to make his appearance in the Rooms. By dinnertime, however, he was entirely himself again. He sat at Mrs. Block’s right hand, and endured stoically the pressure of her immense foot. The burden of conversation devolved mainly upon him, for Mr. Billingham was noticeably silent, and, for him, almost morose.

“Jealous!” his hostess whispered to the Marquis as they left the dining-room. “Jealous of you, dear!”

The Marquis felt his fingers lightly pressed and received a languishing glance.

“You have encouraged him,” he rejoined.

“Not more than the others,” she declared, airily and mendaciously peopling her environment with the forms of many suitors. “Men are so difficult nowadays,” she sighed.

“A beautiful woman has always her embarrassments,” the Marquis sympathised. . . .

The evening progressed according to plan. The little party had made their way to the Sporting Club, but Mr. Billingham, becoming more and more silent and depressed, presently withdrew. Madelon followed shortly afterwards and in a little voiture they drove to the Carlton. Mr. Billingham’s depression had vanished as though by magic.

“Say, your uncle is getting away with this fine!” he declared. “It took me a week to get where he’s got in less than a day. He’s got the knack of it.”

Madelon was looking up at the moon. Mr. Billingham was suddenly conscious that the night held a charm which was not altogether pagan. The sky was perfectly clear, the music from the cafés reached them faintly, in the dim light the crowds of moving people were like shadows.

“After all,” she murmured, “it is rather terrible.”

“I don’t quite get you,” her companion confessed.

“Having to live like this,” she explained. “This living on one’s wits. The insecurity of it is horrible. Sometimes it is

amusing, it appeals to one's sense of humour, but it destroys one's dignity. In time we shall all three become really bad."

"Not you," Mr. Billingham rejoined softly.

"Why not me?" she asked, turning abruptly and looking at him. "What do you suppose will be the end of me?"

"I guess you'll marry."

"Who would marry any one like me—who worth marrying?" she demanded, with a little note almost of passion in her tone. "Of course I want to marry—every girl does. I want a home of my own and a man to look after me. What sort of a husband do you think I am likely to find living this kind of a life?"

Mr. Billingham, too, was very serious.

"I guess it's hard on you," he admitted, taking her hand in his.

"It is hard on all of us, I suppose."

"Say, shall we lay off for a bit?" he suggested. "I can make money on the square. There's my old Company. They'd have me back as a director."

She withdrew her fingers and patted his hand.

"You are very foolish," she said. "Of course you can make money. You are clever—but that would not help us. We

could not live upon your charity. And yet, without you we should probably slip back into helplessness.”

Mr. Billingham leaned towards her and coughed. His voice was a little husky.

“Madelon,” he began.

She turned her head.

“Well?”

The carriage pulled up with a jerk outside the Carlton; the commissionaire threw open the door.

“Damn!” Mr. Billingham exclaimed. . . .

At supper-time Madelon became unexpectedly gay. She insisted upon dancing most of the time and resisted any attempt at serious conversation.

“Of course you know that you dance absurdly well,” she told him once. “You must be very fond of it.”

“For a fat man,” Mr. Billingham admitted, as he wiped his forehead, “I fancy I can move some. But dancing with you, Miss Madelon, is pretty easy going. Let’s sit and talk for a bit now.”

She shook her head.

“I could not,” she objected. “To-night I am nervous. If I talk I shall weep. Go and fetch me that dancing

instructor—the dark one. You will have to give him a hundred francs. I like that little side-step he does. You can either rest or try your fortune with the little danseuse.”

Mr. Billingham obeyed orders so far as the dancing instructor was concerned, but made no effort towards securing the companionship of the little danseuse. Instead, he leaned back in his corner and watched. He seemed to be watching all the room, but as a matter of fact his eyes never left Madelon. She was very simply dressed, as usual, in a plain black georgette frock, but there seemed to be some new quality in her face—something a little haunting in her eyes, a dash almost of recklessness in her graceful movements. She danced like a devotee, without a word to her partner. Once her eyes met Mr. Billingham’s and she smiled, but even her smile seemed to possess an indefinable and unrealisable quality. As soon as the dance had finished she thanked her partner briefly and returned abruptly to the table.

“I want to go, please,” she begged. “We will see how uncle is getting on.”

Mr. Billingham paid his bill. They stepped outside and into a voiture. Mr. Billingham’s voice was once more a little husky.

“Madelon,” he began——

She laid her hand for a moment on his.

“You must please not speak to me all the way back,” she insisted. “And don’t mind if I am a little foolish.”

Her head disappeared between her hands. Once he saw her shoulders shiver as though she were sobbing. When they reached the Club, however, she sat up with a little weary smile. There were no signs of tears in her eyes.

“You see, after all I am not a finished adventuress,” she said. “I am just a silly girl, who is liable to these sorts of moods. I think being with this horrible woman has affected me to-night. I hate ugly things and ugly people. If we continue our life of crime I insist upon it that our next victim is not of this type.”

Mrs. Block was, for her, almost nervous when on the following afternoon, in response to an urgent telephone call, she received a visit from Mr. Billingham. Mr. Billingham seemed to have lost entirely that spirit of bonhomie which he generally presented to the world. Even his attire was more sombre than usual. He shook hands without a smile and declined a chair.

“Annie,” he said, using her Christian name boldly, “I have come for an explanation.”

“What sort of an explanation?” she enquired, toying with her rope of pearls.

“I guess you know,” was the stern reply. “We Americans don’t waste words. You know very well you’re engaged to marry me and you’re flirting with my friend. It’s got to stop right now!”

The situation had its embarrassments, but also its delights. Mrs. Block felt a thrill of joy as she once more invited her visitor to seat himself by her side. She had all the sensations of a heroine of some modern romance.

“Samuel,” she said—“or rather, Mr. Billingham, because I am not going to call you Samuel any longer—you will have to be very generous. I wish to break off our engagement. It was never announced, as you know.”

“Because of the Marquis?” he demanded.

Mrs. Block admitted the fact.

“It’s no use wasting words about it,” she went on. “I promised to marry him last night. We’re keeping the engagement secret for a fortnight and then I’m going back to England to arrange my affairs.”

“And what do you expect me to say?” Mr. Billingham asked.

“I expect you to be a dear and—give me up,” she declared.

“I shall do nothing of the sort,” he replied firmly.

“You can’t hold me to that promise,” she insisted. “There’s nothing on paper, anyway. You wouldn’t have me marry you without loving you, Samuel?”

Mr. Billingham flinched but persevered.

“You are engaged to marry me,” he rejoined doggedly. “I may not be an aristocrat like the Marquis; I may not even be

so well off, but you promised.”

Mrs. Block shook her head.

“I can’t help that,” she said. “If you don’t like it you can—do the other thing. That’s all there is to say about it. I’d rather be friends.”

Mr. Billingham remained unmoved.

“I am not to be got rid of like that. I shall appeal to the Marquis himself,” he threatened.

“What do you mean?” she demanded.

“The Marquis is a man of honour,” Mr. Billingham explained. “I shall go to him. I shall tell him the truth. I shall say ‘Mrs. Block was engaged to me. I introduced you as my friend. As a man of honour I require you to withdraw.’ I know my friend,” Mr. Billingham continued. “He will do as I desire. He will leave Monte Carlo the same day.”

Mrs. Block was pale with anger. Her visitor’s words carried conviction. The phrase “a man of honour” daunted her. In her fancy she could already see the Marquis seated with folded arms in his little voiture, with his portmanteau on the seat in front, on his way to the station.

“You must do nothing of the sort,” she insisted.

“What is to prevent me?” he retorted. “Besides——”

“Besides what?” she interrupted eagerly.

Mr. Billingham was shamefaced but determined.

“I am poor,” he confessed. “I am tired of being poor. I have lost heavily at the tables.”

Mrs. Block came up to the scratch at once.

“For how much money,” she asked, “will you leave me and the Marquis alone?”

“Two thousand pounds,” Mr. Billingham replied without hesitation.

She was a little staggered, but she was a woman of action. She wrote out a cheque and handed it to him. He shook his head.

“It would take weeks to get the money for that,” he pointed out.

“They will cash it downstairs,” she assured him.

“You get the money and bring it in mille notes,” he insisted. “That’s all I ask. You can marry the Marquis as soon as you like then.”

She motioned him to a chair.

“Wait,” she ordered.

In a quarter-of-an-hour she returned, slightly breathless, with a great pile of mille notes in her hand.

“They had to send to the Bank,” she explained. “There’s your money. Now you just leave me and the Marquis alone.”

Mr. Billingham picked up his hat sadly.

“You may be choosing the better man, Annie,” he said, “but this is a great disappointment to me.”

Mrs. Block sneered a little. She was not really fond of parting with her money.

“You’ve got something to console yourself with,” she snapped out. “Hurry off, please. I am expecting the Marquis at any moment.”

Thereafter the Marquis played his part manfully for a week. At the end of that time he made an abrupt appearance as Mr. Billingham and Madelon were finishing their dinner in a secluded corner of the Sporting Club Restaurant. He had all the appearance of a man on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

“My friend,” he exclaimed, sinking into a chair which a waiter had brought from a neighbouring table, “order me a liqueur brandy. This must cease. I have reached the limit.”

Mr. Billingham wisely ordered a double liqueur brandy hastily and forbore to question his friend.

“I have stood the amused ridicule of a crowd of strangers,” the latter went on. “I have put up with the agony of being

drenched with intolerable perfumes, of listening to that strident voice, of——”

“Cut it out!” Mr. Billingham interrupted. “What’s the trouble?”

The Marquis looked around him wildly.

“The lady,” he confided, “is becoming amorous. She has held my hand, she has pressed my feet, until the thing has become monotonous. Now she has, I fear—other designs upon me.”

The creases around Mr. Billingham’s eyes began to deepen, his mouth quivered, his efforts at self-control became useless. He joined in Madelon’s ecstatic outburst of amusement. When he had recovered sufficiently to wipe his eyes, the Marquis had drunk his brandy and was looking thoughtfully at the bottle.

“We dined,” the Marquis explained, “at the Hôtel de Paris. She insisted—declared that it was too quiet here and that she wanted me alone. She wore white satin—not enough of it by yards. She wore jewellery which made the people blink when she came into the room. She sat next a party of your compatriots and she called me ‘Marquis’ at the top of her voice every few minutes. When at last I thought my hour of comparative release had arrived, she declared that she had a headache and would spend the evening in her sitting-room. She has ordered me to follow her. I am to return—to sit with her there alone! She has whispered in my ear that we are engaged.”

Mr. Billingham made signs to the waiter, who filled the Marquis' glass.

“You've got to go through with it, Marquis,” he declared.

“But what is to be the end?” the Marquis demanded, almost passionately. “People are beginning to smile when they see us together. Our engagement has even been announced in some of the papers. One day she will march me into a church or registry office and I shall emerge a married man. She is masterful—overwhelming! What is your plan? It is time to announce it.”

Mr. Billingham reflected.

“There have been a few little pickings,” he mused.

“It is true,” the Marquis assented. “I have jewellery for the first time for many years; pearl studs like blobs, and some sapphire sleeve links and waistcoat buttons which are admirable. These things are so much to the good, but I cannot go on collecting them. There is a certain definiteness,” he added, “in the woman's intentions towards me this evening, which is horrible.”

Madelon, wiping the tears from her eyes, leaned forward.

“There must be a rescue party,” she suggested.

“I agree,” Mr. Billingham assented. “In ten minutes your sufferings shall be at an end; temporarily, at any rate. I will find some excuse. We will break in upon you.”

“With that promise and under those conditions,” the Marquis said, “I will return . . .”

The Marquis kept his word, and Mr. Billingham carried out his share of the bargain. In less than a quarter-of-an-hour he presented himself at the sitting-room of Mrs. Block’s gorgeous suite. He was immediately aware of tragical happenings. The Marquis, looking a little dazed, was standing upon the hearthrug. Mrs. Block, grasping a telegraphic despatch in her hand, was in a state almost of collapse upon the sofa. The new-comer looked from one to the other.

“I regret my inevitable intrusion,” he began —“Monsieur le Duc, the Marquis’ father, has telephoned from Nice.”

Mrs. Block banged the end of the sofa with her fist.

“Damn you all—dukes and marquises and the lot of you!” she cried. “Tom will smash you when he comes, and he’ll kill me. What a fool I’ve been!”

“Say, who is this ‘Tom,’ anyway?” Mr. Billingham demanded.

“My husband!” Mrs. Block declared dramatically.

“Her husband!” the Marquis murmured under his breath with a beatific smile.

Mrs. Block rose to her feet. She was, after all, a woman of force and determination.

“Look here, you two,” she confessed, “this is the long and short of it. I’m no widow. My husband’s hale and hearty, though he’s sixty years old. I’ve been down here three years, and a lone woman doesn’t get the show she ought to. She wants some one attached to her. I guess I lost my head a bit. I wanted a man along, and I chose the simplest way of getting one. Now it’s got put in the papers about me and the Marquis, my old man’s seen it, and he’ll be here to-morrow morning at twelve-thirty. Years ago,” she went on, with a livid little shadow of memory blanching her face, “he used to beat me. He’d think nothing of doing it again, and as to any man he’s ever run up against—well, he’s made short work of him. ‘Fighting Tom,’ they used to call him. . . . Don’t stand there looking like nincompoops, both of you! What are you going to do?”

The Marquis duly interpreted a glance from Mr. Billingham.

“I shall consult with my friend,” he said. “You have treated me very badly, madame.”

“Following upon your treatment of me,” Mr. Billingham added meaningly, “the situation becomes a grave one. With your permission, we will call upon you at half-past ten to-morrow morning.”

“Let’s have it out now,” the lady begged.

Mr. Billingham shook his head.

“At half-past ten,” he repeated. “Come along, Marquis!”

Mrs. Block had not the strength to argue. The two men took dignified leave of her.

At half-past ten on the following morning a very altered Mrs. Block received her two visitors. She was wearing a plainly made gown, her pudgy face was devoid of its artificial colour, her eyebrows appeared to have lost their shape, and nothing but a cascade of jewellery remained of her previous magnificence. She scarcely waited for them to sit down.

“Well?” she demanded eagerly.

Mr. Billingham coughed.

“The Marquis desires to know your wishes, madame,” Mr. Billingham announced stiffly.

“What I want him to do is to clear out,” the lady declared. “If Tom’s seen that bit in the paper about the Marquis and me—which he must have done as he’s never left England before in his life—he’ll hunt this place until he’s found him, and then there’ll be trouble. I shall tell him that the whole thing is a bit of newspaper stuff, that I don’t know any Marquis, that I haven’t any friends here at all.”

“I gather that you desire the Marquis to leave Monte Carlo,” Mr. Billingham observed.

“This morning,” was the prompt assent. “I want him out of the way before Tom starts making enquiries.”

“You will understand, I am sure,” his friend continued, “that for a man fixed like the Marquis, with a whole heap of social engagements, this is some sacrifice.”

“It is intolerable!” the Marquis interposed. “I shall lose my roulette, my rooms are taken for another month—I lose, also, more than I can express,” he added, with a little bow.

“You can cut that out,” was the blunt retort. “You may or you may not have been in earnest, but I’m not going to believe that you’re going to break your heart. Will you go or won’t you?”

“I prefer to remain,” the Marquis announced coldly. “If your husband desires satisfaction I shall be at his service.”

Mrs. Block laughed. It was not exactly a laugh of humour, but it was the first time her features had relaxed.

“Tom’s idea of ‘satisfaction’ would be to knock you into a jelly,” she confided—“and he’d do it, too.”

“I await the arrival of monsieur,” the Marquis repeated haughtily.

“Look here, madame,” Mr. Billingham intervened, “I guess we’re wasting time. The Marquis is like myself—a man of moderate means. After losing a small fortune, he’s struck a vein of luck and he’s winning every day at the tables here. His rooms are taken for another month and he’ll have to pay for them. If you want him to quit for your convenience, you must talk business about it.”

“O-ho!” the lady exclaimed. “So that’s the game, is it? I’m beginning to wonder,” she added suspiciously, “whether the Marquis isn’t another of your kidney.”

The Marquis picked up his hat and coat.

“The interview is at an end,” he declared. “I find the attitude of madame outrageous.”

Mrs. Block sprang up and barred his exit.

“Don’t be silly,” she enjoined. “Your friend knows what he’s talking about. How much do you want to clear out of Monte Carlo before half-past twelve, not show yourself here for at least a week, and deny you ever set eyes on me if Tom finds you out?”

“My friend will arrange such a matter,” the Marquis replied icily. “I have no head for figures myself. These moves are very expensive.”

“The Marquis will leave by the twelve o’clock train to Nice,” Mr. Billingham promised, “for the sum of two thousand pounds.”

Mrs. Block looked from one to the other of the two men. There were times when she was a very ugly woman, and this was one of them.

“I believe you two,” she began, “are nothing more nor less \_\_\_\_\_”

Mr. Billingham held out his hand with a warning gesture, and the woman, with an effort, held her tongue. The Marquis threw his card upon the table.

“Present this with my compliments to your husband, madame,” he begged. “I shall remain in this afternoon.”

The woman leaned over the table, tore up the card savagely, and threw the fragments into the fire. Then she crossed the room, unlocked a drawer and produced a thick wad of mille notes. She counted them out in piles of tens. At a hundred thousand she paused. Mr. Billingham shook his head.

“The exchange to-day,” he reminded her dryly. . . .

She flung down another four packets. The Marquis picked them up with well-assumed nonchalance. His fingers trembled a little, however, as he thrust the entire roll into his breast coat pocket.

“I’ve been a damned fool,” the woman confessed, “and I suppose I’ve got to pay for it.”

“Fools always pay,” Mr. Billingham murmured, as he picked up his hat and cane. “We have the honour, madame!”

“The deep regret!” the Marquis echoed.

“Go to blazes!” was the lady’s valedictory remark.

Madelon and Mr. Billingham that night, being in a festive mood, dined at the Hôtel de Paris. They were still considering the matter of *hors d'œuvres* when a *maître d'hôtel* ushered in some late arrivals. Mr. Billingham glanced up casually, but his eyes remained transfixed. Madelon slightly turned her head. Mrs. Block, in one of her most gorgeous frocks, was sailing through the room. Behind her was a small, ill-made man of about five feet seven, with sandy hair, unpleasant complexion, bushy eyebrows, narrow, suspicious eyes, and a very acquisitive mouth. He was badly dressed and he had the clumsy presence and the assertive manners of a stranger to such places. The *maître d'hôtel*, who had been talking to Madelon, smiled.

“It is the husband of the wealthy lady from Leeds in England,” he confided. “He arrived this morning.”

“Fighting Tom!” Mr. Billingham gasped.

## 35: THE CAFÉ OF TERROR

The Marquis always talked very bad English when he was angry, and this morning he was very angry indeed. Climbing up narrow and precipitous paths upon a surface of loose stones, pushing his way occasionally through brambles and undergrowth, and looking downwards from heights, which always made him giddy, had been undertakings which had combined to incense him. He was not dressed or built for such mad escapades. The sight of Madelon, bare-headed, and laughing, having the air of one to whom such excursions, instead of being a torture, were a keen pleasure, only irritated him, whereas the final note of exasperation he discovered in the pleasant good temper of Mr. Samuel T. Billingham, their guide and host, who, with a huge cigar in his mouth, was walking with springy steps and unabated cheerfulness up the path which the Marquis had passionately declared to be only fit for goats and idiots.

“I can no further make this absurd promenade,” the Marquis announced, sinking on to a heap of stones and dabbing with a scented pocket-handkerchief drops of moisture upon his forehead, which must not be allowed to reach his eyebrows. “It is an absurdity! I have a pain of the stomach, a pain of the knees, a pain of the back. It is not for this I came. Where is the automobile?”

“Poor uncle!” Madelon sympathised. “I had forgotten that you were not used to walking. You should have lived in England as I have done. But the view—you must admit that the view is marvellous!”

The comments of the Marquis upon the view were delivered in fluent and sacrilegious French. He displayed an acquaintance with the various forms of blasphemy peculiar to his language which moved even Mr. Billingham to wondering admiration.

“When I feel better,” he concluded, after a moment’s electric pause, “I shall apologise. At present I will only say that the view from the window of my *salon*, which takes in the Casino and all that glorious sea, is better worth having.”

“Less than a kilometre to go,” Mr. Billingham declared. “I reckon we shall strike the main road just beyond that clump of firs, and that’s where I told the car to pick us up. Another quarter-of-an-hour, Marquis, and we shall be in St. Félix.”

“If one could only drink something!” the latter observed pettishly, as he rose to his feet. “I miss my morning *apéritif*.”

“That’s coming to you, sure,” Mr. Billingham promised. “I’ve done this tramp before, and unless I’m mistaken there’s a little café where this path joins the cart track.”

The prospect was sufficiently encouraging to induce the Marquis to struggle to his feet. They clambered another fifty yards or so up the stony path and found themselves in a

rough track which had evidently been made by the carting of timber from the other side of the ravine. A little way along there was a small white-plastered building, to which Mr. Billingham pointed.

“The Café du Forêt!” he exclaimed. “The worst ever, so far as I remember, but a Dubonnet won’t poison us.”

The Marquis almost smiled.

“A Dubonnet will be acceptable,” he admitted. “The place appears poverty-stricken, but if one can secure an unopened bottle——”

“We’ll find that,” Mr. Billingham interrupted confidently.

A few minutes’ further climb brought them to the café. It was small, dilapidated and uninviting. Nevertheless it proclaimed itself in rudely painted black letters to be a restaurant where “*Vins et Consommations*” were to be obtained. There were three iron tables outside with a couple of chairs at each, but no sign of life. The door stood open and his two companions followed Mr. Billingham inside. There was no one behind the little counter, no one in the rude little compartment with its sanded floor and benches in place of chairs. There were bottles upon the shelves, however, and a tumbler half full of brandy upon the counter. Mr. Billingham raised his voice and the glasses around shook.

“Hullo there!” he shouted.

“Allo, allo!” the Marquis echoed. “*N’y a-t-il personne ici pour nous servir?*”

There was a stolid, unsympathetic lack of response. They waited for a moment, then Mr. Billingham opened the door of the room behind the bar and glanced around. It was a rough-looking kitchen, with a stone floor and a few clumsy articles of furniture. A string of onions, a scraggy piece of meat, and a rabbit hung down from iron hooks in the ceiling. There were pots and dishes upon the table, but no fire or any sign of recent occupation. Mr. Billingham raised his voice again without result, opened still another door, and called up a flight of flimsy stairs—also without result. Then he returned to his companions.

“There is no one about at all,” he announced.

“You might try outside,” Madelon suggested.

Outside there was no garden but a little clearing, a rudely constructed shed built of pine logs from which the bark had not been stripped, and a lean-to shelter, with a corrugated iron roof, against the wall. Mr. Billingham again, in stentorian tones, invited the presence of the missing innkeeper and again without response. He returned to the bar.

“Deserted!” he exclaimed.

“They were preparing for a *fête* at the small village we passed through last,” Madelon remarked. “Perhaps the people have gone there, or the man may work in the woods.”

The Marquis smiled. He had been studying the labels upon the bottles.

“At least,” he pointed out, “they have left a bottle of Dubonnet. Produce that excellent corkscrew of yours, my friend Billingham. We will serve ourselves and leave the money.”

They opened the bottle of Dubonnet which the Marquis had dragged down from the shelf, found some thick wine-glasses, and seated themselves before one of the rude tables outside. Madelon gave a little exclamation of relief as they passed out into the pine-scented sunshine.

“That place gave me the shivers,” she declared. “It seemed so very empty, so very silent.”

“It’s a lonely spot,” Mr. Billingham agreed, pouring out the Dubonnet. “They seem to have left off felling the timber round here, and I guess that took the trade away.”

“So long as they are absent,” the Marquis said, “one owes them gratitude that they left the place open. Never have I tasted Dubonnet with a better flavour. Tell me, my friend Billingham, how much further of this abominable promenade before we reach the automobile?”

“Not more than half a kilometre,” Mr. Billingham assured him. “There’s a little path which leads straight up to the road from the cart track. There we shall find the automobile. In a few minutes more we shall be in St. Félix. After that—the *déjeuner!*”

The Marquis breathed a little sigh of content and helped himself once more from the bottle. Madelon, who had set her

glass down empty, was fidgeting about as though anxious to start.

“Hungry?” Mr. Billingham enquired.

She shook her head.

“I have taken a dislike to this place,” she confided. “Am I superstitious, I wonder? I have a terrible feeling about it.”

The Marquis was sympathetic but entirely comfortable and not disposed to hurry. He lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair.

“I understand,” he murmured. “A deserted inn on the edge of the forest! There are all the materials here for drama. There was a story I once read——”

He broke off abruptly and the cigarette fell from his fingers. Mr. Billingham sprang to his feet. Madelon, who had wandered a few yards away from them and turned back towards the house, was standing suddenly rigid, suddenly pale. The cry which had startled them had escaped from her lips. She pointed to the window above the door.

“There was a face there!” she cried. “Some one up in the room!”

Mr. Billingham remained composed.

“Well, I guess that isn’t so terrible after all,” he observed. “I dare say there’s some one ill there. Who was it—a man or a woman?”

“I do not know,” Madelon answered faintly. “It was—just a face!”

“Seems to have given you a shock,” Mr. Billingham continued. “Sit down, Miss Madelon, and drink half a glass more of this stuff. Guess I’d better hunt round and see if there’s any help wanted.”

Madelon—young woman of nerve and courage though she was—staggered into a chair and was utterly unable to raise to her lips the glass which her uncle hastily filled. Mr. Billingham disappeared inside the building. In about five minutes he returned.

“There’s only one room upstairs,” he announced, “and there ain’t a soul in it.”

“But I saw some one,” Madelon protested.

He strolled a yard or two away and looked back at the window, pausing a moment to relight his cigar which had gone out.

“Well, there’s no one there now,” he assured her. “There’s only one room and not a cupboard for a hiding-place. There are two beds—both look as though they’d been slept in—but there isn’t a human being in the shanty. You can take my word for it.”

Madelon looked at him steadfastly. She had drunk some of the Dubonnet and she was becoming herself again.

“Do you believe, then,” she asked, “that I saw the face of some one who does not exist?”

“I shouldn’t say you were the sort who saw spooks,” Mr. Billingham admitted. “All I say is, there’s no one there now.”

“You must surely have realised, my dear Madelon,” the Marquis intervened, “whether the face was the face of a man or a woman.”

“I should have said that it was the face of a young man,” Madelon replied, “but it might have been the face of a girl. There was a mass of black hair. The face itself was smooth. It was the eyes that were horrible.”

“You don’t say!” Mr. Billingham murmured with tolerant sympathy. “Kind of scared, were they?”

Madelon rose to her feet.

“Please let us go now,” she begged. “I cannot talk about it any more. I can only assure you of one thing. Something terrible has happened here. Please, Mr. Billingham!”

“We’ll get right along,” was the prompt response.

“Ten francs will square us for the bottle of Dubonnet, I guess—ten francs and what’s left of the bottle. I’ll put it underneath the glass—see? Now, we’re right! Just a yard or two through the trees and then we’ll leave this place behind us.”

“I hope,” Madelon murmured as they passed swiftly back to the cart track, “that I may be able to forget it.”

The Marquis smiled.

“Pooh, pooh, my child!” he exclaimed. “You are too sensitive, too emotional! Material discomforts you scoff at. A fancy sometimes tortures you. Behold, the good news!”

He pointed upwards. At the end of the path was the curling main road and by the side of it the automobile Mr. Billingham had hired for their day’s excursion. No vehicle before had ever appealed so greatly to the Marquis.

“We’ve struck it right after all,” Mr. Billingham declared with satisfaction. “Gee, how hot the sun is out here! Lunch on the terrace in twenty minutes, Miss Madelon. Now, let’s forget that dirty little shanty and its spook!”

The spook was not so easy to forget. Madelon, with Mr. Billingham as her escort, was on her way that evening from the Casino to Ciro’s, when she suddenly gripped her companion’s arm.

“Look,” she cried, in a tone vibrant with absolute terror. “Look! The boy at that table!”

Mr. Billingham’s eyes followed her gesture. The young man was certainly an unusual sight in such surroundings. His clothes, although perfectly new, were clumsily fashioned and of the sort worn on fête days by the peasants. His hat was pushed to the back of his head, and, although it was of the sombrero order affected by the mountaineers of the district, it failed to conceal the masses of black hair which gave him almost a grotesque appearance.

His complexion was the usual burnt olive of the Provençal labourer. It was again his expression which arrested. His eyes were large and black, without either the vacancy or the humour of the peasant on a holiday. They looked neither at the people who passed, the trees and flowers of the plaza, nor at the bottle of wine which stood half empty by his side. They seemed to be looking at something which, if it existed at all, existed far away.

“That,” Madelon said, “was the face I saw at the upstairs window of that place this morning.”

Her hand was clutching nervously at his arm. Mr. Billingham patted it gently.

“Say, this boy has got on your nerves some,” he declared. “I’ll go across and have a talk to him. Sit down and wait for me.”

“I think I will for a moment,” Madelon acquiesced.

She seated herself on one of the benches by the side of the pavement. Mr. Billingham crossed the road and addressed the boy in hesitating but comprehensible French.

“Do you belong to the inn up near St. Félix?” he enquired. “The young lady and I were there this morning.”

The boy stared at his questioner for a moment with parted lips and terrified expression. He made absolutely no reply, however.

“We could not find any one there,” Mr. Billingham continued, speaking with laborious care. “We hoped there was nothing wrong.”

The boy broke out into a stream of rapid, unintelligible speech, to which Mr. Billingham listened in ever-increasing confusion. He turned round to find Madelon by his side.

“Say, this young goat-herd has got hold of a lingo of his own,” he complained. “I don’t know as any one but a monkey could tell what he’s chattering about. Seems kind of annoyed with me, but I can’t get a word of it.”

“It is the dialect of the Italians here,” Madelon explained. “Let me try.”

She spoke to him patiently. The boy only shook his head. Presently he poured out another glass of wine and drank it. Then he sat quite still, stolid and inattentive. He took no notice of Madelon’s questions. He showed no sign of understanding a word she said. In the end she was seized by a sudden revulsion. She tugged at her companion’s arm.

“Come away!” she begged. “He will not reply. He pretends not to understand me, though I believe that he does. Let us leave him.”

“Guess you’re right,” Mr. Billingham assented. “He’s a crazy loon, if ever there was one, or he wouldn’t speak such gibberish. Anyway, it’s not our business.”

They passed on. The young man looked after them sullenly and helped himself to more wine. Ten minutes later, when

Mr. Billingham, obeying an unaccountable impulse, chose a moment when Madelon was talking to some acquaintances and hurried back, the chair was empty. The young man was gone.

“Anyway,” Mr. Billingham murmured to himself, struggling against a curious feeling of uneasiness, “it ain’t our affair.”

Notwithstanding the fact that Mr. Billingham had twice declared that whatever trouble there might be or have been at the little inn on the edge of the forest was not his affair, it was barely ten o’clock in the morning when he left the automobile which he had hired in the Square at Monte Carlo, clambered down the steep path, made his way along the cart track, pushed through the clump of trees and found himself before the café. There was no smoke emerging from the chimney, and Mr. Billingham gave a little start of surprise as he saw on the table, in front of the still open door, the half-consumed bottle of Dubonnet and the ten-franc note under one of the glasses.

“I guess passers-by round here are pretty scarce,” he ruminated. “Seems queer that whoever quit the place didn’t trouble to lock up. Left in a hurry, perhaps.”

Mr. Billingham would doubtless have scorned the suggestion that he talked to himself for the fact of any pleasure he might derive from hearing his own voice, and yet it was without a doubt true that the uneasy feeling of the day before had returned to an even larger extent. He pushed open the door.

The half-emptied tumbler was still upon the counter. Some little disarrangement of the bottles upon the shelf, effected by their removal of the bottle of Dubonnet, still existed. He threw open the door leading to the kitchen and called out:

“Hullo there!”

There was no reply. He mounted the stairs with footsteps which he was half-ashamed to admit were reluctant ones. The bedroom was as empty as it had been on the previous day. There was no place to hide anywhere—no other room. As he descended, however, he realised that it was perfectly possible for the owner of the face whom Madelon had seen there to have escaped by the back door and reached the wood in the matter of a very few seconds. He returned to the kitchen. Here he noticed for the first time that by the side of the fireplace was a clumsy frame-work door, which looked as though it might have led into a pantry or cupboard. He moved towards it and raised the latch. Before he threw the door open, he knew. When he closed it again—in the space of a second or two—there were great beads of perspiration upon his forehead. The colour had left his cheeks and the blood seemed to have been drained from his body. He staggered out into the bar, gripped the counter for a moment, saw a bottle of Martell’s brandy on the bottom row of the shelf, seized it, made his faltering way outside, knocked off its neck against the top of one of the iron tables, and drank. . . . Mr. Billingham was a strong man and his recovery was prompt. Nevertheless, he was breathing heavily as he hastened up the hill to where his automobile was waiting.

“Drive to the Mairie at St. Félix,” he ordered. . . .

Arrived at the Mairie—a small wistaria-covered building on the outskirts of the straggling village of St. Félix—Mr. Billingham was ushered at once by a gendarme into a bare little apartment with whitewashed walls and a row of benches, in which a very formal-looking gentleman with a closely-trimmed black beard, very smoothly brushed hair, and gold-rimmed pince-nez, was seated at a table, signing documents. His work for the morning had consisted of adjudicating upon a highly important case of fowl stealing, and he looked with some surprise at his visitor’s precipitate entrance. Mr. Billingham’s opening statement was in far from lucid English. The magistrate, with a puzzled expression, waved him to a seat.

“*Comment, monsieur?*” he exclaimed.

Mr. Billingham pulled himself together. His French, though not rapid, was fairly precise, and he had no difficulty in making himself understood.

“A woman has been murdered at a little café at the edge of the forest,” he announced.

The magistrate gasped. The gendarme gasped.

“Continue, monsieur,” the former begged.

Mr. Billingham told his story. The magistrate gave him his entire attention. It was a great day, this! A murder! Obviously a murder, in his district! He began to make notes of Mr. Billingham’s statement. He was friendly but official.

It was quite hopeless for him to conceal the fact that the news had filled him with pleasurable interest. It had been the secret desire of his life to have the handling of such a case.

“I will accompany you to the inn myself at once, monsieur,” he announced, rising to his feet. “You can accommodate a gendarme, perhaps, on the front of your car. . . . Let the Court remain open till my return,” he directed a subordinate. “Tell me again your story as we proceed, monsieur.”

Mr. Billingham went through the few facts again. In response to his own enquiries the magistrate gave him certain information.

“The inn,” he said, “was kept by a very respectable, good man, of the name of Pierre Anson. He lived there with his wife, the woman who without a doubt is the victim, and his nephew, a young man of whom one hears not too much of good. The wife, it is reported, had savings,—savings of some account—and the nephew knew it. Three days ago news came to Anson of the death of a relative in Marseilles. This I know because he came to me for information as to the burying of the relative and as to his journey. He set off last Monday morning. He was expecting to return to-night. He left alone his wife and this nephew. One fears to reflect what may have happened!”

Mr. Billingham sighed, because he was a kind-hearted man, and because a vision of that flashing knife of the guillotine is terrible to such. Nevertheless it was his duty.

“Last night,” he confided, “the young man, who apparently was the nephew of Pierre Anson, was drinking wine at the Café de Paris in Monte Carlo. He was pointed out to me by the young lady, who declared that his was the face she saw at the window.”

The magistrate nodded gravely.

“It is a crime,” he said, “in effect simple, not uncommon amongst this race of people. When heated with wine and drunk with the desire of pleasure, the shedding of blood is nothing. I, who tell you this, know.”

They arrived at their destination. The magistrate and the gendarme made their way to the little room. Mr. Billingham sat outside. He had no soul for horrors. It was an hour before they rejoined him. The magistrate was carrying his note-book in his hand.

“All is clear,” he announced. “The savings of the poor woman have disappeared. To-night, or to-morrow at the latest, the young man will be in our hands. Your name and address, if you please, monsieur. You will attend the Court?”

“Certainly,” Mr. Billingham promised.

“The young man,” the magistrate continued, “will have had two nights of that wild pleasure of which he has lain awake, here in this place of tranquillity, and dreamed. Afterwards—well—he may escape with the penitentiary. One knows little of his age.”

Mr. Billingham looked up at the blank window. The silence which brooded over the place remained unbroken. A gendarme, having closed the door, seated himself outside.

“Pierre Anson will arrive by the night train,” the magistrate remarked. “It will be a sad homecoming for him.”

“Better,” Mr. Billingham rejoined, with a little shiver, “than if he had found the house empty and opened that door, as I did.”

The most pathetic sight in the bare, white-washed little room of the Mairie on the first morning of the examination was Pierre Anson, the woodman. The tears streamed down his brown, wrinkled face as the magistrate addressed his first few kindly questions. He had, at one time, as was evident, been a man of great stature and strength. Now he seemed shrunken up, stricken with the horror of his home-coming.

“Your wife had savings, Pierre Anson?” the magistrate asked him.

“She was a thrifty woman,” was the tremulous reply. “She had always a stocking.”

“Do you know how much was in it?”

“She never told me.”

“Did your nephew—the young man between the gendarmes there—the young man whom you trusted alone with your wife—did he know?”

“I cannot tell,” Pierre Anson answered. “He was always wanting money.”

“You have been to Marseilles to bury a relative—is it not so?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“You thought it safe to leave this youth, of whose character we hear little that is good, alone with your wife in such a desolate spot?”

“She was his aunt,” the man announced, with a little sob. “How would I dream of anything so horrible?”

The magistrate bent over his papers. Mr. Billingham, seated by his side, watched the shaft of sunlight which had found its way through the cobwebbed windows and had fallen upon the boy’s face. Madelon, who had also been invited by the magistrate to occupy a chair near him, scribbled something on a piece of paper and passed it to her neighbour. He glanced at it and passed it on to the magistrate, who studied it through his pince-nez with pursed lips. Finally, with a little shrug of the shoulders, he twiddled it between his fingers.

“Where did you stay in Marseilles, Pierre Anson?” he asked suddenly.

The woodman lifted his head and stared uncomprehendingly at his questioner.

“I asked you where you stayed in Marseilles,” the magistrate repeated.

Pierre Anson shook his head.

“I do not remember,” he said. “It was a small lodging-house down by the quay.”

“You do not remember?” the magistrate echoed, in a tone of some surprise. “Is that not strange, Pierre Anson?”

“It was somewhere near where my cousin lay dead,” the man answered, a little sullenly. “I could find the place—the name I never knew.”

The magistrate’s right arm suddenly shot out.

“Or is it that you are lying, Pierre Anson?” he thundered. “Is it that you yourself, before you left home in the small hours of that Tuesday morning, murdered your wife and stole her savings, forced two of the notes on that half-witted youth, persuaded him to buy clothes and go down to Monte Carlo, and went yourself to Nice—your *rendezvous* at Nice—to your *rendezvous* with Lucie Bérard?”

The man half rose to his feet. His eyes seemed suddenly bloodshot. He swayed about as though striving to speak.

“Bring the woman,” the magistrate ordered.

Pierre Anson glanced fearfully towards the door. A woman in the care of a gendarme entered. They looked at one another across the room—the man and the woman—and one understood.

“The money of which you robbed your wife, Pierre Anson,” the magistrate continued, “was found upon this woman. You have visited her month by month in Nice. You would have thrust the burden of this crime upon your nephew. You yourself are the murderer! Do you confess?”

A cry rang through the Court—not from the man, Pierre Anson, who was indeed incapable of speech, whose hands were fighting the air, who fought against unconsciousness, but from the boy who stood between the gendarmes. His eyes were fixed upon the woman who had entered the Court Room. His indifference had vanished. His eyes again were lit with fear.

“Mother!” he cried.

“It is I!” she answered.

The boy turned towards the magistrate.

“It was I who killed the woman,” he pleaded. “No one else knows anything about it.”

“You are a liar and a fool!” the woman declared angrily. “It was he, the bungler there,” she added, pointing to Pierre Anson. “And there is the money.”

She dashed a bundle of notes upon the floor and stood with folded arms, defiant, the incarnation of an evil spirit. A gendarme touched Pierre Anson upon the shoulder. The proceedings were over.

Afterwards the magistrate entertained his two distinguished guests with a bottle of sweet wine and biscuits in his retiring-room. He was well-pleased with the whole business.

“Amongst the lowest classes of our peasants,” he explained, “these family dramas are not uncommon. Pierre Anson, as the story goes now, loved both sisters. He married the older one—a widow with money. The rest of the story unfolds itself. Yet Pierre Anson had cunning which few of these peasants possess. He deceived us all. It is to you, monsieur,” he added, turning to Mr. Billingham, “that we owe the clue by means of which we arrived at the truth.”

Mr. Billingham shook his head.

“Not to me,” he rejoined—“to the young lady.”

The magistrate bowed.

“Then might one enquire,” he ventured, “what led the young lady to doubt the lad’s guilt?”

Madelon was once more serious.

“Something in his eyes,” she confided, with a little shudder of reminiscence—“something which was there and something which was not there.”

The magistrate raised his glass and bowed first to Madelon, then to Mr. Billingham.

“Something in his eyes,” he repeated. “Well, one reads somewhere in a lay commentary upon our laws and the

discovery of crime, that the born detective must have an instinct for the truth. Mademoiselle, there is a great vocation open to you.”

Madelon smiled. She sipped her wine, but she remained silent.

## 36: THE ROYAL GAME

“Too bad!” Mr. Billingham murmured sympathetically.

Madelon was almost angry. She leaned across the table towards her companion.

“Speak to him, please,” she begged. “It is impossible that we go on like this. It becomes an affair of charity. You dispense the money. Nobody earns anything. He thinks and dreams and talks of nothing but roulette. You wished him to make some enquiries about those people at Nice. He did nothing.”

“Well, they’ve gone now, anyway,” her companion remarked.

“Will you speak to him?” she persisted.

“Right away,” Mr. Billingham promised. “Here he comes. Now you shall hear for yourself.”

“Do not be too easy with him,” she enjoined.

“Leave that to me,” was the confident reply.

The Marquis drifted in from the Arcade to the glass-sheltered bar. He was happy and spruce. He had a mille's worth of counters in his pocket and the music of the whirling wheel in his ears. He greeted his niece and his friend with gay cordiality.

“A minute or two late, I fear,” he apologised. “Let mine be the pleasure. Waiter!”

An approved order was given. The Marquis accepted a chair.

“Mr. Billingham has something to say to you, uncle,” Madelon confided.

“A little matter of business which arises, eh?” the Marquis asked. “Well, I am at your disposal.”

“As a matter of fact,” Mr. Billingham declared, “neither your niece nor I have had any fortune for the last few weeks, and, to put it bluntly, funds are running low. We think that it is time you bestirred yourself.”

“Indeed yes, uncle,” Madelon intervened. “You spend morning, noon and night at the tables. You make no acquaintances. You take no initiative.”

“You being, so to speak,” Mr. Billingham went on, “the social bird of the party, we expect you to be more in evidence.”

The Marquis gulped down his cocktail.

“You think that I am neglecting our interests—our joint interests?” he demanded, in a hurt tone.

“That idea has occurred to us,” Mr. Billingham admitted.

“There is no doubt about it,” Madelon said coldly.

The Marquis made signs to the waiter.

“I am,” he announced, “in a position to prove that you have misjudged me. I have, in our joint interests, made the acquaintance of two gentlemen who possess the most amazing gifts. They need fresh blood and—er—introductions. I am arranging to provide them with both.”

“What may their gifts be?” Mr. Billingham enquired.

“They are expert poker players,” the Marquis explained. “Their knowledge of the game is indeed wonderful. Amongst my acquaintances there are several wealthy men to whom the tables are no longer a novelty. A game of cards amuses. I have promised to arrange something, to play myself, to bring you. We are to put up nothing and we are to have a third of the winnings.”

Mr. Billingham sighed.

“Are your friends clever enough to put this through?” he asked.

“One of them,” the Marquis confided, “was a professional entertainer for some years. His speciality was card tricks. The other learned the game upon an Atlantic liner.”

“It is a primitive form of misappropriation, this,” Mr. Billingham sighed, “but it depends, of course, upon the measure of skill which your friends possess. Invite them to a rehearsal. Have you pointed me out to them yet?”

“Not yet,” the Marquis admitted.

“Bring them along to my sitting-room to-night, after dinner,” Mr. Billingham enjoined. “Introduce me as an American tourist upon his travels, one of the jay birds with plenty of the dough. You may say that I only play a low game, but after a few whiskies and sodas I like to increase the stakes. I’ll figure it out myself then if they’re to be trusted.”

The Marquis looked a little doubtful.

“You will lose your money,” he ventured, “and it may not be possible to explain afterwards.”

“Guess I’ll fix that,” Mr. Billingham promised. “Bring your friends along and I’ll see what’s doing.”

When he ascended to his sitting-room that evening after dinner, Mr. Billingham prepared to dispense hospitality on a generous scale. There were two packs of unopened cards upon a green baize table, whiskies and sodas and a box of cigars upon the sideboard, besides a variety of liqueurs. Presently there was a knock at the door and in response to Mr. Billingham’s hearty invitation to enter there appeared the Marquis, Madelon, and the Marquis’ two friends, whom he introduced as Mr. Conrad Adler and Mr. Blane T. Hackett of St. Louis. Mr. Conrad Adler was a trifle Semitic. He wore a

black moustache, curly black hair, and tortoiseshell glasses. Mr. Blane T. Hackett was of a different type—florid, large, and more American than Mr. Billingham himself. His handshake was painful, his tone almost vociferous. He eyed the preparations for the evening's entertainment with approval.

“Our friend, Mr. Adler,” the Marquis explained, “is in the wine trade. He travels a great deal. Mr. Hackett is like yourself—an American bent on pleasure.”

“And very glad to meet a fellow countryman over on this side,” Mr. Hackett declared cordially. “You still in business, sir?”

“Only partly,” Mr. Billingham confessed. “Linoleum.”

“Boots,” Mr. Hackett confided—“the Hackett Boot Company, out at St. Louis. I guess I'm like you—get tired of these foreign games. The sight of a couple of decks of cards and a few chips looks good to me. Shall we make it a small game?”

“Fifty francs ante, and a hundred francs rise?” Mr. Billingham suggested. “Will you join us, Marquis?”

“With pleasure,” the latter assented.

The four men sat down. Mr. Billingham distributed the chips, and accepted the money. A waiter, who made an unobtrusive appearance, served drinks and passed the cigars. The game proceeded and it was very soon apparent that it was proceeding very contrary to the expectations of Mr. Conrad Adler and his friend. On one occasion, when the former had

shown, with a half apologetic air, four eights, having drawn three cards, and Mr. Billingham, with a quiet chuckle, had laid down four knaves, an explosion appeared to be imminent. The game was continued, however, although with the exception of their host the players became more and more silent. At the end of an hour the whole of the chips lay in front of Mr. Billingham. That gentleman paused to light a cigar.

“Seems to me I got all the luck to-night,” he remarked. “What do you say, gentlemen,—shall we raise the stakes a bit? The game seems kinder quiet.”

Mr. Conrad Adler glanced at his watch.

“I got to go,” he mumbled. “I forgot I had an appointment over at the Casino.”

There was an expression of pain upon Mr. Hackett’s face.

“I’ll be getting along too,” he announced stiffly. “I don’t seem to quite get the hang of this game.”

“Eh?” Mr. Billingham ejaculated with ferocious emphasis.

Mr. Hackett opened his mouth and closed it again. His eyes were fixed upon the pile of counters in front of Mr. Billingham’s place and the little roll of bills underneath his tumbler.

“Fact of it is,” Mr. Hackett confided, “I don’t think I know enough about this game for the present company.”

“You’ll learn,” Mr. Billingham assured him cheerfully. “Any day that you feel like a little lesson, make the stakes worth while and I’ll show you. Have another cigar before you go.”

The two men took their leave, crestfallen, suspicious, and a little vituperative. The Marquis looked at his friend and gasped. Madelon came over and patted him on the shoulder.

“Clever dear!” she murmured.

“Say, that was nothing at all,” Mr. Billingham assured her lightly. “Watch me!”

He threw a pack of cards into the air, brought one down from the ceiling, another from the sleeve of Madelon’s dress, and a third from the back of his collar.

“Just a little lesson for you, Marquis,” he said. “Now I’m going to let you have it straight. Card-sharping don’t come inside our little scheme of life. Do you get that?”

“It really seems,” Madelon sighed, “as though with gifts like yours some profitable use should be made of them.”

“My dear,” Mr. Billingham protested, “cheating at cards is a low-down game. We’re out for adventures all right, but we’re out to skin the worthless rich and to skin ’em our own way. You take my advice, Marquis, and don’t you be seen speaking to that pair of crooks again. They’ll get found out the first time they try a serious game with any man who knows his way about.”

“But you are so much cleverer than they are,” Madelon expostulated. “Couldn’t you get hold of some really terrible people and win just a little of their money. I saw the most beautiful chinchilla cape yesterday, and so cheap!”

Mr. Billingham was playing idly with the cards.

“Do you,” he asked the Marquis, “happen to know Madame Groosens?”

The Marquis shivered.

“The good God forbid!” he exclaimed.

“That horrible creature!” Madelon cried. “Every one in the club and at the Casino, too, hates her. She claims every one’s stakes. She’s always trying to bully the croupiers—an unspeakable person!”

“She has no friends,” Mr. Billingham remarked, “and therefore to make her acquaintance should be easy. I heard her say that she preferred bridge and poker to all that gambling. Here is your task, Marquis. Make her acquaintance and bring her with two or three absolutely respectable people to a little game of poker. There shall be no cheating, but something might come of it.”

“It is a horrible task,” the Marquis complained, with a little shiver, “but I must confess that you intrigue me.”

“See about it, then,” Mr. Billingham enjoined, “and, by the by, you might remember this. Another ten days at the most sees our exchequer dry. I do not know what you have saved

out of your share of our little adventures—you have perhaps added to them by your roulette wins—but as a co-operative society we're on the rocks.”

The Marquis rose to his feet.

“I will take a stroll through the Club,” he observed.

“We will follow,” Mr. Billingham agreed. “I feel like a little flutter myself. . . .”

The roulette room of the Club was crowded. Around the louis table people were standing two and three deep. Madelon touched Mr. Billingham on the arm. Almost opposite was the woman of whom they had spoken. They watched her for some moments. She was short and inclined to be fat, expensively dressed and with a profusion of jewellery. Her face was heavy and pallid, her mouth disagreeable, her eyes acquisitive. With her sallow, pendulous cheeks and occasional glimpses of ill-shaped teeth, she was irresistibly reminiscent of a soft and pudgy insect.

“They call her ‘the yellow slug,’” Madelon whispered.

“Watch her now.”

She stood with a plaque in her hand, as though uncertain whether or not to risk it. People on either side of her made their stakes. Still she hesitated. The wheel spun, the number was announced. There was a plaque placed some time previously, almost in front of her upon the table.

“*Un cheval à moi,*” she called out shrilly to the croupier.

An Englishwoman seated on the same side of the table protested.

“Madame is mistaken,” she exclaimed indignantly. “The plaque was mine.”

There was the usual controversy. Madame Groosens ejaculated, shouted, pushed, and finally seized the money. The croupier looked remorseful. The *chef* awaited an appeal. The woman to whom the money belonged shrugged her shoulders.

“It is not worth while,” was her only comment.

“Absolute robbery,” Madelon murmured, as Madame Groosens thrust the plaques into her gold bag and left the table.

Mr. Billingham nodded.

“I’m glad we saw that,” he declared. . . . “Mademoiselle, I take my hat off to your uncle. Behold!”

The Marquis was offering his commiserations. It was most annoying to have one’s stake claimed. He was glad that Madame had courage. These people who were not *habitués* threw down their plaques right and left and claimed everything.

“Uncle is really doing his best,” Madelon whispered.

“He is earning good money,” Mr. Billingham assented.

The second poker party in Mr. Billingham's room came off within the next few evenings. It consisted of Mr. Billingham himself, the Marquis, Madame Groosens, and two perfectly respectable acquaintances of the Marquis—Madame de Bernande, a well-known resident of Monte Carlo, and Lord Henerford, whom the Marquis had once met in Paris and who was also a well-known *habitué*. The presence of Madame Groosens appeared to be somewhat of a surprise, and Madame de Bernande's greeting was cool in the extreme. The Marquis, however, who figured as host, exerted all his tact to create a feeling of friendliness.

"Seems deuced odd to be playing poker down here," Lord Henerford remarked. "One does get rather fed up with these other games, though."

"I play poker at my villa once a week," Madame de Bernande announced. "Some of you must join me there one evening. I expect your friend Mr. Billingham plays very well—most Americans do."

"Nothing out of the way, madame," Mr. Billingham assured her. "When I was in business in New York we used to play Saturday nights at the country club and I played coming across on the steamer."

"A risky proceeding," Lord Henerford murmured.

"I guess I can generally size people up," Mr. Billingham declared. "Besides, the gangs who work the steamers are pretty well known. I wouldn't say they had much chance—on the Southern route, anyway."

The game proceeded without event. The Marquis and Mr. Billingham were excellent joint hosts and they kept the game from flagging. Sandwiches and other forms of refreshment were handed around, and Lord Henerford declared that Mr. Billingham's cigars were the best he had smoked in Monte Carlo. As the evening wore on, Mr. Billingham more than once showed signs of some perturbation. He looked at his cards on several occasions before he threw them in and he paid marked attention to Madame Groosens' play. She, to her intense satisfaction, became in time almost the only winner. A pile of chips and counters were gathered in front of her, by the side of her gold bag. Her little eyes twinkled, her covetous mouth was twisted into a satisfied smile.

Madame de Bernande whispered at last in Madelon's ear:

"My dear, what induced your uncle to ask that horrible woman here? She robs every one downstairs and makes life a torment to the croupiers."

"My uncle is very good-natured," Madelon sighed, "but indeed she almost invited herself."

Mr. Billingham was dealing. A very considerable jack-pot had been opened and it was Madame Groosens' turn to take cards.

"Three," she demanded.

Mr. Billingham threw three cards face downwards upon the table. Madame Groosens apparently discarded three and held out her hand to draw the three

which had been given her. Suddenly, Madelon, who was standing by the fireplace, dropped a tumbler with a little crash. Everyone started and looked round. There was a moment's pause. Then Mr. Billingham's voice rang out, clear and sharp.

"Madame," he insisted, "don't move! Don't touch your cards!"

His left hand suddenly imprisoned hers.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "I regret to say that Madame Groosens has been cheating. I have been watching her. This time I am convinced."

The woman was absolutely incapable of speech. She glared at her accuser with an expression of blank and utter amazement. The natural venom of her face, however, destroyed its attempted innocence.

"Don't move!" Mr. Billingham repeated. "I gave you three cards. Lord Henerford, be so good as to see how many lie in front of Madame."

"Only two," Lord Henerford declared.

"Now lift her reticule."

Lord Henerford did as he was bidden.

"There is another card there," he said, producing it.

“That,” Mr. Billingham pointed out, “is the third card. Now lift that handkerchief which has been lying on the table by her side all the time.”

Lord Henerford obeyed. Underneath the handkerchief another card was concealed.

“Now, Madame, show your hand,” Mr. Billingham ordered.

Madame Groosens, still speechless, did as she was told. She held a pair of aces. In obedience to a gesture, Lord Henerford turned up the card under the handkerchief. It was another ace.

“The trick is a simple one,” Mr. Billingham explained. “I’ve seen it done on the steamer more than once. I never expected to see it in company like this. When I gave her three cards, Madame discarded one, but pushed it with her sleeve under the reticule. She was helping herself to the one underneath the handkerchief which had been waiting there for the occasion—the third ace. You see? She would have scooped the pool.”

Madame Groosens found words at last. Her abuse was violent, her statements vehement, but both seemed utterly futile. Every one listened to her coldly.

“If Madame Groosens had not kept that ace underneath her handkerchief, if she had not put it there herself, who else would have been likely to?” Mr. Billingham demanded. “Everyone at the table saw me give three cards. How did that

third card—the one she wanted to get rid of—get underneath her reticule?”

Madame Groosens sprang to her feet and commenced stuffing her winnings into her bag. The Marquis, however, held her wrist.

“Madame,” he insisted, “this is a serious affair. You must kindly leave that money where it is.” . . .

“You, ladies and gentlemen,” Mr. Billingham added, moving towards the bell, “are the best judges of what should be done. I suggest that I send for the manager of the hotel and a representative of the Casino.”

Madame Groosens sat down heavily. She had a sudden and an awful vision of the joy with which this substantiated charge against her would be received. She had a vision of life without Monte Carlo. She shook in every limb.

“It is all a mistake?” she gasped.

“Mistakes of such a nature,” the Marquis commented, “do not occur.”

“You can take your money,” Madame Groosens exclaimed passionately—“take it back. I am innocent, but this shall not be spoken of. You can have your money. I will go!”

Mr. Billingham walked to the door, locked it, and returned with the key in his pocket.

“Madame de Bernande,” he said, “and you, Lord Henerford, I am an American and I don’t quite know how you treat a case like this. I guess I’d be glad of some advice.”

“The woman should be punished. She should be exposed,” Madame de Bernande declared.

“Without a doubt something should be done,” Lord Henerford assented, helping himself to a whisky and soda.

“But I never touched the cards,” Madame Groosens protested hysterically. “I took what were given to me.”

“I guess you may as well cut that out,” Mr. Billingham said shortly. “I am a man who is accustomed to be believed, and I tell you to your face that I have seen you cheat and so have the others.”

“There is no possible doubt about it,” Madame de Bernande agreed.

Madame Groosens leaned back in the chair, distracted, vicious, impotent. Mr. Billingham took the pile of notes and counters and divided them into heaps. He returned to each an equal portion.

“I guess that leaves us pretty well as we were,” he pointed out. “The next thing for us to decide is what ought we to do about this lady.”

“Do about me?” she gasped. “You’ve taken my money. You’ve lied about me. You’ve insulted me——”

“She is always like this,” the Marquis interrupted, with an apologetic little gesture. “We have had warning enough below from the croupiers.”

“If you think, madame,” Mr. Billingham said sternly, “that you’re going to get out of this scot-free, you’re making a big mistake. I guess you’ve run up against the wrong crowd this time. How much you’ve made by cheating people all your life as you tried to cheat us to-night, no one can tell, but some of those dollars you’re going to refund. That’s a sure thing!”

“This is interesting,” the Marquis remarked.

“What do you propose?”

“I propose, ladies and gentlemen,” Mr. Billingham continued, “that we adopt one of two courses. We either publish an account of what has transpired this evening socially and to the managers of the Casino and the Sporting Club, who, I am inclined to believe, would welcome such information, or we fine Madame a certain sum which shall be entrusted to one of us for distribution amongst certain approved charities.”

“I,” Madame de Bernande said, “am in favour of reporting Madame to the authorities.”

“I, on the other hand,” the Marquis intervened, “am not absolutely certain that that would entirely exclude her from the use of the Rooms. I am therefore in favour of making her pay.”

“And I, if I have a voice in the matter,” Madelon echoed.

“I should make her stump up,” Lord Henerford agreed.

“Touch ’em through their pockets more readily than in any other way.”

“That goes, then,” Mr. Billingham decided. “Madame, on receipt of a cheque for two thousand pounds, which I shall devote to certain charities which I have already in my mind, you may leave this room. If you hesitate for more than twenty seconds I shall ring the bell and ask for the Manager.”

Madame Groosens hesitated for less than twenty. She wrote the cheque and she left the room, with a venomous backward glance which few of them ever forgot. The little party broke up soon afterwards, leaving Mr. Billingham, the Marquis, and Madelon alone. Mr. Billingham, in an enterprising frame of mind, amused himself bringing cards from the chimney, from under the carpet, even fluttering down from the ceiling.

“May we ask,” Madelon demanded, “to what charities you propose to devote that little cheque?”

Mr. Billingham smiled blandly.

“Charity,” he replied, “begins at home!”

“Is poker really a game of skill?” Madelon asked, as she and Mr. Billingham paced the Terrace after dinner a few nights later.

“I shall probably be able to answer that question tomorrow morning,” her companion replied, a little grimly. “I have promised to make up a game to-night with some of the New York crowd. I don’t much fancy it.”

Madelon laughed softly.

“Why, my dear man,” she exclaimed, “you can do what you like with them!”

Mr. Billingham shook his head a little sadly.

“In a way we are friends,” he explained. “They are fellow club-men. I cannot treat them as I would Mrs. Groosens. So far as any manipulation of the cards is concerned we meet on equal terms.”

“Then don’t gamble,” she begged. “Madame Groosen’s two thousand isn’t going to last us for ever.”

“If I don’t gamble,” Mr. Billingham objected, “I must lose. Poker’s kind of a queer game that way. The man who sits too tight at the stakes this crowd play is bound to get it in the neck.”

“Whom are you playing with?” she enquired.

Mr. Billingham inclined his head towards the harbour.

“With Millionaire Frost and his crowd.”

“On the yacht?”

Mr. Billingham nodded.

“I’ve got to get down there in a few minutes,” he confided.  
“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to the opera after the first act, to Madame de Bernande’s box. You can leave me at the door as you pass—and good luck to you! Remember my chinchilla cape, and do not bluff!” . . .

Mr. Billingham looked for a moment or two almost wistfully after Madelon’s slim form as she passed into the Casino. Then, with a little sigh, he went on his way down the steps, along the quay, across the drawbridge, to be received with much respect by a smart-looking steward and ushered into the saloon of the famous yacht *The Flying Dutchman*. Here four or five men were still sitting over their wine. The host of the party—a thick-set, prosperous-looking New Yorker—waved his hand cordially.

“Glad to see you, Billingham. Take a seat and try my Madeira before we get to business. Shake hands with Senator Curtis—Mr. Billingham. I guess you know the rest of the crowd.”

Mr. Billingham accepted the seat, exchanged greetings all round and drank a glass of wine. They were a typical little gathering of New Yorkers—opulent, full of good-nature and friendliness—and when they moved to the smoke-room and sat down at the poker table every one was on the best of terms with himself and his neighbour. Only Mr. Billingham was for a moment thoughtful. He had paused to glance

through the porthole across the little glittering stretch of water to the flaming lights of the Casino. He pulled himself together, however, with barely an effort, at the rattling of the chips.

“A hundred dollars ante, a thousand dollars rise—how’s that?” the host proposed.

“It’s steep,” Mr. Billingham commented.

“I’ve seen you play the same game at the Manhattan,” one of his acquaintances observed. “And anyway it’s no use playing for nuts.”

“I’m agreeable to whatever stakes you generally play, gentlemen,” Mr. Billingham acquiesced. “I guess it will take three of a kind to get me curious.”

“You sit tight and you’ll win a wad,” Millionaire Frost declared. “We’re all fool bluffers here. The Senator’s the only man who understands the game, and he loses.”

The chips were apportioned, the deal commenced, and the game proceeded. Mr. Billingham, playing with the utmost care, managed to just hold his own for the first part of the evening. At half-past eleven his host glanced at the clock.

“We’re an early crowd here, Sam,” he said. “Twelve o’clock sees us through. What do you say to starting a couple of rounds of jack-pots?”

“I’m agreeable,” Mr. Billingham assented readily. “I was kind of set on seeing the folk out of the Opera, anyway.”

A round of jack-pots proceeded with varying fortunes. Mr. Billingham saw his stock of chips, notwithstanding the utmost caution, materially reduced, and as each chip represented a hundred or a thousand dollars according to its colour, the fact was not without its significance. The last jack-pot of the game Mr. Billingham himself opened. Every one came in and every one drew three cards, excepting the host, who drew two. Mr. Billingham took one and started the betting with the limit—a thousand dollars. He was seen by every one until it came to the turn of his host, who raised him a thousand dollars. Mr. Billingham without hesitation raised the bid another thousand. The others dropped out. Thenceforward it became a duel. The betting reached ten thousand dollars. Millionaire Frost relit his cigar, studied his cards and looked across at his adversary.

“Say, ain’t we wasting our breath like this?” he demanded. “It stands at ten thousand dollars just now. What about the doubling game?”

“I’m agreeable,” Mr. Billingham replied without hesitation.

“Twenty thousand dollars, then,” Millionaire Frost proposed.

“Forty thousand,” Mr. Billingham rejoined.

There was a little chorus of exclamations and chaff.

“Guess you’ve run up against something, my lad,” Senator Curtis observed, with a chuckle. “It’s a great game, that doubling game!”

Millionaire Frost studied his cards once more, scratched his head and hesitated. Finally he threw them down on the table.

“I’m letting you have it, Billingham,” he announced, counting his thousand dollar chips out and throwing them into the middle. “I reckon you’ve got me. In any case I’ve quit being inquisitive.”

“What did you get, anyway, Frost?” his friend Senator Curtis enquired.

“Only a pair of kings,” was the regretful reply. “I kept a kicker and threw two, to put him off, but he wasn’t having any. No good seeing him. He drew one card and opened. He must have opened with two pairs, which had me beat, to start with.”

“Say, what had you?” the Senator enquired, turning to Mr. Billingham.

The latter hesitated for a single moment.

“I’d have you understand,” he explained diffidently, “that this isn’t the kind of game I generally play. I picked up the eight, nine, ten, knave of spades and the knave of hearts. I opened the jack-pot, pushed the knave of hearts here to show you my openers,” he went on, disclosing it, “and drew for a royal flush.”

“And what did you get?” the other demanded.

Mr. Billingham turned his cards face upwards. He had still the eight, nine, ten, knave of spades and the two of hearts.

“Bust!” he pointed out.

They all gazed at the cards open-mouthed. There was a roar of laughter. The Senator leaned across and patted Mr. Billingham on the back.

“You’ve put one over on the old man,” he declared. “Say, Frost, what about it?”

Millionaire Frost laughed good-humouredly.

“A fine bit of play,” he pronounced. “We’ll have a bottle and a sandwich and drink your health, Mr. Billingham!”

Mr. Billingham was just in time to meet Madelon as she came out of the Opera. She had said good-bye to Madame de Bernande, and she welcomed him with a smile of pleasure.

“I knew Uncle wouldn’t be here, although he promised,” she said.

“I hurried round,” Mr. Billingham confided, “to see how you felt about a bite of supper.”

“I should love it,” she declared. “But tell me first, please—you didn’t bluff?”

“Not exactly what you might call bluffing,” Mr. Billingham replied evasively, as he tucked her hand through his arm, and started across the Square.

## 37: BLOOD-MONEY

There was something wrong with Mr. Billingham. For two days he had shown a marked lack of interest in his food, his drink, and his gambling. The Spring had laid its relaxing hand upon the hills and the little Principality; the sun had gained in strength, the flowers in the gardens were drooping, there were cracks in the smoothly-shaven lawns, umbrellas at every table in the Café de Paris, and green verdure in place of the snows on the lower slopes of the mountains. Men were wearing flannels and straw hats, and some of the women had even ventured upon muslins. Mr. Billingham, however, seemed slow in responding to these genial signs of the advancing season. For several days he had shown a tendency almost to mope. The climax came when, at half an hour before his usual luncheon-time, he complained of his cocktail at *Ciro's*.

“*Mais comment, monsieur?*” the bartender exclaimed. “It is as I have always mixed it day by day for months.”

“It tasted flat,” Mr. Billingham pronounced—“flat!”

There was nothing more to be said. The bartender withdrew with a pained look. The Marquis stared first at his friend's frosted glass, then at Mr. Billingham himself.

“My friend,” he declared, “it is perhaps the liver. The cocktail is as always. The moment you enter the place Charles braces himself. You have even those much to be treasured drops of absinthe at your disposal.”

“It didn’t taste good,” Mr. Billingham insisted doggedly.

“We will try another,” the Marquis suggested. “Charles! In case there should have been any slight discrepancy in the mixing, in case your elbow should have shaken with the angostura, your special attention, if you please.”

Charles had scarcely recovered from his hurt, but he obeyed orders. He shook the cocktails himself in front of the two men and poured them out, waiting for the verdict. Mr. Billingham felt that he had perhaps been a little unreasonable.

“I guess the cocktail was all right, Charles,” he admitted. “It’s myself that’s out of sorts.”

Charles accepted the *amende* and withdrew. Mr. Billingham leaned forward and gripped his companion by the arm. His eyes were fixed upon two approaching figures.

“Say, Marquis,” he demanded, “who the devil’s the young man with Madelon?”

The Marquis adjusted his eyeglass and stared at the newcomers. Madelon was wearing a ravishing little gown of lemon-coloured linen, with an adorable little hat. Her

companion was a tall, thin young Englishman in grey tweeds, who walked very slowly with the help of a stick.

“That is Captain Bruntingford,” the Marquis answered.

“Madelon introduced me to him last night.”

“Know anything about him?” Mr. Billingham enquired.

“Nothing whatever,” was the candid reply.

“Mademoiselle Madelon does, apparently, to judge from the way she’s been going round with him the last few days,” Mr. Billingham grunted.

The Marquis suddenly understood the cause of his friend’s low spirits. Internally he amused himself; externally he remained placid.

“Madelon has, perhaps, an eye to business,” her uncle remarked under his breath. “She is scarcely likely to find any other interest in the young man. Be careful! They arrive!”

Madelon entered the little glass-enclosed room with the sunshine streaming upon her hair, her eyes laughing, her step light and buoyant. She kissed her hand to Mr. Billingham, installed her companion in a chair and placed his stick by his side.

“Mr. Billingham,” she said, “let me introduce you in the best American fashion. Shake hands, if you please, with Captain Bruntingford, late of the British Army. Uncle, you have met Captain Bruntingford. Mr. Billingham, will you order us

some of those cocktails with a little froth at the top—or,” she added, turning to the young man——

“I’d like a dry Martini, if I may,” he begged.

Mr. Billingham gave the necessary orders. The little party joined forces. Mr. Billingham was prompt in extending an invitation to luncheon, but Madelon shook her head.

“I am lunching with Captain Bruntingford,” she answered. “He would be quite polite if we turned it into a *partie carrée*, but he would be very cross with me afterwards. Englishmen need so much humouring.”

“Americans can get the needle sometimes,” Mr. Billingham reminded her.

“Not wise Americans,” she replied——“not really good and kind Americans, who like their friends to be happy and who trust them. Besides, Captain Bruntingford and I have serious matters to discuss.”

The cocktails were drunk and approved. Madelon helped her companion out of his chair, gave him his stick, and they departed. Mr. Billingham stared after them gloomily.

“Who the devil is this fellow Bruntingford?” he asked again.

“I expect Madelon will tell you presently,” her uncle replied cautiously. “I know nothing about him myself. At the same time——”

“Well?”

“I do not fancy that Madelon is only amusing herself. She has, what you call, the eye to business, as we, too, upon occasion.”

Mr. Billingham found the suggestion consoling. He was able, even, to find some slight interest in his luncheon. Afterwards Madelon unexpectedly joined them. They had the corner table on the terrace and she accepted a chair and some coffee. An older woman might have found the streaming sunshine disconcerting. It brought out the flecks of gold from Madelon’s hair, but the faint violet lines under her eyes—perhaps a little more readily visible in the flood of light—were, owing to the freshness of her complexion, only intriguing.

“Tell us, my dear,” the Marquis invited, “more of your friend Captain Bruntingford.”

Madelon shut her vanity case with a click.

“I like the type,” she said, “and he orders the right sort of things to eat. He has just the right tone, too, with head waiters. In short, I find him quite an agreeable companion.”

“Is this sufficient,” the Marquis ventured, “to account for the enthusiasm with which you have accepted his recent invitations?”

“Perhaps not altogether,” she conceded. “You see, he was wounded in nineteen-fourteen, and afterwards he was attached to the Intelligence Department of the British Army. His section seems to have been broken up since the war and

he has gone into partnership with a firm of private detectives.”

The Marquis tapped a cigarette upon the tablecloth.

“Indeed,” he murmured.

“That sounds kind of interesting,” Mr. Billingham observed.

“He is out here,” she continued, “on some sort of business for his firm. That is exactly as much as he has confided in me. I am beginning to believe,” she went on, with a sigh, “that it is as much as he means to tell me. And I am just a little curious.”

Madelon paused for a moment. She was gazing out of the window through the dark green of the gardens, towards the stucco front of the Casino.

“Every afternoon,” she proceeded, “he drives himself in a little two-seated car towards La Turbie; always in the same direction, always about the same hour. Another thing about that expedition rather interests me, too. Always, before he starts, he feels in his pocket to be sure that his revolver is there.”

“But how observant!” the Marquis murmured.

Madelon shrugged her shoulders.

“The sort of grey tweed lounge suit which he wears,” she said, “is not made for carrying things in the pocket of which you wish to conceal the shape. Then, there is one

other somewhat singular circumstance. Although he is liberal with his invitations to me for luncheons, dinners, and suppers, he has never once asked me to accompany him in that afternoon drive.”

The Marquis smiled faintly.

“A little piqued!” he commented.

“Possibly,” Madelon assented. “In any case it has occurred to me that it was my turn to bring something into the bag.”

Mr. Billingham smoked serenely. He was feeling a little more content with life.

“There may not be room for us to butt in,” he remarked. “He may be just collecting evidence in some divorce case. These detective agencies don’t as a rule handle the big jobs.”

“Nevertheless, I am intrigued,” Madelon persisted. “There is much about Captain Bruntingford that interests me. Sometimes in the middle of a dinner or a luncheon I have seen a shadow pass over his face and a light in his eyes as though there were something near which he feared. I have seen him start when some one has nearly run into us at a corner. I am sure that he is a brave man, yet I am sure that he has been living in fear.”

“The remains of shell-shock, perhaps,” Mr. Billingham speculated. “Has he taken that little red car out this afternoon?”

Madelon nodded.

“He has taken it out and gone just the same way—upon the route the cars take for La Turbie.”

“It’s a fine afternoon,” Mr. Billingham said. “I’ll hire an automobile and treat you to a spin. We’ll go up to the Golf Club to tea.”

Madelon hesitated, but it was obvious that the idea attracted her.

“I should love to come,” she admitted. “Only, if we do happen to meet Captain Bruntingford in his red car, I hope he will not think that we are following him.”

“It’s an open road,” Mr. Billingham reminded her, “and there are plenty of others upon it. We’ll get a move on right away and see the sunset from the top.”

The little party started within a quarter of an hour. They never reached La Turbie. About half-way up the narrow road which leads into the upper Corniche, just after negotiating a very awkward bend, they came upon an all too common sight in this region of mountainous roads and reckless driving. A little crowd of people were gathered on the edge of the precipitous slope. The remains of a small car lay upside-down, partially concealed by a huge volume of smoke and steam and with little flames bursting from the petrol tank. A few yards away something was stretched upon the ground, covered by a mackintosh sheet. Mr. Billingham touched the driver upon the arm, and by his directions the automobile was brought to an abrupt standstill.

“I shouldn’t come on, Miss Madelon,” he advised. “Let the chauffeur back with you to the corner. The Marquis and I will see if there is anything to be done.”

Madelon was looking straight ahead of her. The colour had left her cheeks, but her voice was quite steady.

“The little red car!” she exclaimed.

Mr. Billingham nodded.

“I thought it might be,” he assented. “I’m afraid by the way they’ve covered the body up there isn’t much left of poor Captain Bruntingford.”

Madelon half closed her eyes.

“I think perhaps you are right,” she murmured. “Please come back to me soon.”

The car was reversed slowly to the corner and left in a safe place. From below a large police motor van came tearing up the hill, and from above a doctor’s automobile from La Turbie was winding its way to the scene of the disaster. Mr. Billingham and the Marquis joined the little crowd of people. No one seemed to know much of what had happened. The car had struck the low grey stone wall at the side of the road and turned over. The driver was apparently quite dead; his neck must have been broken.

“Better let me see,” Mr. Billingham suggested. “I’m not a medical man, but I did a little amateur surgery in the war.”

They made way for him and he lifted the waterproof cover. When, a few moments later, he rose from his knees, most of his healthy colour had departed. The doctor from above and a police *commissaire* from below arrived almost together. Mr. Billingham took the Marquis by the arm and led him a little way down the hill. They could see the marks of the car, could see where it had apparently skidded and overturned. About twenty or thirty paces farther on was a small villa, enclosed by a high wall of white plaster. Mr. Billingham looked at it speculatively. Then he looked back at the little group, at the police *commissaire* and the doctor both bending over the prostrate form. An ambulance which had followed the police car was now drawn up.

“Guess there’s nothing else we can do,” Mr. Billingham said. “We’ll get back to Miss Madelon.”

They returned, Mr. Billingham thoughtful and curiously silent. The Marquis answered the enquiry in his niece’s eyes with a grave little nod.

“A very serious affair, I am afraid, my dear,” he told her kindly. “The car seems to have struck the wall, skidded, and overturned. Poor fellow! He is quite dead.”

“How terrible!” Madelon murmured. “And how strange,” she added, a moment later. “I saw him drive once or twice and I thought he was especially skilful. The roads are not slippery. Why should he skid?”

Mr. Billingham came back from his brown study.

“I should say,” he remarked, “that it was not exactly a skid. He lost control of the machine.”

“But why?” Madelon demanded.

Mr. Billingham pointed to the little pink villa behind the high, plastered wall.

“Because the poor fellow was shot—probably from that villa—on his way up the hill,” he announced gravely. “Naturally he lost control of the car and over it went. As a matter of fact his neck was broken as well.”

“You mean that he was murdered?” Madelon gasped.

“Not the slightest doubt about it,” Mr. Billingham replied. “He was shot well on the left-hand side, and there seems to be no cover anywhere near except from that villa. I heard one of the labourers say that they heard the report of a tyre-burst. As a matter of fact it must have been the report of the rifle.”

“Did you tell the *commissaire*?” Madelon asked, as they started off on their homeward journey.

Mr. Billingham shook his head.

“He didn’t need any telling,” he replied. “Neither he nor the doctor can make any mistake about that. What I am curious about,” he went on, “is just this. There’s a heap of talk about the way accidents and sudden deaths and motor catastrophes are hushed up in this part of the world. Now we shall be able to judge for ourselves.”

A few days later the very suave functionary who presided over the lives and liberties of the Monégasques received a call from Mr. Billingham. He welcomed him with cordiality.

“Official or unofficial?” was his first question.

Mr. Billingham considered the matter.

“Because,” the other continued, “officially I can be dumb; unofficially I am able to remember that we are good friends, that you have done us services, that you are not one of those people who go about making trouble unnecessarily.”

“My visit is unofficial,” Mr. Billingham announced. “I came to ask whether you have formed any conclusions as to how that poor fellow came by his death—the fellow in the little red motor-car.”

The police functionary shrugged his shoulders.

“Our roads are dangerous to those not accustomed to them,” he declared.

“No one,” Mr. Billingham retorted, “can drive a car successfully with a bullet wound in his heart.”

The functionary stroked his chin.

“You noticed that, too?” he observed.

“I did,” Mr. Billingham replied. “I also noticed that the only very brief report of the accident described it as being due to a skid and Captain Bruntingford’s death due to a broken neck.”

“His neck certainly was broken,” the other remarked—“a sufficient cause of death, I think.”

“Have you no curiosity,” Mr. Billingham enquired, “as to the bullet wound?”

The other shook his head.

“We are never curious here about these things,” he observed. “Besides, what good purpose is served by destroying what is after all an amiable fiction? It is better for the world to believe that this young man died of a broken neck through a motor accident than that he shot himself.”

“Shot himself?” Mr. Billingham murmured. “Ah! . . . By the by, was the weapon found?”

“Not to my knowledge,” the police functionary admitted. “To tell you the truth, I sent two men up to search, but they were unsuccessful. There were a good many men at work in the fields and on the roads, and I am afraid that anything in the way of fire-arms is looked upon as a rather desirable acquisition amongst these people.”

“I follow you,” Mr. Billingham murmured. “You know that I am not a chatterbox. For the moment, nothing more! Oblige me with one piece of information.”

“By all means.”

“I should like the dossiers of the inmates of the little villa—‘Les Mimosas’ it is called—quite close to where the young man met with his accident.”

The police functionary looked across at his visitor keenly.

“Why?” he demanded.

Mr. Billingham shrugged his shoulders.

“An idea,” he replied.

“They shall be at your hotel within two hours,” the other promised. “In the meantime——”

“We are of one mind,” Mr. Billingham declared. “The young man must have friends, probably relations. Let it remain as a broken neck. But be sure I have my dossiers. There is one thing more, too. If any of Captain Bruntingford’s business friends should come over from England, will you ask them to favour me with a call?”

“With pleasure,” was the ready response.

It was one of the pleasing practices of Mr. Billingham’s cleanly life to perform certain acrobatic exercises in his bathroom every morning. He was lying upon his back, pummelling his stomach with both fists and indulging at the same time in deep breathing, when a knock at the door, the next morning, disturbed his praiseworthy efforts at maintaining his physical condition.

“What is it?” he demanded, sitting up.

“A gentleman to see you, sir,” was the floor-waiter’s reply.

Mr. Billingham reflected for a moment.

“Show the gentleman into the *salon*,” he directed, “and leave his card on my teatray.”

The footsteps outside passed along. Mr. Billingham abandoned further attempts to reduce his girth and jumped into his bath. Five minutes later, with tousled hair and glowing face, he picked up the card which reposed upon his tray.

“*MR. JAMES H. BERRY.*”

And underneath in small type—

“*Berry and Bruntingford,  
Private Inquiry Agency.*”

Mr. Billingham poured himself out a cup of tea and, with it in his hand, passed through to his *salon*. A small man, with sandy hair and an indifferent complexion, wearing gold-rimmed spectacles and obviously of furtive habits, rose to his feet as he entered.

“Mr. Billingham, sir,” he said, “I fear that I have disturbed you too early.”

“Don’t you worry,” was the cheerful reply. “We get up a trifle late here. Monte Carlo isn’t New York, or London either for that matter. Glad to see you, sir.”

He shook hands and waved his visitor to a chair.

“You are Captain Bruntingford’s partner, I gather,” he went on. “Terrible affair! What was the game out here, eh?”

Mr. Berry felt his breath being taken away. He removed his spectacles and polished them.

“I am very much disturbed, Mr. Billingham,” he confided. “The news of this accident to Captain Bruntingford was a great shock.”

“Accident?” Mr. Billingham repeated.

His visitor nodded gravely.

“He was, I understand, killed in a motor accident.”

“I guess not,” Mr. Billingham objected. “He was murdered.”

The little man jumped almost out of his chair. Then he leaned forward and looked at Mr. Billingham, his hands gripping its sides.

“You don’t mean that?” he gasped.

“I surely do,” Mr. Billingham replied. “He was shot through the heart. That’s how the motor accident happened.”

There was no doubt about it that Mr. Berry was not only taken by surprise but that he was deeply moved. He dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief.

“I told Bruntingford,” he declared, “that it wasn’t our class of business. Too risky and not enough to it! He wouldn’t listen

to reason. Murdered! Good God! They didn't tell me this at the police-station."

"They wouldn't," was the curt rejoinder. "Murders and suicides never happen in Monte Carlo—just accidents, that's all!"

"Well, well, well!" Mr. Berry exclaimed helplessly. "To think they'd go as far as that!"

"Who's 'they'?" Mr. Billingham demanded.

His visitor shivered.

"How much do you know?" he asked.

"Nothing," Mr. Billingham confessed.

"Where do you come in, then?" the other enquired, a little puzzled.

"I don't come in," Mr. Billingham admitted. "I want to. I should like to take on Bruntingford's job—whatever it was. That is, unless you're going to take it on yourself?"

Mr. Berry dabbed his forehead again.

"Take it on myself!" he repeated. "I'd sooner starve first. It ain't my idea of pleasant business, sir, and that's a fact."

"No?" Mr. Billingham murmured sympathetically.

“Give me the making of a divorce case, or the chance of collecting evidence in a slander job, or even a bit of blackmail, and I’m on the spot,” Mr. Berry continued. “When it comes to these big things with desperate people up against one—well, all I say is ‘take the job somewhere else.’ It’s what I told Bruntingford, only he wasn’t having any. He’d got used to these tough affairs in the Army.”

“Put me wise about this,” Mr. Billingham begged. “I’m interested.”

Mr. Berry cleared his throat. Somehow or other this powerful pink-and-white-looking man, in his bath robe, still glowing from his exercises, inspired him with confidence. He accepted a cigarette, and Mr. Billingham, after a moment’s departure from the room, returned with another cup of tea, helped himself to a cigar, and, crossing his legs, settled down in an easy-chair, with a liberal display of underclothes.

“Bruntingford was after forty thousand pounds,” Mr. Berry explained. “I never believed he’d get it, and he didn’t. He got something else instead, and it’s my belief that the next person who goes after that forty thousand will get his the same way.”

“What is it?” Mr. Billingham enquired. “Stolen money?”

“Blood-money!” was the hushed reply.

“You’ve got me guessing,” Mr. Billingham confessed.

“Eh?”

“What kind of blood-money?”

Mr. Berry hitched his chair a little closer.

“The Johnny who first came to see Bruntingford,” he confided, “was one of them foreign Jews, and he was marked down for trouble right enough. Never came except after dusk, and he was scared stiff if ever there was a footstep on the stairs. Got a cough, he had, too, enough to split him open. I didn’t understand a word of their lingo. Bruntingford had to tell me afterwards. It seems the little chap was a Russian—had been in the police, and got into trouble. He bolted from Russia and brought some of the papers from headquarters with him. It was through these he got on to the game. The Russian Government, if there is such a thing, want that chap Kitilsky who ran things there for a bit after they wiped the Tsar out. He escaped when the Bolsheviks took hold, but he’s alive still and they want him.”

“Why?” Mr. Billingham demanded.

“Got some papers, for one thing,” Mr. Berry confided, “and they believe he knows where there’s some stolen gold hidden. Anyhow, they want him bad. Ten thousand pounds reward they offered. The little chap, just before he hopped it, got on to the lay. He reckoned Kitilsky was living at a villa somewhere back of Monte Carlo. He daren’t leave London himself, though, and daren’t claim the reward. He wanted Bruntingford to take hold and see what arrangements he could make. He found most of the money and Bruntingford came out here. Looks as though he had discovered his man if your story’s the truth.”

“I guess that’s so.”

There was a moment’s silence. Mr. Billingham proffered a cigar, which was promptly accepted.

“You going on with this show?” the latter enquired.

Mr. Berry hesitated. There was a cunning gleam in his eyes.

“I’m none too keen,” he confessed. “I’d rather sell my share.”

“Your share?”

“The reward.”

Mr. Billingham smiled.

“You mean you’d like to get home with a sound skin.”

“I was never one of the fighting sort,” Mr. Berry admitted apologetically.

“I tell you what I’ll do,” Mr. Billingham suggested. “I’ll look into this matter. I can’t say I’ve got properly the hang of it yet, but I’d kinder like to say a word or two to some one in that villa.”

“You’re tackling it yourself?” Mr. Berry asked, with a shiver.

“I guess so,” Mr. Billingham admitted. “I don’t know as I see clearly as to the financial side of it yet, but I’ll give you a third of anything I pick up.”

“It’s a go?” was the eager reply. “I’ll stay here for a few days on the chance.”

Mr. Berry brought his visit to a close. He looked around the room wonderingly.

“What are you taking this on for?” he demanded. “You seem to have plenty of the stuff already—living here like a prince!”

Mr. Billingham smiled.

“Appearances are sometimes deceptive,” he confided, as he showed his guest out. “Besides, there is always the adventure!”

Mr. Billingham, later in the morning, drove up to the Villa des Mimosas in a closed car which he had hired in the Casino Square. He passed the crumpled-up remains of the little red automobile, and descended in a few moments before a huge nail-studded door let into the plastered wall. He pushed down the iron handle with a jerk, but found, as he had expected, that it was fastened on the other side. Rather to his surprise, however, after scarcely a moment’s delay a little click was heard and the door was released by means of a catch from within. He stepped into a narrow stretch of garden; uncared for and overgrown with weeds. The front door of the villa had been opened and upon the threshold a woman was standing. Mr. Billingham recognised her at once as an *habituée* of the Casino—a florid-looking woman with too much flesh, too much jewellery, ill-powdered and

besmeared with rouge. She was untidily dressed. Her hair was tousled. There was a hole in her black felt slippers. After the somewhat tense sensations of his impending arrival, Mr. Billingham was conscious of a curious sense of something inadequate in the situation. His surprise was increased when the woman addressed him in English.

“Are you the English doctor?” she enquired.

“American,” Mr. Billingham replied, with ready presence of mind.

“The same thing,” she muttered. “Come in.”

She closed the door carefully behind him. Mr. Billingham caught a glimpse of an unkempt-looking man securing the outside gate. The hall of the villa was dirty, ill-kept, and almost devoid of furniture.

The woman paused there. She spoke in a hoarse, husky whisper.

“I don’t know that you can do anything,” she said. “It’s about all up. He wouldn’t have a doctor before, though. The only chance is you might be able to keep him going for a week or two.”

“Let me see him,” Mr. Billingham enjoined.

She opened one of the doors which led out of the hall. Mr. Billingham found himself in what might have once been the *salon* of the villa, but was now a nondescript apartment, containing only a few oddments of furniture, heavy with

cigarette smoke, malodorous from the closed windows and reminiscences of past meals. Although it was a brilliantly sunny morning, a pair of shabby curtains were completely drawn—the light in the room was so dim, indeed, that Mr. Billingham nearly blinked. There was heat coming somewhere from a closed stove, and stretched upon a sofa by its side was the emaciated figure of a man wrapped in a dressing-gown. His throat was so skinny that its cords seemed to stand out almost singly. His deep sunken eyes were unnaturally large, brilliant with an uncanny light. His white face was disfigured by many days' growth of black and stubbly beard, his fingers were yellow with the stain of nicotine. By the side of his couch was a small table and a miniature roulette board. Close to it was the seat from which the woman had risen. By the side of the roulette board was a strip of paper and a pencil. The man spoke to the woman in a language of which Mr. Billingham knew nothing, and pointed to her seat. She replied soothingly. He shook his head and broke out once more. Then he coughed. She leaned over and patted his shoulder.

“You had better wait for a moment,” she said, turning to Mr. Billingham. “Every day we do this,” she went on, pointing to the board. “We spin twenty numbers. I take the results down and go to the Casino and back the same numbers in the same order. It is the only thing which distracts his thoughts since he cannot go himself. We have finished seventeen. Will you wait?”

“I will wait,” Mr. Billingham agreed.

The woman resumed her seat, threw in the ball and turned the wheel. The man leaned over, watching it eagerly. He took note of the number with a little air of satisfaction and muttered something, whilst the woman scribbled it down in pencil upon her list. Twice more the operation was repeated. Then the man leaned back. He spoke a few faint words; apparently in Russian. The woman appeared to assent and he closed his eyes. She drew Mr. Billingham a little on one side.

“He wants me to hurry off to the Casino,” she explained. “He says if I do so he will let you examine him.”

Mr. Billingham opened his mouth and closed it again. There were tears streaming down the woman’s terrible face; a sob choked in her throat.

“I am afraid,” Mr. Billingham began——

He stopped short. The door was opened. A man stood there; corpulent, unprepossessing. He wore only a pair of black trousers and a flannel shirt. He was the man who had closed the gate. He spoke to the woman; again in that incomprehensible jargon. She listened and turned towards Mr. Billingham. Her face had hardened, her tone was suspicious.

“There is a man here who says that he is the doctor,” she announced.

“He is probably right,” Mr. Billingham admitted.

“Who are you, then?” she demanded.

“I came to see who fired the shot from this villa which killed Bruntingford,” Mr. Billingham declared, keeping his hand near his hip-pocket and his eyes wandering from the woman to the man.

The woman’s face had been terrible before, but something of real fury gave it for a moment almost a diabolical expression. Her lips were parted. She remained, however, unexpectedly silent. There was a moan—a low moan but ending in a still more terrible sound—from the man upon the couch.

“The doctor!” Mr. Billingham exclaimed.

She called out something to the servitor. A little dark man with a black bag entered. She pointed to the couch.

“Go out and wait,” she ordered Mr. Billingham.

He went into the dirty hall and sat upon a crazy cane chair. The atmosphere of the place stifled him.

Presently he withdrew the bolts from the big door and found his way out into the tangled wilderness of garden which still remained beautiful. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead and waited. It was probably half an hour before anything happened. Then the woman came out. She advanced slowly towards him, and Mr. Billingham—who had seldom known fear—was conscious of a strange new sensation in his veins; a feeling that the sun had passed from the heavens and that there was sulphur in the air.

“You came to find out who fired that shot,” she said. “I did.”

“Why?” he demanded.

“That he should end his days a free man,” was the solemn answer. “That has arrived. Are you of the police? I am ready!”

Mr. Billingham shook his head.

“The police do not know,” he assured her hoarsely. “What about him?”

“He is dead,” she announced. “He died—just then.”

Mr. Billingham twirled his hat in his hand. It was so sordid, incomprehensible, amazingly unreal. Through a little clump of olive trees, he saw that the gate remained open.

“My affair here is finished,” he said. “I will go.”

She nodded.

“Go!” she assented. . . . “You are fortunate,” she added, a moment or two later, “that you did not come a few days ago with your question.”

“You know, of course, that there was a great reward for information about him?”

“I have known it for years,” she admitted. “Nevertheless I kept him hidden. We had always two foes to fight—spies and starvation.”

“And now about yourself?” he asked.

She stared at him. Another button of her dress had given way. She seemed more ragged than ever.

“Myself!” she repeated. “What does it matter? He is dead!”

## 38: THE SYMBOL IN THE BOOT

Mr. Billingham, attracted always by the unusual, paused in his early morning stroll through the clean streets, the flower-bedecked squares and along the glorious Terrace of Monte Carlo, to regard with some surprise the extraordinary spectacle of a man seated before one of the tables outside the Café de Paris fast asleep. The place was almost deserted, save for the sprinkling of visitors who came to take their early morning *déjeuners* in the sunshine, and Ben Hassim, the swarthy vendor of carpets, who stood patiently in the background, taking apparently no interest whatever in his immediate surroundings, yet with a curious air of watchfulness in his attitude and shining out of his black eyes. The young man who had attracted Mr. Billingham's attention was seated at one of the tables a little removed from the others and was sleeping peacefully and apparently naturally. It was obvious to an *habitué* of the place, however, that so unusual a proceeding would before long evoke interference from the authorities. A waiter had already called the attention of a *maître d'hôtel* to his presence; a gendarme from the Square had halted in his promenade and seemed to be contemplating action. Mr. Billingham approached, leaned over the sleeping man, sniffed the air for a moment and became immediately interested. He summoned the *maître d'hôtel*.

“How long has he been here?” he enquired, indicating the recumbent figure.

“Since the place was opened, monsieur,” the man replied. “It seems probable that he spent a great portion of the night here. It is time he moved on.”

Mr. Billingham produced a twenty-franc note.

“Will you let him remain for ten minutes longer?” he begged. “I shall return by then. I am going to the chemist’s. The young man is suffering from the effects of some drug.”

The twenty-franc note resulted in the usual miracle, and on Mr. Billingham’s return, in less than the time he had stated, he found the object of his solicitude still asleep. He poured a little powder into a wineglassful of soda-water and took the young man firmly by the arm.

“You must wake up,” he said.

At the second injunction the sleeper opened his eyes and stared around him in a dazed fashion. Mr. Billingham thrust the wineglass into his fingers.

“Drink this,” he ordered.

The young man obeyed. Then he blinked several times, stared around him again, and finally looked hard at Mr. Billingham.

“How did I get here, and who are you?” he demanded.

“How you got here is the question we’ve all been asking,” Mr. Billingham replied. “As for me, I’m just an American visitor, staying at the hotel yonder. My name is Billingham.”

The young man shook himself. He was a sunburnt, good-looking fellow and had a soldierly air notwithstanding his crumpled clothes, somewhat dishevelled appearance, and the fact, disclosed by the shape of his boots, that one leg was a little longer than the other.

“Well,” he declared, “they got me first time. Drugged and robbed, I suppose.”

He opened his coat and drew out a pocket-book. A considerable number of mille notes were there, some visiting-cards, and an odd letter or two.

“They’ve left you some money, at any rate,” Mr. Billingham observed.

The young man returned the case to his pocket.

“Yes,” he assented. “They haven’t touched that. They’ve taken the packet, though.”

He pressed his disabled foot on to the ground for a moment, and leaned once more back in his chair.

“Anything valuable?” Mr. Billingham asked. “Do you want to get in touch with the police? I’m rather close to the chief here.”

The other shook his head.

“The packet,” he confided, dropping his voice a little, “is not quite so valuable as the people who stole it imagine. All the same I think I had better be getting along. They’ll be after me again as soon as they find out.”

He rose to his feet a little unsteadily. There was still rather a drawn look about his face.

“Say, where are you staying?” Mr. Billingham enquired.

“Close here—at the Robespierre.”

“I’ll walk down with you if you like,” his rescuer suggested. “I’m just out to stroll about.”

“It would be very kind of you,” was the grateful acknowledgment. “To tell you the truth I’m still feeling a little giddy.”

He picked up his rubber-tipped stick and leaned for a moment heavily upon it. Ben Hassim, the vendor of carpets, who had advanced slowly nearer and nearer, salaamed as he accosted them. His white teeth flashed and his smile was as irresistible as ever. Nevertheless, there was a gleam of anxiety in his dark eyes.

“Has the young gentleman been robbed of anything valuable?” he asked anxiously.

“Why should you think that he had?” Mr. Billingham rejoined.

Hassim patiently deposited one of the rugs, which was slipping from his shoulder, upon the back of a chair.

“Because it was I who brought him down here,” he confided. “I found him up in Beausoleil. He was on a chair in front of a restaurant—not a good restaurant. I knew that if he stayed there it would be ill for him. I brought him here. I was waiting until he awoke.”

The young man’s hand went towards his pocket, but Hassim’s arresting gesture was full of dignity.

“I desire nothing,” he said. “Only I wish to be assured that the gentleman has not been robbed.”

The latter thrust the twenty-franc note back into his pocket.

“Curiously enough I have not,” he replied.

“Something was taken from my pocket, but it was of no value to anybody. Anything I had with me,” he added, looking intently at Hassim, “which is of value, I still possess.”

Once more Hassim salaamed. He gathered up his rugs and retreated. They both looked after him curiously.

“That’s a quaint fellow,” the young man remarked.

“Got something at the back of his mind about you,” Mr. Billingham mused, as they walked slowly off together. . . .

“My name is Powell—Leonard Powell,” the young man volunteered, after a moment’s silence. “I suppose you think

that I've been making a night of it?"

"Kinder looks like it," his companion assented.

"Well, I haven't. I'm here on a special errand. I knew I was being watched and I went up to dine at the quietest place I know of—right at the back of the town here. I had half a bottle of wine and a liqueur brandy. The last thing I remember was paying my bill."

"Any ladies about?"

"Not a sign of one," was the emphatic reply.

"Sounds kind of interesting," Mr. Billingham observed, as they neared the hotel. "Sure you don't want me to get you in right with the police?"

The young man shook his head.

"The police couldn't help me," he confided. "If you like to come in and have your morning coffee with me, I'll tell you just the little more there is to be told."

Mr. Billingham accepted with alacrity. They made their way into the almost deserted *salon* of the hotel and the young man, after a few minutes' absence for a wash and a change of linen, seated himself at the table opposite his guest. His clothes were well-cut, but a trifle shabby. He was, however, entirely presentable and Mr. Billingham found his original impressions confirmed.

“Read that first,” Powell enjoined, producing a long newspaper cutting from *The Times*. “I found it in the personal column a fortnight ago.”

Mr. Billingham adjusted his glasses and read:—

*“WANTED. Ex-officer or young man of courage, willing to risk his life in a dangerous enterprise. Adequate remuneration. No hardship, but real danger. Applicant must produce unexceptionable references and be unmarried.—Apply Box B. 771. The Times, E.C.4.”*

“I saw this,” Mr. Billingham declared, tapping the cutting with his forefinger. “I remember wondering at the time whether it was genuine.”

“I should think it is probably genuine enough, judging from last night,” the young man observed. “Anyhow, I answered the advertisement. I happen to have a few decent medals and a pretty good record, and I got the job. I was passed through three hands before I came to the principal. I can’t tell you his name, but he is the head of the greatest financial and exploration company in the world. The job when I got it seemed almost ludicrously simple. I was to bring a packet here and deliver it safely to the person for whom it was intended.”

“Sounds pie to me,” Mr. Billingham commented. “Why don’t you deliver it and get it off your chest?”

“It isn’t quite so simple as that. Even the person who entrusted me with the commission didn’t know exactly who would come for the packet. They could only tell me how to recognise him when he did arrive. Meanwhile, as they warned me, there’s an ugly crowd around, who would like apparently to nobble me and get hold of it, whatever it may be.”

Mr. Billingham for the first time felt inclined to doubt his companion’s *bona fides*. His story on the face of it was scarcely convincing.

“Do you know what this mysterious packet of yours contains?” he enquired.

“Not an idea,” the young man confessed.

“Do you know what sort of person you have to look out for?”

“He isn’t an ordinary personage,” was the somewhat hesitating reply. “I shall probably know when he is here.”

Mr. Billingham coughed. The greatest in the world are not infallible. For once in his life he had arrived at a wrong decision.

“Well,” he remarked, as he pushed back his chair and rose, “I wish you luck. I must be getting along.”

The young man walked with him to the door. The air was filled with soft sunlight and the faintest of southern breezes stirred the leaves of the trees in the gardens on their left. The hour was still early and there were few people about. A dark-

skinned denizen of some southern race was reading a newspaper in the little railed-off space in front of the hotel. Powell glanced towards him with a frown.

“Another of the brutes!” he muttered. “On guard, I suppose. . . . Well, good-morning, sir. Thank you very much for your help.”

Mr. Billingham, whose interest in the affair had experienced a slight revival, had a question to ask, but his companion had already left him. Just before he reached the opposite side of the way, he turned around, conscious of an unusual noise. An elderly gentleman of military appearance was knocking the stone balustrade behind which the solitary occupant of the hotel piazza was seated—knocking it with the obvious intention of attracting the dark-skinned foreigner’s notice. Mr. Billingham paused on the pretence of lighting a cigarette. He saw the young man who had been reading the newspaper rise to his feet and he heard the exchange of a few sentences in the strangest language to which he had ever listened. After a moment or two, the foreigner, with a curious little bow, resumed his seat, and the elderly gentleman, who had accosted him, turned towards the gardens. Mr. Billingham, as he passed, beamed at him amiably.

“If I’m not taking a liberty, sir,” he said, “I should very much like to know what language that might have been you were talking just now. Don’t seem to me that I’ve ever heard it before.”

“I don’t suppose you have, sir,” was the not ungracious reply. “I don’t suppose there’s another white man in the place

except myself who can speak it. It's the language of a God-forsaken little country right at the back end of Mesopotamia. I had a draft of the natives in a regiment I commanded during the war."

Mr. Billingham fell into step with his companion and signified his interest monosyllabically.

"Gave me quite a start to see that young man seated there in European clothes," the latter continued. "This place is full, of course, of Anglo-Indians, and there are a few Egyptians, but an Arab of that young man's race very seldom finds his way into civilisation. Damned fine fellows they are, too, most of them!"

"Did he explain his presence here?" Mr. Billingham enquired.

His companion smiled—a smile with which was associated a slight grimace.

"He did not," he admitted. "He seemed rather disturbed at my recognition, but in the politest possible manner he told me to go to the devil. . . . I wish you good-morning, sir. I am due at my barber's." . . .

The Marquis de Félan, Mr. Billingham's friend and confederate, was in high spirits that evening. He had won almost as much in the afternoon on his two favourite numbers as he had lost the evening before, and he insisted upon paying for the dinner with the money which he had previously borrowed from his guest.

“At roulette,” he declared didactically, “all that is needed is confidence. I say to myself ‘my numbers will arrive—they shall arrive.’ I see them arriving and behold they follow one another. But for the unfortunate closing of the tables in the Club at eight o’clock I firmly believe that my winnings this evening would have been enormous.”

“You did pretty well as it was, didn’t you?” Mr. Billingham asked.

The Marquis hesitated.

“I was on the point of doing well,” he confided. “I had re-established myself. A little more capital——”

“As a matter of fact,” Mr. Billingham interrupted, “a little more capital is what we all need. What about you, Miss Madelon?”

Madelon opened her purse and disclosed its contents.

“I am, what you call, nearly on the rocks,” she admitted. “I have a hundred-franc note, perhaps two hundred francs’ worth of counters, and a five-hundred-franc note at home in my stocking.”

“At home,” the Marquis repeated disconsolately. “I was rather hoping——”

“Quite impossible,” Madelon pronounced firmly. “My last five hundred francs does not go to the tables. Dear chief,” she went on, turning to her neighbour, “the time has arrived for us to act. Is there nobody here we can rob?”

Mr. Billingham shook his head sorrowfully.

“I can think of no one,” he confessed, “whom we can rob safely and honestly.”

“One might perhaps draw the line a little less rigidly,” the Marquis suggested, polishing his eyeglass.

“I’m not out to look for trouble,” Mr. Billingham grunted. “No, thank you! I guess if you’re up a gum tree, Marquis, the croupiers at the Sporting Club have raked in the bits. I myself have not touched that whip-up for charity we worked Mrs. Groosens for. And as for Miss Madelon, you know her position.”

Madelon shrugged her shoulders with a little gesture of despair. The Marquis hastened to explain.

“A loan, my dear!” he insisted. “I owe you money. I admit it. All shall be paid. In the meantime, however, our need for capital is somewhat urgent. I am delighted to hear that our friend is in a position to make us a small advance if necessary.”

“Mr. Billingham is in a position to do nothing of the sort,” Madelon replied. “You have borrowed all my money, uncle. That must be enough for you. Think of some way of earning it. We will all help. We are an amazing trio—unscrupulous, clever, brave! We are surrounded by pleasure-seekers and fools. There must be some means by which they can be induced to add to our exchequer.”

“Guess it’s up to you to sound the tocsin, Marquis,” Mr. Billingham declared. “You need the money. We don’t happen to, just at the moment. Do you get me?”

The Marquis coughed.

“In a partnership like ours,” he began, “a certain community of interest as regards——”

“Cut it out!” Mr. Billingham interrupted brutally. “You’ve had your share of everything we’ve done. You’ve borrowed from your niece, you’ve borrowed from me. If you can’t win, quit it!”

“One needs capital,” the Marquis complained. “Besides playing my numbers I have perfected a system which will infallibly bring me in a profit as soon as I get it started.”

“Sell it to one of my fellow-countrymen,” Mr. Billingham advised. “There are three or four hundred of them landing tomorrow morning. Three or four hundred Americans plumb full of the stuff, with fat pocket-books and large letters of credit!”

The Marquis’ eyes glistened wistfully as he toyed with his eyeglass. Suddenly he arrived at an heroic decision.

“I shall go down to the quay,” he announced. “I shall offer my services as guide. I will compete with that brawny ruffian from Cook’s.”

Mr. Billingham smiled incredulously. He said nothing, but the effect of the smile was potent.

“You think that I would not do that?” his *vis-à-vis* demanded.

“I’ll match you a mille you don’t,” was the prompt challenge.

The Marquis hesitated for a moment, gulped and made up his mind.

“Your wager is accepted,” he declared. “The money will be mine.”

Almost as he spoke the siren of the great incoming steamer rang out its blatant announcement, dwarfing all other noises, audible from Mentone to Beaulieu. Mr. Billingham smiled once more.

“Guess you don’t need to worry, Marquis,” he observed. “No one will be allowed to land until to-morrow morning. The first tenderful will arrive in the harbour at about nine o’clock, with money oozing out of their finger-nails.”

“I shall be there,” was the other’s valiant pronouncement.

Amongst several hundreds of intrepid transatlantic sightseers, there stepped from the tender on to the dock at Monaco, the following morning, the illustrious family of the Henry P. Hootermans of Chicago. The family consisted of Mrs. Henry P. Hooterman, a short, squat lady with an

immense capacity for speech, pushing in a crowd, and managing her own and every one else's affairs. She was of dark complexion, sallow, and she wore huge tortoiseshell spectacles. She carried a jewel case, which was somewhat ostentatiously chained to her wrist, and in the other hand an umbrella. She had flat feet which seemed to always take up a little more than their share of room upon the earth, and a voice and mien of authority which had won for her the position of President of the Society of Women Thinkers in her home city. She was accompanied by her daughter, Mamie, who had some claim to good looks and whose eyes were certainly dark and almost beautiful, but whose chances of success in life were considerably handicapped by the maternal environment. There were also a younger daughter, Sadie, still in her early teens, freckled, loquacious and gawky; a lad, who bitterly resented the whole undertaking; and finally Mr. Henry P. Hooterman himself, a tall, thin man, sombrely dressed, of pallid complexion, who had more the appearance of a Methodist minister than the multi-millionaire he was reputed to be. This estimable quintette stood upon the landing-stage and looked around them.

“What we need,” Mrs. Henry P. Hooterman said firmly, “to give us points about this place, is a Cook's man. Hi, you!” she added, lifting her umbrella and addressing an individual in a gold-laced cap. “Say, are you Cook's or American Express?”

The functionary in question, who happened to be one of the five officers of the standing army of Monaco and ignorant of any of the barbarian tongues, turned coldly away. The boy, looking upwards, espied a familiar sight.

“Say,” he exclaimed, “there’s a trolley-car up there. I guess if we can make the road we can have a ride round.”

“Anyway,” his father decided, “we’ll be moving along.”

It was at this precise moment that the Marquis, who had been talking for a moment to the ship’s doctor, with whom he had some slight acquaintance, approached. He raised his hat and addressed Mrs. Henry P. Hooterman in his own language.

“Madame is perhaps in need of some information?” he suggested.

They all looked at him blankly; Mamie in frank admiration.

“Say, ain’t they some dressers, mamma!” she exclaimed.

“Isn’t he cute!” Sadie echoed.

“Sorry we don’t get you,” Mr. Hooterman apologised.

“We’re Americans.”

The Marquis removed his hat once more.

“It is for that reason,” he explained in English, “that I have ventured to address you. It appeared to me that you might be in need of some information or advice. I am a resident here. My services are at your disposal.”

The little party were at once interested.

“Want to show us round, eh?” Mr. Hooterman ventured doubtfully.

“That would give me great pleasure,” the Marquis assented. “I might add that I only offer my services occasionally. I believe I have the honour to address Senator Henry P. Hooterman of Chicago.”

So far as the countenance of a man whose skin was rather like dried-up leather could express emotion, it was obvious that Mr. Hooterman was pleased. He smiled in wintry fashion.

“You know me,” he observed.

“Monte Carlo was apprised of your intended visit,” the Marquis rejoined with trenchant grandiloquence. “It was to meet you that I am here. I am not, it is true, a professional guide, but I sometimes occupy that position to people of distinction. My services are at your disposal for the day for the sum of five hundred francs.”

“Steep!” Mr. Hooterman commented.

“He talks some!” Mrs. Hooterman agreed.

“I think it would be lovely to be taken round by some one who really knows the place,” Miss Mamie cooed.

“That will include your meals and all gratuities?” Mrs. Hooterman enquired.

“It will be inclusive,” the Marquis promised. “If you decide to engage me I am at your disposal. Otherwise,” he added, glancing across the quay towards another little group——

“Those horrid Smithsons!” Mamie interrupted. “Dad, fix this up, please.”

“You are engaged,” Mr. Hooterman declared. “Lead on. What shall we do first?”

Many a time in later days the Marquis’ tone shook with emotion when he spoke of that morning. It is certain that he carried out his task manfully. He deposited the little company in an automobile and took them to the Casino. He obtained their *cartes d’entrée* in advance of a long line of their fellow passengers—a fact which immensely impressed the elder members of the family. He explained the game—to the details of which they listened with great earnestness—and at his suggestion Mr. Hooterman changed a note for a hundred dollars into counters, which, with the exception of a small handful which he retained for purposes of instruction, the Marquis distributed amongst his companions.

“Now,” he said, “I will show you how the betting is done.”

He placed one of the counters on fourteen and one on twenty-nine. One which Mamie thrust upon him he placed on “red.” They all watched breathlessly. The Marquis gave a little start as the ball slipped into its place and the croupier’s monotonous voice recited the result.

“*Quatorze, pair, rouge et manque.*”

The Marquis leaned gallantly across, picked up two louis from the “rouge” and handed them to Miss Mamie.

“You have won, mademoiselle,” he announced. “So, it appears, have I.”

He accepted thirty-five louis and swept them into his pocket. Mr. Hooterman watched him, fascinated. Mrs. Hooterman nudged her husband. Mamie smiled rapturously.

“Say, did you win all that?” she exclaimed.

“I did,” the Marquis acquiesced blandly. “By the by, the original louis belongs to your father. Pray take it and place it where you will upon the table.”

He returned the counter and explained further the system of staking. Several more ventures were essayed without result. Then, as it had been necessary to leave the boy and Sadie outside, they quitted the rooms and embarked upon a personally conducted drive to La Turbie and Mentone, winding up outside the Arcade which led to Ciro’s. The Marquis, who had been sitting in front, gallantly helped Mrs. Hooterman and Mamie to alight.

“It is, perhaps, the luncheon hour,” he ventured.

“Yes, sirree,” Mamie assented enthusiastically and with great emphasis.

“You spoke a mouthful, Mr. Guide,” Henry junior declared.

The Marquis was puzzled, but gathered that his suggestion was favourably received. They made their way along the Arcade until they were met by a *maître d’hôtel* from the restaurant. The season was waning and they were welcome

guests. The manager himself ushered them to a table upon the balcony.

“With what can I have the pleasure of serving Monsieur le Marquis?” he enquired, presenting the bill of fare.

One and all, the little party looked up in amazement. The Marquis found them strangely acquiescent in the matter of the luncheon he ordered. They did not even flinch at the idea of cocktails. As soon as the waiter had departed Mamie leaned forward.

“Why did that man with the black tie call you ‘Marquis’?” she demanded.

“It happens to be the title which belongs to me,” the Marquis explained, dropping his horn-rimmed eyeglass and gazing amiably around. The luncheon he had ordered consisted, curiously enough, of all his favourite dishes and he felt at peace with the world.

“You mean that you are a real Marquis—a nobleman?” Mamie persisted.

“My family has been noble for seven hundred years,” the Marquis replied modestly, yet with some dignity.

“I am the eleventh Marquis de Félan and I happen to be also a Count of the Holy Roman Empire.”

“Say, what are you doing in this guide business, anyway?” Mr. Hooterman queried, after a moment’s awed silence.

The Marquis shrugged his shoulders slightly.

“I am not in the guide business,” he declared. “To tell you the truth I have never before undertaken such an enterprise. I happen to be temporarily somewhat embarrassed financially and a friend of mine—a compatriot of yours, by the by—bet me a considerable sum of money that I would not offer my services to a family from your steamer and show them Monte Carlo. I took the liberty,” he went on, with a little bow towards Mamie, “of showing some discrimination, and—well, *nous voilà!*”

“Why, did you ever hear anything like this?” Mamie exclaimed.

“Shucks!” her younger sister murmured.

“Say, don’t you wear anything if you’re a Marquis?” Henry junior asked discontentedly.

“I knew he wasn’t an ordinary guide,” Mrs. Hooterman confided under her breath to her husband.

“Here, by the by,” the Marquis continued, in high good-humour, “comes the gentleman with whom I made the wager and my niece. Permit me,” he added, as Mr. Billingham and Madelon paused on their way to a table, “to present my niece and Mr. Billingham—Mr. Henry P. Hooterman and family.”

Mr. Hooterman held out his hand and gazed earnestly at his compatriot.

“Linoleum?” he asked.

“You’ve said it,” was the prompt assent.

“Boots,” Mr. Hooterman confided.

“I know the plant,” Mr. Billingham declared. “The Hooterman, Steadman Plant, Chicago.”

“Sit right down, you and the young lady,” Mr. Hooterman invited. “We’ve just heard of that wager of yours. Join us in a bite of luncheon, sir.”

Places were laid and a curious but interesting meal was started. Madelon sat between Mamie and her younger sister and enjoyed herself immensely. Mrs. Hooterman told the Marquis all about the Women’s Guild and how she became President, and Mr. Billingham discoursed eloquently on financial subjects. They were perhaps half-way through a very excellent repast when Ben Hassim, with half a dozen carpets hung from his shoulders in picturesque fashion, made his smiling and dignified appearance.

“The gentleman would like to take home to New York something wonderful—a carpet fit for a palace?” he enquired, displaying one of his rugs.

“Say, did you ever!” Mrs. Hooterman exclaimed, gazing hard through her tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles. “What sort of a foreigner might he be, Marquis?”

“Either an Arab or an Egyptian,” the Marquis replied. “He probably comes from somewhere beyond Jaffa.”

“He looks quite romantic!” Mamie sighed. “Momma, that’s a beautiful blue rug.”

“A thousand francs,” Ben Hassim declared, smoothing it down—“in your country a thousand dollars. I take it to the steamer for you.”

Mrs. Hooterman fell to examining the texture of the carpet, and Mr. Hooterman began to make facetious suggestions as to possible reductions in the price. Suddenly Mamie gave a little exclamation.

“The Prince!” she exclaimed. “Isn’t he handsome?”

They all glanced along the terrace. A man, tall, olive-skinned, with the thin aquiline nose and brilliant eyes of an Arab, dressed in robes of flowing white, with a white turban and gold bracelets upon his arms, advanced in leisurely fashion towards one of the empty tables, followed by a servant. The vendor of carpets dropped his wares and performed a strange, genuflectory reverence, to which the other replied only by a slight upraising of his hand. He passed on to the empty table and seated himself with the servant behind his chair.

“Say, do you folk know who that is?” Mr. Billingham enquired with interest.

“He’s a Sheik or Prince from somewhere in Mesopotamia,” Mamie declared. “He got on the steamer at Jaffa. They said that he had flown from Bagdad in an aeroplane which belonged to the British Government. Isn’t he just the most picturesque dear that ever lived?”

Mr. Billingham nodded a little absently. There were other things interesting him just at that moment. In the first place, Leonard Powell, the Englishman who had been occupying a table in a distant corner, had risen to his feet and was gazing across with eager interest at the object of Mamie's admiration. Furthermore, the young foreigner who had been seated outside the Robespierre Hotel earlier in the morning had also made his appearance in the Arcade accompanied by a smaller, coarser and more vicious edition of himself. The two had paused, half-way between the bar and the terrace restaurant, and were talking together eagerly. Their whole attention also seemed concentrated upon the Arab Sheik, who never once glanced in their direction. . . . Then, too, a change had come over Ben Hassim. He had dropped his wares and his eyes were fixed in almost terrified fashion upon the two new-comers. His rugs lay in a little neglected heap upon the floor. He mumbled to himself in some strange dialect. Continually he looked backwards and forwards from the spot where the two had halted to the table where the Arab Prince was seated. The climax of his disquietude arrived when the taller of the former, followed by his unprepossessing companion, began to move forward. Mr. Billingham half unconsciously rose to his feet. He felt the need of freedom in case action was required of him, yet of what might be going to happen he had not the faintest idea. It was Henry junior who first supplied a hint as to the possible course of the proceedings.

“Say, isn't that a dandy dagger!” he exclaimed breathlessly.

Mr. Billingham's eyes followed the direction of the boy's eagerly pointing finger. Ben Hassim had

retained one of the rugs upon his arm, and beneath its folds, partially concealed, his right hand was gripping a long, curved knife of wicked-looking blue steel, the hilt of which was of beaten silver, set with precious stones. With the rug still hanging over his arm, he moved stealthily out until he stood almost as though it were his purpose to intercept the two Europeanised Arabians. The manager of the restaurant, conscious of something unusual, hurried up with an angry exclamation. Ben Hassim took no notice. His eyes were fixed upon the advancing figures. Suddenly he began to talk rapidly in French to the manager. The latter appeared at first bewildered and then incredulous. Finally he turned away towards the two young foreigners whom the carpet vendor was indicating now with almost frantic gestures. He bowed, as though welcoming prospective clients.

“You wish for a table on the terrace, sir?” he enquired.

The foremost of the two young men hesitated. Ben Hassim took advantage of his pause to creep round the other tables and emerge upon the Arcade with one rug still hanging over his arm, effectually concealing the knife which only Henry junior and Mr. Billingham had seen. He stood between the table where the Prince was seated and the civilised parody of himself, about whose deliberate approach there had been indeed something almost sinister. The latter, checked in his advance by the manager, was led reluctantly to a table. Ben Hassim turned and with head respectfully bowed commenced to talk to the Prince—to talk in a strange language with many gestures and brandishing of the arms, almost with tears in his eyes. The Prince listened without movement, without any sign of hearing. In the end, however, he rose to his feet, and,

screened still by the carpet vendor, turned and entered the indoors portion of the restaurant. Hassim stood in the entrance, breathing heavily, drops of perspiration upon his dusky forehead, agitated yet triumphant. The manager came across to him, frowning.

“There are things here,” Hassim said, “which you may not understand—nor even I, wholly. You wish to avoid trouble in this restaurant. Go, then, and bring the Englishman to me who sits at the corner table.”

The manager was angry. He had a shrewd idea as to what it was that Hassim held in his hand beneath that rug.

“If there is any brawling here,” he threatened, “never again shall you bring your rugs to my clients.”

“That will be as Allah directs,” was the quiet reply. “Send or seek that Englishman.”

The manager, with a shrug of his shoulders, turned away and approached the young Englishman who had risen from his place but had seemed for the last few seconds uncertain how to act. Mr. Billingham, who had been watching his two nearer neighbours, turned to his companions.

“Will you folk just excuse me one moment?” he begged. “I want to say a word to our dusky friend there.”

He made his way to the adjoining table, and, uninvited, took the third chair. Neither the young man whom he had seen earlier in the morning, nor his more villainous-looking companion, indulged in any immediate comment upon this

very singular behaviour. The former simply looked at the newcomer with expressionless face and eyes from which even enquiry was absent, but the latter's right hand stole promptly underneath the tablecloth and remained out of sight.

“Say, you understand plain English, don't you?” Mr. Billingham asked.

“Naturally,” was the calm reply.

“If you don't put your right hand upon the table this second,” Mr. Billingham declared, “I'll take you by the scruff of the neck and throw you out, and your gun after you!”

Mr. Billingham's arm was outstretched; a strong, muscular arm. The little Arab with the squinting eyes looked into this intruder's face and decided that it was without doubt the face of a man who meant what he said. He was prompt to obey.

“Now we can talk,” Mr. Billingham continued, his eyes straying for a moment to the corner where the Englishman was standing irresolute, leaning upon his stick. “I'm taking a hand in a game I don't quite tumble to, but I guess I'll see it through. You're going to sit here quietly opposite me for another three minutes and let things rip.”

“Who are you and why do you interfere?” the taller of the two young Arabs demanded. “What is your interest in this matter?”

“I guess you'd better not be too inquisitive,” was the curt reply.

The young man watched with sullen eyes the Englishman, who, with the manager by his side, was now making his way towards the restaurant. He looked back at Mr. Billingham.

“If you knew what was going on there,” he said, pointing significantly towards the entrance to the restaurant——

Mr. Billingham, not wholly, but partially fell. Ever so slightly he turned his head in the direction indicated. Instantly the younger of the two Arabs, with a movement of incredible swiftness, stooped and half rose again. The sun, which was streaming in through the glass windows, flashed upon his silver-plated pistol. Quick though he was, however, he was not quick enough. With a sudden terrible blow, Mr. Billingham struck and pinned his hand to the table. The pistol clattered harmlessly on to the floor. The young man’s eyes glared. There was murder in his face. He dived, sprang to his feet, swayed one way and another. In Mr. Billingham’s Herculean grip, however, he was helpless. A couple of waiters hurried forward, followed by the manager. One of them picked up the pistol.

“What is the matter?” the manager demanded.

“Nothing, so long as we don’t let him move,” Mr. Billingham replied. “There’s some trouble going on. I can’t get the hang of it, but this little one is the guy who meant mischief.”

The Englishman emerged from the restaurant, with a smile of triumph upon his face. He waved his hand to Mr. Billingham. Then, recognising that something unusual had happened, he came over to the table.

“Are you through with your little job?” Mr. Billingham enquired.

“I am,” was the prompt reply, “and jolly glad of it, too! . . . Is there anything wrong here?” he added, with a curious glance at Mr. Billingham’s companions.

“There might have been if I hadn’t taken a chance,” Mr. Billingham acquiesced.

“You had better let him go,” the taller of the two young Arabs advised, breaking at last his long and impassive silence. “Our task is over. We have failed. The evil has come. The message has been delivered. All that we desire is to depart. I pledge you my word that my brother is now safe. He carries the symbol! He may not be touched!”

Mr. Billingham released his grip, and, in obedience to a sign from the manager, the *vestiaire* brought the two young men their hats and sticks. Very slowly they made their way back down the Arcade and disappeared. Ben Hassim stepped forward from the threshold of the restaurant. Once more he took up his place by the side of his little pile of carpets. Once more that broad and delightful smile illuminated his face.

“It was the great chief of my tribe,” he explained. “I had to pay my respects. It is a happy day, this. I will say eight hundred francs. The carpet to you shall be as a thank-offering.”

“Delivered down to the steamer?” Mr. Hooterman stipulated.

“You pay me when I bring it,” was the dignified response.

“Say, what about that knife?” Henry junior demanded. “Buy that for me, Dad.”

“Knife?” Hassim repeated, shaking his head slowly and extending his arms. “I carry no knife. One lives in peace on this side of the blue sea.”

Less than a mile from the land, the great steamer lay at anchor, blazing with lights. Twice her siren had made the night hideous. Now, with puffing and snorting, the last tender, filled with passengers, had left the harbour. The Marquis, well-content, replaced his hat upon his head, lit a cigarette, and stuffed, with amusement, his five hundred francs into his pocket. Hassim gathered up his rugs one by one, after a final glance into the brown leather pocket-book where eight hundred francs were safely bestowed. It had been a great day for him. Suddenly he felt a hand upon his shoulder. He looked round quickly and perhaps it was some revival of an ancient instinct which sent his right hand down to the folds of his robe. When he recognised Mr. Billingham, however, he shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

“Hassim, my friend,” Mr. Billingham begged, “put me wise to what has been happening. Curiosity disturbs my digestion. And let me remind you of this. I, too, had a hand in the game. It was I who found the Englishman recovering from his drugs outside the Café de Paris this morning. Even as I led him away the other came down the hill.”

Hassim nodded gravely.

“They come from the land which was once mine,” he explained. “He, the Prince, who to-night is in the air—for he flies back from Nice to Jaffa and thence to the valleys where his kingdom lies—and the others, one of whom was his brother.”

Mr. Billingham was patient.

“The Englishman brought a letter or something of the sort,” he suggested.

Ben Hassim looked around him. They were walking very slowly along the quay. Perhaps the weight of his rugs was great.

“Listen,” he said. “Years ago, before the great war, there came to the country where I was born—a great kingdom it was, and is, and ever will be—one of those strange Englishmen who seek for wealth. He stayed nearly a year with the King, the father of the Prince and that other. He paid money which made the Kingdom of my country richer in camels and horses and women and jewellery than any other, and he took in exchange the land where the oil was. But before he left, so that the King might not go back on his bargain, he took with him the secret token, without which no man can be crowned King.”

“The secret token?” Mr. Billingham repeated. “I don’t get you.”

“It is an image of the first king of my country—two thousand years old—beaten in gold,” the vendor of carpets continued

solemnly. “In it there are emeralds for eyes, rubies for lips, and pearls for teeth, yet so thin is it that a man might carry it in his pocket-book.

“They took it to England, but when they came to sink the wells and the pledge should have been redeemed, the war came. That other—the youngest son of the King—he chose what they call civilisation. He came to England, to school and to college. The Prince remained. Last year the King died.”

“Tell me the name of this country,” Mr. Billingham begged.

Hassim shook his head.

“Since I left it, I speak of it no longer,” he declared.

“The King, as I told you, died. That other had become what you see him—a western creature. He made favour with the Ministers in England. He sought for the throne of his father—the throne which belonged to the Prince—but the Prince, though this is the first time he has ever left his country, was the chosen of the people. He sent to those who owned the token. The land was theirs. The war was over. These English were honest men. The other, he too tried for the token. By arrangement—I know not whose—they sent it here. The other followed him. Because he might not raise his hand against his brother, he brought with him a friend of evil repute. If he could take back the token the kingship was his. He failed.” . . .

The Marquis caught them up. He was in high spirits.

“Madelon waits for us at the Café de Paris,” he told Mr. Billingham. “We have supper together and you will pay me a thousand francs. The family of Hooterman were well pleased with me. La belle Mamie has presented me with her photograph, Madame has invited me to Chicago, and Monsieur added a benefice to my fee. If you will give me what you owe me, my friend, I may consider paying for our supper.”

They took a little *voiture* and drove up to the Café de Paris. After the strain of the earlier part of the day, they found themselves singularly gay. At the next table, Hassim was stroking one of his beautiful rugs as he displayed it to a little party of new arrivals. The brother of the Prince was dancing with a professional *danseuse*. The Marquis, who was still in high spirits, called for the wine waiter.

“I am appreciating the joy,” he explained to his companions, “of leisure and recreation after toil. You others, what have you done? I, on the contrary, have gained—when you, my friend Billingham, have paid me—fifteen hundred francs.”

“I,” Mr. Billingham protested, “have also been busy. I have saved the life of a Prince.”

“And I,” Madelon sighed, “have heard all about her Women’s Guild from Mrs. Henry P. Hooterman of Chicago.”

“I will pay for the wine,” the Marquis decided.

## 39: THE SALVATION OF MR. NORTON

Even the serious business of losing money gracefully was suspended for a moment or two when Validia, followed by her latest cavalier, emerged from the baccarat room and leaned over the roulette table. All heads were turned. There was a little whisper of half reluctant admiration. Validia had been the acknowledged beauty of Monte Carlo for several weeks.

“Give me a mille or two,” she demanded, turning to her companion with a careless gesture.

He produced a substantial-looking pocket-book, deliberately extracted two mille notes and gave them to her. She passed them a little contemptuously to the croupier.

*“Maximum au zéro et les chevaux,”* she directed. *“La monnaie en plaques.”*

The ball was spun. One of the numbers at the lower end of the table turned up. Validia swept the remaining plaques into her bag and turned away.

“I do not know why I play this game!” she exclaimed angrily. “I always lose. Let us try the other table.”

Her cavalier followed her; silent, with an obedience which was a little dog-like and British. Validia walked slowly and there was no one who did not notice her coming and her passing. She was beautiful in the type which pleased most at the moment, with oval face, ivory-tinted complexion and black hair, smooth and glossy, brushed back and ending in almost a chignon. She wore a dress of white silk, with many flounces and with just a suggestion of the crinoline. Her only jewellery was a rope of wonderful pearls. Her total avoidance of all cosmetics, in a season during which even schoolgirls aimed at making their lips look like lines of scarlet, was in itself an aid to distinction. She walked alluringly. Her dark brown eyes, a little narrow, it is true, but very wonderful, held in them a light which many a man had known to his cost. Her lips were so provocative, at times so inviting, that one failed to notice their wickedness. She had come to Monte Carlo two seasons before in the Russian Ballet, unknown and without particular genius. She had abandoned dancing now and her jewels and toilettes were each month more gorgeous. She had given colour to a report and liked it to be understood that she was secretly married to a somewhat disreputable but wealthy member of a Royal House. She spoke of her secret in the strictest confidence to every one. It eased somewhat the strain of a position which she herself once naïvely remarked “might be open to misconception.”

She approached the farther of the three roulette tables and once more extended her hand to her companion, this time

without looking at him. It was a very beautiful hand, with long fingers and exquisitely manicured nails. There was an emerald ring on one of the fingers which was reputed to have belonged to Catherine of Russia.

“A mille,” she said.

The man by her side—very English, a little pompous, distinctly middle-class—hesitated.

“You have those plaques,” he reminded her.

She turned her head ever so slightly and his fingers went shivering for his pocket-book. He handed her the note which she took without a word of thanks. Again she staked and again she lost. She thrust the plaques which came to her as change into her bag. Then she turned towards the door.

“I think I will drink something,” she decided. “You shall take me to the bar, *mon ami*. That man Kretterson is a pig tonight. He will not give up the bank for an hour.”

“Why do you like so much to gamble?” he asked. “Why must it be baccarat? They tell me there is no game where you can lose so much.”

She laughed quietly and tapped his hand with her little ivory fan.

“I do not often lose,” she said.

Madelon, seated with Mr. Billingham in a remote corner of the bar, leaned over suddenly and laid her hand upon his arm.

“My friend,” she exclaimed, “I will tell you what it is which makes this place seem so satisfying to us—which makes us loath to leave. Underneath all its tinsel and theatricality there is real life to be seen here—human everyday life.”

“I guess we’ve seen a few strange things this season,” Mr. Billingham acquiesced.

“I do not mean the obvious tragedies,” Madelon continued. “I do not mean the suicides, the murders, the naked passions. I mean something nearer to our hearts. I will give you an example. . . . You saw the two who just came in?”

“Sure,” Mr. Billingham assented. “The woman Validia—the Russian woman—and the pompous English Johnny who follows her like a shadow.”

“Now I want you to look at some one else,” Madelon went on, dropping her voice a little. “Do you see that middle-aged, badly-dressed woman who has just changed her seat?”

Mr. Billingham nodded.

“Female hayseed type,” he observed. “Looks as though she had been dug up from the backwoods and dressed in last year’s styles from the department store.”

Madelon smiled.

“You are really a very observant person,” she murmured. “You see her. She is a study in herself. She was probably considered pretty when she was young. She lived in a small town and her father was perhaps a prosperous but unambitious manufacturer. She has gone comfortably through life and her chief troubles have been her domestic servants and the high price of provisions. Just now she has something else in her face. Can you see it?”

“She looks kinder scared,” Mr. Billingham suggested.

“She is living in the shadow of a new and terrible fear,” Madelon declared. “Something has happened to her of which she has never dreamed. She has jogged comfortably on through life and now suddenly there is a precipice at her feet. She is the wife of the man who is talking to Validia. He has left her alone all the evening. She has just changed her place so as to be out of sight. Look at her sitting there with her hands in her lap and her eyes staring through the wall. She is too rustic even to hide her sorrow.”

“Who put you wise to all this?” Mr. Billingham demanded curiously.

“I talked to her yesterday afternoon,” Madelon explained. “I could not help it. She looked so lonely. Do you mind if I go and talk to her again now?”

“Why, of course not,” Mr. Billingham acquiesced. “Come to look at her closely she does look as though she’d been put through it. I’ll try a hand or two at *trente et quarante*.” . . .

Madelon crossed the room and sat down by the woman's side.

“You are not gambling this evening,” she remarked pleasantly.

“I do not play these games,” the woman confessed, a little timidly. “I don't understand them. At home we play auction bridge sometimes, but I am not fond of cards.”

“Where do you live?” Madelon enquired.

“At Exeter, in Devonshire,” the woman answered. “My husband is manager of the principal bank there.”

“Manager?” Madelon repeated. “I thought he was a banker himself.”

The woman shook her head.

“It is a big position,” she said, “and my husband is very much esteemed in the city. When we married he was just a clerk in the bank with two hundred a year. He has just got on by being steady and industrious. He has a wonderful head for figures, too.”

“This must be a great change for you after an English city,” Madelon suggested.

The woman shivered. She was keeping her eyes carefully turned away from the further end of the room.

“It is a horrible place,” she declared, with a strange little sob in her throat. “The first day I thought I should like it. The band was playing and the sun was shining and Henry and I took a little carriage and drove out to Cap Martin, and after dinner at the hotel we got our tickets for the Rooms, and I won thirty francs. I thought it was quite a wonderful place that first evening!”

“Tell me,” Madelon asked—“that is if you do not think it an impertinent question—is your husband very rich?”

“We are very well off,” was the complacent reply. “He gets eight hundred a year now and he has just had a legacy. That is why we are here. We have never been abroad and he had to take his holiday in February, so we came out here for three weeks. Cook’s arranged it all for us. I thought that I was going to enjoy it so much and now it all seems terrible.”

“You mean because of that woman?” Madelon said kindly.

“I do not know why I talk to you like this,” the woman continued, with a note of desperation in her tone, “but there it is! Henry has gone mad. He will not let me speak to him at night. He doesn’t sleep. I wake up and find him with his eyes open, muttering to himself. He spends more money every day than our whole hotel bill on flowers for her. If I speak to him he storms. And,” she went on confidentially, “if any of the folks from around us were to get to hear of this—any of his big clients or the Bishop—we have all the ecclesiastical business—I can’t think what would happen.”

“Do you mind my asking you how much this legacy was?” Madelon ventured.

“Ten thousand pounds,” the woman confided. “Eight thousand when the duties were paid. We are going to invest it in house property in Exeter, and a little cottage down on the south coast for our summer holidays, but Henry thought he would like to take this trip first.”

“How did your husband become acquainted with this woman?” Madelon enquired.

“I don’t know,” was the helpless reply. “He stood next her one evening whilst she was waiting for a seat at a *chemin de fer* table. If any one had told me,” she continued, “that Henry Norton—the Henry I’ve been married to for twenty-two years—would behave as he is doing, like a stark, raving lunatic, all on account of a half-naked, shameless creature like that, I should have thought that they were crazy. Henry used to go on so at the young girls who wore short skirts in Exeter. He’s a churchwarden and the Bishop calls him his right-hand man in the city. And now look at him! If any of the directors of the bank were to see him at this moment where should we be?”

“Men are very trying creatures,” Madelon agreed soothingly. “Sometimes they break out like this, but it all passes. How long are you staying?”

“For another ten days. . . . How I shall live through them I don’t know,” Mrs. Norton added, with a little break in her voice. “For a week I have cried myself to sleep

and I go and cry in the afternoons, and now I haven't any tears left. I have nothing but just misery. I try to keep away from here, but what can I do? I only fancy things. I sat in the hotel all last night, in the lounge, and read last week's papers. I sat there until one o'clock, and he hadn't come in. Then I went and walked out on the Terrace, where they say people sometimes commit suicide. I never thought of that before, but when one has such a pain——”

Madelon patted her companion's fat hand for a moment.

“You must not be silly,” she enjoined. “Listen. I shall try and help you. There are ways.”

“Henry won't stand being interfered with,” his wife sighed.

Madelon nodded understandingly.

“I can quite believe that,” she said. “When an obstinate, rather narrow-minded man like your husband gets such an obsession he is hard to deal with. But there is always the woman. I shall go and talk to a friend of mine, who is very clever and very fond of helping people in trouble—what you call in English, I think, ‘a good sort.’” . . .

Madelon departed with another little nod. On her way out she passed Validia and Mr. Norton, the bank manager from Exeter. Mr. Norton did not appear to be talking much; his attitude was simply one of dogged and deliberate concentration. Validia was gazing at herself in a little mirror. She was looking bored.

“Let us return, my friend, and watch the play,” she suggested, putting away her vanity case. “If that hateful man is losing, perhaps he will give me the bank a little earlier. Would you like to be my partner this evening? . . . Well, we shall see!”

She rose to her feet. Her companion immediately followed her example.

“I do not understand the game,” he said hesitatingly, “but if you wish it——”

He followed at her heels; a little self-conscious, a little vain, only failing to be ridiculous because of his intense earnestness. As they crossed the passage, he leaned towards her.

“Must you gamble to-night?” he asked hoarsely. “Couldn’t we go out somewhere—have some supper—talk? I want to talk to you,” he went on. “I see nothing of you with all these people. I waited until four o’clock this morning, and then you were too tired.”

She laughed and looked at him with one of those sidelong glances which would have been a revelation to anyone from Exeter.

“Some time,” she whispered, “the caprice will seize me. I will take you by the arm. I shall whisper ‘let us go.’ Then you will be happy. Just along the passage there—it is not far. You will be glad then that you have waited.”

He was a man of imperturbable ways, of stiff and portly demeanour, but little veins stood out upon his forehead and something rose in his throat. Before he could reply they were once more amongst the crowd.

Mr. Kretterson was winning that evening and showed no desire whatever to relinquish the bank. Validia became fretful and irritable. She was ready to welcome any diversion. She received the bow of the Marquis with marked graciousness. She knew all about him—that he was poor but distinguished. Nevertheless, his notice was always pleasant and he might well be the medium to other things.

“Madame has yet not had her chance at the baccarat table?” he enquired.

She made a little grimace.

“That man wearies me,” she declared. “He wins and so he persists. After all, why not? I would do the same. The trouble is I desire to play and I do not like to wait for the things which I desire.”

“Why not punt against him?” the Marquis suggested.

“It is a winning bank,” she replied, “and besides I like the cards myself.”

She smiled at him, thinking that although he, too, was elderly, he was indeed a man of great distinction; contrasting him for a moment in her mind with that dumb, stolid Englishman who stood patiently waiting for her notice. And

the Marquis, looking at her perfect face, tracing the curve of her smile, appreciating the little glint of red in the liquid brown of her eyes, fancied himself back again in his younger days. She was indeed a very beautiful woman. Then he remembered his mission.

“I wish, madame,” he said, “to ask a favour. I wish to present to you my friend Mr. Billingham from New York. Mr. Billingham is one of those giants who have lifted commerce and money-making into a place amongst the fine arts. He has been an admirer of yours for a long time.”

No form of introduction could have been more apt. It gave madame great pleasure to make the acquaintance of Mr. Billingham. Her pleasure was enhanced when she found that he spoke quite tolerable French. The three talked together, whilst Mr. Henry Norton stood dumbly in the background. Presently, without a word of excuse to her late companion, Validia pointed to an empty seat and motioned Mr. Billingham to accompany her.

“You have left your friend,” he remarked, accepting, however, her invitation.

“Ah, he wearies me!” she murmured. “You need have no fear. He has not a word of French. It wearies me, too, to speak his ugly language. You, monsieur, speak French so well for an American. You have lived in this country?”

“Only as a pilgrim,” was the regretful reply. “We Americans do our best to be patriotic but our law-makers do their best to push us over on this side if we want a little freedom.”

“What sort of freedom do you want?” she asked softly.

Mr. Billingham’s answering smile was non-committal.

“Madame,” he confessed, “the freedom I most desire at this moment is to talk to you very confidentially—if I might take the liberty on an acquaintance so short.”

She leaned a little towards him.

“You intrigue me,” she whispered. “What have you to say to me so confidential?”

“I should like to speak,” Mr. Billingham confided, “of that poop who shadows you everywhere.”

She laughed; softly at first and then unrestrainedly, her head thrown back, both rows of her brilliant teeth exposed.

“Well,” she demanded presently, “what of him?”

“In the first place,” Mr. Billingham began, “do you know who he is?”

“A rich English banker,” she replied. “He is dull, he is stupid, he is not even generous, except that he is *fou de moi*.’ He wearies me. But what would you have? I make no pretence. I am Validia. Some one must pay that I may live.”

Mr. Billingham nodded approvingly.

“Madame,” he said, “I admire your frankness. I will imitate it. Your friend is not what you suppose him. He is not a banker at all. He is the local manager in an English country town of a great banking firm at a salary which would not pay for your silk stockings and gloves in the year.”

“What does he do here, then?” she asked incredulously.

“He has come into a legacy,” Mr. Billingham explained, “and before investing it he has brought his wife here for a short holiday. They have never been abroad before. They have been married twenty-two years. They live in an English Cathedral city in a ten-roomed house with two maid-servants. This is his long-talked-of holiday. Of the husband and his madness you know. The wife—she is plain, between forty-five and fifty, and your maid would not wear her dresses. You only need a glance at her to realise her position. She is face to face with a new and terrible sorrow in life.”

“You are a very strange person,” Validia observed. “Are you in earnest?”

“More or less,” Mr. Billingham assented.

“I have deceived myself perhaps in this man’s story,” she admitted after a moment’s reflection. “It is my imperfect knowledge of his language. Besides, he is so stupid that I thought he must be rich. How much is this legacy?”

“Less than eight thousand pounds,” Mr. Billingham replied.

She yawned.

“It is a disappointment,” she confessed. “I am glad that you told me. Still, if he cannot pay much for being foolish, he must pay little. Eight thousand pounds would cover my expenses here and perhaps he can borrow something.”

Mr. Billingham sat for a moment in silence. She looked at him curiously. A few yards away Norton stood watching them, waiting for his opportunity to slip into the vacant place if its present occupant should take his departure.

“Is it worth your notice, a small thing like this?” Mr. Billingham asked.

She shrugged her shoulders slightly.

“Why not?” she replied. “If he has no more, then at least I should be rid of him when it was gone. You know who I am and what I am. They say of me, my friends here, that I have one quality. I am truthful. That is all. What I need of men who admire me is money. All that I have to give—and it is much—I will give to the man who can make me feel. That man will not be Mr. Henry Norton—but what would you have? I, even like the others, must live.”

Mr. Billingham smiled enigmatically.

“If you were a man,” he said, “I should like to do business with you. I like your way of putting the cards upon the table. I shall now show my admiration by following your example. I am one of the few men in the world who have begged for an introduction not to offer their homage,

although I am not sure that at the present moment I do not consider you the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“It is something,” she remarked. “It is perhaps the truth. But I do not attract you, possibly?”

She turned and looked at him—looked at him thoughtfully and with a comprehension which amazed him.

“It is true,” she continued. “I do not attract you because you are another of these Saxons who possess the hateful gift of fidelity. You love another woman. Is it not so?”

“Perhaps,” he admitted. “In the meanwhile the reason why I asked to be presented to you was to beg you to open the door of that golden cage of yours and let this last captive escape.”

She eyed him speculatively.

“He does not wish to escape,” she declared. “And besides, why should I do as you ask? What are you offering me? Not even your homage, as you yourself have admitted.”

Mr. Billingham was a brave man, but even he was conscious of the peril of the moment. Nevertheless, he braced himself.

“Madame,” he confessed, “I have perhaps nothing to offer you. On the other hand there is something, some negative consideration, which I think you might find adequate.”

“You talk strangely, monsieur,” she observed.

“It is a difficult subject.”

“You need not fear to be frank with me,” she told him.

“Let it be so, then. If you do not grant my request I do not think that your nightly games at baccarat will continue.”

Whatever she might have been expecting it was not this. Her face showed no surprise nor any anger. She simply seemed suddenly to have become removed into another world. She had become entirely and absolutely aloof.

“I do not understand you,” she said presently. “At baccarat I win because I have an instinct for the game. There have been many who have protested to the management against a woman being allowed to take the bank. Yet, you see, I continue! You cannot disturb me!”

“I shall certainly try,” he warned her.

She laughed scornfully.

“A challenge!” she exclaimed. “Very well, I accept it! . . . Come here, my good friend, Mr. Norton,” she went on in English. “Why do you stand apart? You must meet this gentleman—Mr. Billingham from New York, I think he calls himself. He imagines that to-night I am not to win at baccarat. We shall see! Would you like to take a bank with me?”

“I am not sure that I have enough money with me,” was the somewhat hesitating reply.

She frowned and tapped upon the floor impatiently with her foot.

“Of course I will do whatever you wish me to do,” he went on hastily. “You know that I do not understand the game.”

“They will cash your cheque here,” she said. “Get me twenty mille and have more in your pocket. We will see whether we can win. And do not leave me again. I find these others wearisome.”

She bade Mr. Billingham a mocking farewell and departed; the man at her side obviously a little bewildered by her sudden graciousness.

The Marquis strolled up.

“Any luck?” he enquired.

Mr. Billingham shook his head.

“Not yet,” he replied. “We have exchanged long-distance shots. I hoped for terms, but she prefers a fight.”

“But I do not see, my friend, what you can do,” the Marquis protested.

“I have an idea,” Mr. Billingham confided. “When I have an idea of this sort it is not often a mistaken one. I have watched this game for several evenings. We shall see!”

Perhaps because of her beauty and evil reputation, or it may have been from the magnitude of the stakes, or even that the sight of a woman taking a bank at baccarat was in itself an infrequent spectacle, the usual little crowd gathered round

the table when Validia took the place which her predecessor had vacated. The first few coups were not productive of any great interest. The bank lost a little and gained a little. Validia sat with the face of a sphinx, drawing her card, announcing her coup with the air of an automaton. Presently, however, the game increased in volume. A wealthy South American, once successfully and once unsuccessfully, had called “banquo.” Suddenly there was a little stir. Mr. Kretterson had strolled up and taken the place which had been reserved for him. Every one leaned forward—the gambling was about to begin! He addressed a whispered question to the croupier as to the size of the bank, nodded, and produced a huge packet of bills.

“Fifty mille,” he declared.

There was a little hush. Mr. Billingham was amongst the crowd wedged behind his chair and looking over his shoulder. By his side was a young man—one of the celebrities of the rooms—who out of deference had been allowed a place almost to himself, but of whom Mr. Billingham, perhaps because of his democratic principles, had never once lost sight. Kretterson picked up his cards. He had a king and a queen. He asked for a card, and glanced at it carelessly. It was a nine. Validia toyed with her own cards for a moment, then almost for the first time she raised her head. At the same moment Mr. Billingham leaned forward. Their eyes met. Palpably she hesitated. Mr. Billingham was looking directly at her with his usual good-humoured and friendly smile hovering at the corners of his lips. Apparently, so far as he, at any rate, was concerned, no interchange of glances could have been more harmless or have lacked more

completely any ulterior significance. Yet when Validia looked away her fingers were trembling. She glanced at her cards uncertainly and laid them down. She had a king and a six. The croupier began to deal out the winnings.

“What on earth did Validia hesitate for?” some one whispered behind Mr. Billingham. “She couldn’t possibly draw with six, having given the nine.”

“Lost her head for a moment, perhaps,” someone else commented. “She does make the most extraordinary draws sometimes. Hullo, she’s going to quit!”

Validia had risen to her feet with a little gesture of excuse. The croupier announced that Madame was indisposed, and Mr. Kretterson, in response to a universal but unspoken invitation, took the bank. As she passed out, she touched Mr. Billingham on the arm. He followed her to a remote seat in a corner of the bar.

“Order me some brandy,” she begged.

Mr. Billingham obeyed in silence. Incidentally he ordered a whisky and soda for himself. In a moment or two Validia spoke.

“How did you know?” she asked, in a low tone.

Mr. Billingham shrugged his shoulders.

“I suppose because I am myself an adventurer,” he replied. “I go about the world in search of strange happenings, and I am always watching for them. As a matter of fact there is no

game of cards at which I cannot perform miracles myself. I dare not play poker, even with my enemies.”

“Still I do not understand,” she murmured.

“Simple enough,” he continued. “I’ve watched you take your bank from the background, and once or twice I’ve stood behind your chair. You are a woman of intelligence. Often I have seen you draw when no woman who knew the game would dream of it. That set me thinking. I looked round the table. There was one person always interested who seldom played; who seemed to prefer to move about and watch the drawer of cards. That person was perhaps the one human being in these rooms whom people would be least likely to suspect of malpractice. A few nights ago I saw! I gave you a warning when I was first introduced to you. You would not take it.”

“I never dreamed,” she murmured, “that you suspected. I thought you meant that you would complain to the management about a woman taking the bank. Others have done it. They hate women bankers.”

“To-night,” Mr. Billingham went on, “I stood by the side of your—shall I call him, accomplice? You dared not even look for the sign. It would have been a forlorn hope, in any case, to have drawn to a six, but I think that you would have tried it if I had not stood there.”

“Tell me what you propose to do,” she begged.

“You will return to that poor poop Norton the twenty mille and all that you have borrowed from him,” Mr. Billingham pronounced. “You will simply wash him out completely, and so far as I am concerned the matter passes from my memory.”

“You will keep your own counsel?” she asked eagerly.

“Absolutely,” he promised. “I am no philanthropist. I am not in the world to protect fools. If you are clever enough to bring this off I am not one of those who would interfere.”

She looked at him steadfastly.

“If you were Norton,” she said, “I would not let you go.”

Mr. Billingham smiled.

“Alas,” he sighed, “there is that other reason you were clever enough to divine. Now go and say your farewell to this pseudo-banker of yours. But first—have you any heart at all, I wonder?”

“Not for man or woman,” she answered, a little wearily.

“Yet for one moment look across the room,” he begged. “There is a plain, middle-aged woman seated there by herself. You see her?”

“I see her,” Validia assented. “She is Norton’s wife.”

Mr. Billingham nodded.

“She is wearing the wrong sort of clothes,” he continued, “and she knows it. She is looking plain and commonplace—and she knows it. Somehow or other the truth has come to her; in here, or in the quiet times of the night, when she hasn’t been able to sleep. She is suddenly frightened. Everything that made life to her has gone. She is sitting there because she hasn’t the courage to cross through the rooms—sitting there like some creature in pain. You can see all that in her face if you care to look—that commonplace face; eloquent now, perhaps, for the first time since possibly the day of her marriage, or the day her first child was born.”

Validia looked across the room incuriously. Her eyes were as hard as ever; her expression unchanged.

“Yes,” she said, “I see what you are trying to explain. That means nothing to me, however. I do not understand people who take account of the sufferings of others.”

Mr. Billingham was silent for a moment. Then he rose to his feet. She followed suit.

“I will go and keep my bargain,” she promised. “On the whole you are an interesting enemy. It is a pity that you are on the other side,” she added, with that queer little smile upon her lips which had turned the heads of many men and which two seasons ago had induced the critics to christen her portrait in the *Salon* a modern “Mona Lisa.” . . .

Mr. Billingham left her at the door and went in search of Madelon. She made a little grimace as she led him back to the bar.

“Here have I been dying for an orangeade,” she exclaimed, “and you sitting there with Validia, to the scandal of everybody. Your confessions, if you please!”

He drew her abruptly on one side. Norton, with unseeing eyes and uncertain footsteps, had entered the bar. All the prim stiffness of his deportment, his somewhat awkward self-assertiveness, had gone. He was like a man suddenly made natural by a catastrophe; a little frightened, cowed, stricken into common-sense. He crossed towards the bar, stood there gripping the rail with one hand, called for a drink and finished it at a gulp. His wife leaned forward from her place.

“Henry!” she called out.

He turned and looked at her, almost without recognition. Nevertheless, he made his way to her side. Mr. Billingham whispered in Madelon’s ear. Together they approached. Madelon took command of the situation.

“Still not playing?” she said pleasantly to Mrs. Norton. “Let me introduce my friend, Mr. Billingham. This is your husband, is it not?”

Mr. Billingham seemed suddenly possessed by one of those extraordinary fits of geniality which overwhelm any situation. Mrs. Norton’s confused surprise and Mr. Norton’s stupor were scarcely noticeable.

“Very glad to meet you both, I’m sure,” Mr. Billingham declared. “Why, there’s the Marquis!” he went on, as the

latter looked tentatively in. "Come right along," he invited, "Let me present you—the Marquis de Félan—Mr. and Mrs. Norton. Sit down and join us, Marquis. Waiter! A bottle of Clicquot 1911—Dry England, mind, not the Brut—some biscuits, and five glasses! You will join us in a glass of wine, Mr. Norton?"

"I thank you very much," was the colourless reply.

"Tell me, you came from Exeter—a banker there," Mr. Billingham continued, producing his cigar-case. "Any connection with the British General Bank?"

"I am the manager of the Exeter Branch, sir," Mr. Norton confided, with a faint return to his old assurance of manner.

"My, is that so?" Mr. Billingham exclaimed. "One of the finest banks going! I congratulate you, sir. Perhaps you know a friend of mine down there—Lord Herrington."

"Lord Herrington is one of my most valued clients," Mr. Norton declared.

"Say, if this isn't a small world!" Mr. Billingham observed, watching the wine being poured out. "That's why I like this place. We men who watch the run of things can come along and rub shoulders with all sorts and be none the worse for it, and then meet our own sort and get all the pleasure imaginable. Say, Mr. Norton, sir, I'm very glad to have met you. Lord Herrington has asked me to stay with him often. We've been associated in more than one financial

enterprise on the other side. I guess I may come and look you up at Exeter. Mrs. Norton, your very good health!”

By degrees the situation seemed to become almost normal. Mr. Norton talked about the banking business with increased eloquence, whilst his wife confided to Madelon, in an undertone, the extraordinary difficulties presented by the servant problem in Exeter. Mr. Billingham glanced at his watch.

“I’ve had all the gambling I want to-night,” he declared. “Let’s have a change. There’s a Gala Supper at the Carlton. Let’s all go. I told them I’d most likely want a table. What do you say, Mrs. Norton? I don’t look the figure for it, perhaps, but I’m a useful man at a fox-trot. You dance, of course?”

“We had lessons,” Mrs. Norton admitted, looking doubtfully at her husband.

“Anyway, we can watch the fun,” her prospective host continued. “Come along all of you. We’ll get an automobile outside. There are one or two questions about banking matters over on your side,” he went on, slipping his arm through Mr. Norton’s, “I’ve wanted to ask a man of your experience.”

At three o’clock on the following morning, Madelon and Mr. Billingham watched their guests step into a *voiture* outside the Carlton. Mr. Norton handed his wife in amidst a general exchange of good-humoured farewells, and was most impressive in his insistence that no one should forget their luncheon engagement with him on the morrow. He drew the

rug over his wife and leaned back by her side, waving his hand with something of his old complacency. Suddenly Mr. Billingham felt Madelon's fingers grasping his arm.

"You are the dearest person in the world," she whispered. "Not only that, but you are the greatest diplomatist. Did you know that he was holding his wife's hand? And did you see him smile at her at the table? If ever a man was trying to assure her that he was sorry and that he had to be forgiven, he was doing it. And her face—why, she was almost good-looking!"

Mr. Billingham watched the approach of the *voiture* which he had summoned.

"I guess that little affair's fixed up all right," he conceded. . . . "I wonder——"

Suddenly he was silent; thoughtful, almost depressed. Her fingers lingered in his as he handed her into the carriage.

"Sometimes," she whispered—"I wonder too!"

## 40: THE STINK WIZARD

The Marquis was in an evil humour. Neither the sight of that tactfully proffered apéritif, nor his niece's ingratiating smile, produced the slightest effect upon him. He had worked himself up into this state and he meant to remain angry.

“Four months ago,” he declared, thumping the little table before him with his fist, “you, my friend Billingham, joined company with my niece and myself in a partnership—an unwritten partnership, perhaps, but nevertheless a partnership—which was to be devoted to our mutual gain. I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly,” Mr. Billingham assented.

“We embarked upon various enterprises,” the Marquis continued, “and met with some success, but lately, what do we do? We rescue a foolish middle-aged man from the clutches of an adventuress. Not one penny comes to our exchequer. We help a young disabled soldier to carry out a delicate mission. Again not a penny! I ask you how long it is to continue? You others may have sources of wealth unknown to me,” he went on, casting a suspicious glance at Mr. Billingham. “As for me, I am penniless. I must live as a gentleman needs to live. How am I to do it, I ask you? You,

my friend Billingham, tell me that the common funds are exhausted. My niece here has not even a hundred francs to advance. What then, I ask you, is the use of our partnership? You two amuse yourselves whilst I starve.”

Mr. Billingham scratched his chin. He seemed disposed to take a lenient view of the other’s demeanour.

“There is some sense in what you are saying, Marquis,” he admitted. “At the same time, you might remember that your niece and I saved the money we made in one or two little affairs, whereas you——”

He pointed eloquently towards the Casino. The Marquis sat forward in his chair.

“Listen, then,” he interrupted. “I am not a man to accuse a friend of ill-faith. If you assure me that you still maintain your suite at the Hôtel de Paris, your manner of living here, your flowers to my niece, your champagne at our dinners, on the profits of those adventures in which we have been mutually concerned, then you are a very wonderful man. But I will be open. It seems to me that you have been engaged in other enterprises in which we have not been included.”

“As to that,” Mr. Billingham protested, “you are dead wrong. I may have come into a little bit on my own, but it hasn’t been through anything that’s happened out here. You’re for business again, I take it, Marquis?”

“I have seventeen francs and forty centimes in the world,” was the bitter reply.

Mr. Billingham looked at his watch.

“This morning,” he announced, “I shall provide luncheon at the Hôtel de Paris. Afterwards you shall both come to my rooms. I will then propound a scheme by means of which some temporary relief may be afforded us.”

“Dear, clever man,” Madelon murmured. “I have known for two days—since I saw you talking so earnestly with that terrible little Austrian—that something was coming.”

“I have an idea,” Mr. Billingham acknowledged, “but whether it will result in financial profit or not it is impossible at present to say. I guess we might as well try it out, any way.”

In Mr. Billingham’s sitting-room, an hour later, the Marquis and Madelon, on their arrival, found their host indulging in intimate conversation with a black-haired and bespectacled foreigner whom he introduced as Doctor Ludwig Stranz. The Doctor, who spoke English with a very guttural accent, was a man of heavy build and coarse features, untidily dressed and besprinkled with cigar ash. He was cordial but without any grace of manner.

“Friends of Mr. Billingham,” he declared, “I make myself glad to know. This is a beastly place. You perhaps haf’ gained money.”

“I most certainly have not,” the Marquis rejoined. “Do I gather that you too are a gambler, Doctor Stranz?”

“I am a scientist,” was the verbose reply. “I have discovered many wonderful things in my day, though many of my discoveries have been stolen from me and used to their profits by others. I have been to Paris with an idea of my own—useless! Then I come here. I meet my good friend Mr. Billingham. It was he who once found me money for a little invention of mine.”

“That was in the days when I had some,” Mr. Billingham explained hastily—“before linoleum went back on me.”

“Ah, that was a pity that you lose your money,” Doctor Stranz declared. “It is a great invention this of mine now. Even when put to so ridiculous a use——”

“That will do,” Mr. Billingham interrupted abruptly. “We will meet as arranged this afternoon, Doctor Stranz. Better perhaps come five minutes before the time arranged and meet me here. We can go through our plans once more so that there need be no mistake.”

“It is so arranged,” Doctor Stranz agreed, rising to his feet a little reluctantly. “I go to my lonely breakfast.”

It was a hint of which Mr. Billingham took not the slightest notice. They all three watched him depart.

“What an extraordinary man!” Madelon exclaimed.

“He is perhaps concerned with the enterprise you spoke of,” the Marquis suggested eagerly.

“He is a necessary part of it,” Mr. Billingham assented. “But I warn you there is no certainty about this enterprise. It may come off—it may not. At any rate it is my affair. No one else—though I shall rely upon your help—will be likely to meet with trouble.”

“The thought that there is an enterprise to be considered at all,” the Marquis declared with satisfaction, “gives to my luncheon an increased appetite. I suggest a descent.”

Madelon, who was looking in the mirror, sighed.

“I should like some one to admire my hat,” she observed, readjusting it a little.

“Its only fault,” Mr. Billingham suggested, “is that it hides too much of your face.”

“Its only fault that I can see,” the Marquis groaned, “is that it cost too much money.”

Madelon made a little grimace.

“Skinflint!” she exclaimed. “I made it myself!”

At four o’clock that afternoon, just as the *Salons de Jeux* of the Sporting Club were opened, one of the liveried footmen attached to the place announced to Monsieur Louchette, the manager, who was seated in his office, a visit from Mr.

Billingham and a friend. Mr. Billingham being a person who during the four months of his sojourn in Monte Carlo had established himself as an habitué of some consequence, the manager abandoned his habits of almost papal seclusion and intimated his willingness to receive the two gentlemen. The door was thrown open and they accordingly presented themselves.

“I’d like you,” Mr. Billingham said, having shaken hands, “to meet my friend, Doctor Stranz, who has been staying here for a while.”

Doctor Stranz bowed and shook hands solemnly. The manager regarded him with some curiosity.

“Ach, what a place!” the former exclaimed.

Monsieur Louchette cleared his throat.

“I trust you have enjoyed your stay here, Doctor,” he remarked. “What can I have the pleasure of doing for you, gentlemen?”

“For me nothing,” Mr. Billingham replied. “My friend the Doctor, whom I met in New York during the war, just asked me to introduce him. If you gentlemen have business to talk over I guess I’ll leave you to it.”

The manager looked at Doctor Stranz and disliked him.

“No need for you to leave us, Mr. Billingham,” he declared hastily. “What can I do for you, sir?” he added, turning to his companion.

Doctor Stranz sat down ponderously, placing the small black bag which he was carrying with him by his side.

“Sir,” he announced, “I haf’ met with great misfortunes here. I haf’ lost heavily. I haf’ lost all my beautiful money.”

“Indeed,” Monsieur Louchette remarked coldly. “If your business here is simply to tell me this——”

“It is not,” Doctor Stranz interrupted. “I would haf’ you know all of the situation. I come here with one hundred thousand francs—money which has been paid me for my marvellous inventions. I am a great inventor. There is no one who has such a brain as mine. I make everything that blow up. With a projectile as big as a pea I could destroy the Palais at Versailles or the Reichstag in Berlin.”

“Very wonderful, I am sure,” the manager observed a little impatiently, “but you will excuse me if I remark that I am busy.”

“Ach, busy!” Doctor Stranz repeated, leaning over and striking the edge of the table before which the other was seated. “You may be busy but you must listen to me. One—more than one hundred thousand francs of my hard-earned money I have lost here. Something must be done for me.”

Monsieur Louchette looked at Mr. Billingham as though to ask whether the man were a lunatic. Mr. Billingham shook his head.

“I had not received,” he said, “the slightest intimation as to what the Doctor was wanting. He simply asked for an

introduction. I am sorry I brought him if he is a nuisance. Perhaps I had better leave you alone.”

“Not on any account,” the manager begged. “You are sure that the man is sane?” he added, under his breath.

“Sane I am, but insane soon I shall be,” the Doctor thundered. “Now I shall show you whether I am a man of sense or not. I will talk to you plainly. I want my money back.”

“If you wish us to make an advance to cover your return fare home and reasonable hotel expenses,” the manager suggested, drawing a form towards him, “you can make application for a *viatique* which will receive due consideration. You of course understand, however, that you will not be allowed in the rooms again until the amount is repaid.”

“I want my money back,” Doctor Stranz repeated doggedly. “One hundred and forty thousand francs—that is just what I want.”

“You are wasting my time,” Monsieur Louchette declared quietly. “Permit me to wish you good-afternoon.”

The official’s forefinger strayed towards the bell which stood upon his desk. Doctor Stranz stretched out his hand. Something in his expression induced the other to pause.

“I have told you,” he said, “that I must have back my one hundred and forty thousand francs. I have not told you what I shall do if you refuse.”

“A threat!” the manager exclaimed.

“If you refuse I promise you this,” the Doctor continued earnestly. “At eleven o’clock to-night this place will be—is it not so?—packed with people. At five minutes past eleven you shall find them in the streets, on the promenade perhaps, the pavements, on the stairway, everywhere—but not in those rooms—not in those rooms, I promise you.”

Monsieur Louchette looked towards Mr. Billingham who nodded sympathetically, and, unseen by the Doctor, tapped his forehead. The manager smiled tolerantly.

“Well, well,” he said, “I am sorry for you, Doctor Stranz, but you must see that there is no reason why I should return your money any more than anybody else’s. There are dozens and scores here every season who lose more than you have done. You must come back next year and hope for better luck.”

“Will I haf’ back again my one hundred and forty thousand francs?” Doctor Stranz demanded.

“Of course not,” was the firm reply. “Your friend Mr. Billingham will explain to you the absurdity of such a suggestion. You will permit me.”

This time the manager succeeded in reaching the bell. Doctor Stranz rose stiffly to his feet.

“Perhaps,” he announced, “I will visit you again to-morrow morning.”

“It will be quite useless,” the manager assured him. “I wish you good-afternoon, gentlemen.”

A servant entered and held open the door. Mr. Billingham loitered behind.

“Say, I’m sorry I brought him in,” he apologised. “I had no idea he was lunny. He was a bright fellow enough when I knew him. The war again, I suppose.”

“Quite all right, Mr. Billingham,” the other remarked a little patronisingly. “We are used to strange visitors.”

The visit of the mad Austrian had almost passed out of the mind of the manager of the Sporting Club. Nevertheless at a few minutes before eleven he left his office and strolled through the Rooms. Late in the season though it was, they were still crowded, and with a somewhat brilliant gathering. There was an English Duke and an American millionaire playing in maximums at roulette, a noted Greek financier was taking a bank at baccarat, crowds of pretty and well-dressed women and well-known men thronged the place. With a little frown the manager recognised Doctor Stranz seated next to a croupier. He summoned one of his deputies.

“That man’s card of admission,” he directed, pointing him out, “must be withdrawn. He is a madman and declares he has lost one hundred and forty thousand francs. Doctor Stranz his name is.”

“I will see to it at once, sir,” the deputy promised.

Eleven o'clock struck. Nothing happened. Suddenly, however, there was a little murmur. The people at the tables raised their heads. The loiterers in the room made for the doors. There was one expression upon every face—an expression of pained and physical distaste, which speedily became loathing. People who had strolled towards the exits commenced to hurry; others from the remote ends of the room pressed behind them. Finally the players at the tables with one accord rose to their feet, some of them clutching at the money in front of them, some of them abandoning it. There seemed to be a faint white mist drifting about the room and becoming thicker every moment, and apparently from it there was emitted the most terrible, stupefying and noxious smell which ever greeted the nostrils of any human being. Every second it became stronger. The manager opened his mouth to give an order, but his lips were powerless. He rushed for the door with the others. In less than sixty seconds the passages leading into the Hôtel de Paris and the stairway—luckily a broad one—leading into the street were packed with a seething mass of shrieking, coughing, half-fainting people. Two of the servants made an heroic effort to open the windows and fell overpowered. The occupants of the bar joined with the waiters in a mad rush down into the back quarters. Here and there a woman fainted. One man, black in the face with coughing, threw himself over the banisters on to the tables below. In an incredibly short space of time not a soul remained in the roulette room, except one. Doctor Stranz, with a respirator over his mouth, strange-looking spectacles, and flaps over his ears, looked around him with a smile half satanic, half beatific.

“That was good,” he said to himself. “Before, it was I who felt sick at heart in these rooms. Now it is they who feel sick of the stomach!”

At a few minutes after ten o’clock on the following morning, the card of Monsieur Louchette, the manager of the Sporting Club, was brought in to Mr. Billingham, and Monsieur Louchette himself promptly followed. Mr. Billingham welcomed him with a grin.

“Say, that was some trick the Austrian played us!” he observed as he shook hands.

Monsieur Louchette was a man destitute of any sense of humour. For five minutes without ceasing he talked and Mr. Billingham listened in admiration.

“And then some,” the latter remarked, when through sheer lack of breath his visitor became silent. “But say, to get down to business, what are you going to do about it?”

“The police search now for the rascal,” Monsieur Louchette declared. “He shall be made to pay damages. He shall be imprisoned. Such an outrage has never before been known!”

Mr. Billingham stretched out his hand for a cigarette and thoughtfully lit it.

“I don’t know how the law goes on this side,” he remarked, “but in my country I’m not sure as it’s a criminal offence to make a smell—even if it could be proved that he did it.”

Monsieur Louchette was off again. A smell! It was in such cold-blooded fashion that his friend Mr. Billingham could allude to the ghastliness of what had happened? There had been a soldier there who had declared that never in his worst experiences of the war, when they had been caught without masks, had anything so hideous crept into their nostrils. There were ladies lying sick in their rooms in every hotel in Monte Carlo. The lost property office was besieged by an endless stream of men and women who had thrown away everything to escape from this horror. And Mr. Billingham could call it “a smell”!

“It was nifty,” Mr. Billingham admitted, when at last the manager had once more come to a pause. “I worked once in a tan-yard when I was a boy and I have been down in the hold of a Chinese yawl and I know San Francisco pretty well, but I guess the Doctor had all other smells beaten to a frazzle. Fortunately,” he went on, “my young friend, Mademoiselle de Félan and I were near one of the doors, and we got away slick. If it is a fair question, Monsieur Louchette, what do you really think you’re going to do about the fellow?”

Monsieur Louchette’s former eloquence seemed vapid compared to his present expressions. The mad Austrian, it appeared, was to be drowned in burning oil, guillotined and deported. In the midst of it all there was a modest knock at the door and Doctor Stranz was announced.

“I do not intrude, I trust,” he said. “I wished for a word with my friend Mr. Billingham. Ah, it is Monsieur Louchette, the manager of the Sporting Club.

Good-morning, Monsieur Louchette. Are your rooms aired this morning, and what about my money?"

Monsieur Louchette sprang forward, but Mr. Billingham's firm arm restrained him. Nothing, however, could check the torrent of speech which proclaimed his opinion of the new-comer, his intentions with regard to him, and his certain future. Doctor Stranz listened with amusement.

"That policeman," he confided, "he has been to see me already, but what can I do? There was a smell in your rooms last night. Who knows that I made the smell, and if I did, what is the law against one who makes a smell? Your policeman he has gone back to consult a judge. I have done nothing. I want my one hundred and forty thousand francs, but I have done nothing. If I get my money and I leave, perhaps there will be no more smells."

"Apart from everything else," Monsieur Louchette found breath to say, "there was money missing last night from the croupier's box near where you were seated."

Doctor Stranz drew himself up with dignity.

"I am a man of great honour," he declared. "I have never stole from anybody. All that I took with me from the Club last night I won. Why do you not give me back my one hundred and forty thousand francs. Then I think there will be no more smells."

"You rascal!" Monsieur Louchette gasped. "You will never cross the portals of the Club again. Your name

has a black mark against it for ever. Before the day is out you will be in prison.”

“I think not,” was the mild reply. “I think no man can go to prison in Monaco for making a smell—if I did. So you keep me out of the Sporting Club, eh? Listen, you give me my one hundred and forty thousand francs and I will leave to-night.”

“I will see you in hell first!” Monsieur Louchette thundered.

“What a pity!” Doctor Stranz sighed. “Mind you, I do not say I have done anything, but I tell you this, there is not in the world any chemist so clever as I—not in the whole world, mind. You think once more.”

Monsieur Louchette broke partially away from Mr. Billingham, and Doctor Stranz made for the door. On the threshold he looked back.

“You make a mistake—a great mistake!” he called out, departing and slamming the door behind him.

“What do you know about that!” Mr. Billingham exclaimed.

Monsieur Louchette took up his hat.

“I came,” he declared, “to ask if you could tell me anything more about this man.”

Mr. Billingham shook his head.

“I can tell you that he was in charge of a poison gas factory during the war,” he said. “I had a plant in the same city

making aeroplane wings. That's how I came across him. 'The Stink Wizard' they called him."

"Do you suppose he has really lost one hundred thousand francs at the tables?" Monsieur Louchette asked abruptly.

Mr. Billingham shrugged his shoulders.

"I am not a heavy player myself," he replied. "I have seen him get through quite a pile, but I kept no tabs on him."

"Any way," Monsieur Louchette remarked with satisfaction, "he won't get to the Sporting Club to-night."

"I guess there are a good many others who won't either," Mr. Billingham opined.

Mr. Billingham and Madelon dined alone that evening. The latter was a little nervous; Mr. Billingham inclined to be facetious.

"This afternoon," he announced, "I have been to the Law Library up at Monaco with an interpreter. So far as I can see the penalties against a maker of smells are purely nominal."

"There are other things," Madelon reminded him. "I hear Monsieur Louchette complains that a great deal of money was taken."

"Doctor Stranz assures me that he did not take anything with him except what he won," Mr. Billingham declared. "I guess he was telling the truth."

“What did Monsieur Louchette say this morning?” Madelon enquired.

Mr. Billingham grinned.

“If the Doctor had not made a somewhat inopportune arrival in my rooms,” he replied, “I’m dead sure that with careful handling, Louchette would have opened his pockets. As it was he lost his temper, but if to-night—well, we shall see! I hear there are twenty-four detectives in the Club and if Doctor Stranz tries to put in an appearance there will be trouble. Fortunately he won’t.”

“I shall be glad,” Madelon sighed, “when he is out of existence altogether.”

“Don’t say that,” Mr. Billingham begged. “He has given a little colour to a somewhat dull period. Besides which he promises to be an extremely profitable creation.”

“Money, always money!” she sighed. “I wonder whether I am getting tired of being an adventuress.”

He looked at her a little wistfully.

“There is another world,” he said quietly—“a world where pleasure is less of a business, perhaps, and happiness——”

“You are going to make me sentimental,” she interrupted. “Come, we must have our coffee and it is time that we went.”

“The first table to the left in the ‘Kitchen,’” Mr. Billingham reminded her firmly. “I shall meet you in the gardens—the seat I showed you. You have—everything?”

She nodded.

“Do you not see in how careful a fashion I am carrying my bag?” she asked.

A small crowd of detectives awaited developments in the Sporting Club that evening and a lackey stood by each window. Nothing whatever happened. At half-past eleven, however, the events of the night before were repeated with even more terrifying consequences in both the Casino and the *Salons Privés*. Precautions had been taken here also with regard to the windows, but the spread of the fumes was too rapid and stupefying to allow of more than one or two being opened. The crowds which thronged the two rooms gave even more poignant evidences of terror and panic than the visitors to the Sporting Club on the previous evening. Several croupiers attempted to keep their places but fell forward in a moment or two overpowered. As a safeguard the various exits to the *Salons Privés* had all been thrown open and from here the flight although precipitate was conducted with a certain amount of order. The Marquis, who had been seated next to a croupier at one of the end tables, seemed to have possessed himself of some of the perquisites of the absent Doctor Stranz. At the first symptoms of alarm he slipped a respirator over his mouth, spectacles over his eyes and flaps over his ears. He sat there, watching the scene for a few moments with every appearance of interest. To his

amazement, notwithstanding the general exodus, two women who had been playing on the other side of the table also remained in their seats, although they gazed around them with many exclamations of astonishment. The Marquis looked at them, then at the wheel which he longed to spin, and the brass box with the mille notes which he longed to investigate. His whole environment was irresistible. He produced from his pocket a hundred francs plaque and four louis, and held them poised in his left hand. With his right forefinger he spun the wheel. The ball sped round in jerky fashion and alighted in number twenty-nine. The Marquis adjusted his eyeglass, to be quite sure that there was no mistake, and promptly deposited his counters upon the number indicated. With painstaking care he counted out from the croupier's well six thousand three hundred francs, stuffed the amount into his pocket and rose to his feet. One of the women who had been regarding him intently—the fatter and fairer of the two; a woman wearing a dress of bright blue silk and a heavy gold chain around her neck—turned to her companion, who was obviously her daughter, a smaller replica of herself. In her excitement she spoke in German.

“Gretchen,” she cried, “where do they all go, these people?”

The daughter sniffed the air for a moment, her fat little nose uplifted.

“I am not sure, but I think they smell something, Mother,” she announced, also in German.

The Marquis abandoned his solitary amusement, rose sadly from his place and walked across the room, strewn with evidences of feminine flight, towards the lift.

Whilst Mr. Billingham still slept upon the following morning, there was a knock at his door and Monsieur Louchette was announced. It was a very chastened Monsieur Louchette. He was accompanied on this occasion by another functionary whom Mr. Billingham recognised as one of the principals of the Casino.

“Say, you’re bright and early!” Mr. Billingham complained, sitting up in bed, and yawning.

“We apologise,” Monsieur Louchette said, “but the circumstances may perhaps excuse us. We have searched the place for this man Doctor Stranz. We cannot find him.”

“We seek your aid,” the other functionary confided. Mr. Billingham swung out of bed and wrapped himself in a dressing-gown.

“Gentlemen,” he explained, “this man is no friend of mine, but he has asked me to respect his confidence as to his whereabouts. What am I to do?”

“We are prepared to make terms,” Monsieur Louchette announced.

“In that case,” Mr. Billingham replied, “take a seat. Order some coffee if you will and wait whilst I have my bath. Doctor Stranz will be here at nine o’clock.”

“Stop!” Monsieur Louchette exclaimed. “Mr. Billingham, you are a well-known citizen of a country we respect, your name and reputation are beyond question. Will you undertake negotiations for us with this abominable person?”

Mr. Billingham considered the matter.

“Why, I should say so,” he consented. “What’s the great idea?”

“He says that he has lost one hundred and forty thousand francs,” Monsieur Louchette continued drearily. “We have that sum here in notes. We will give it to him provided you can extract some guarantee that the proceedings of last night and the night before shall never be repeated by him, or by any one else with his connivance or help.”

“It seems a lot of money to part with,” Mr. Billingham observed.

“Nevertheless, it is the decision of the Council,” Monsieur Louchette replied. “One hundred and forty thousand francs is a great deal of money, but a repetition of the scenes of the last two nights would be utterly and entirely disastrous. If you can arrange this matter for us, Mr. Billingham, the *Société de Bains de Mer* will consider themselves in your debt.”

“I guess I can fix it if any one can,” Mr. Billingham promised. “Leave the money and come back at half-past ten.”

They left the money.

Mr. Billingham had chosen a table that morning on the terrace at the Réserve Restaurant at Beaulieu. A striped umbrella sheltered him and his guests—the Marquis and Madelon—from the sun. The west breeze across the bay was only a delight. Furthermore, Mr. Billingham had ordered the luncheon with peculiar care. There was caviare—the only pot in the south of France—served with ice and lemon—large caviare, dull, of the colour of olives, procurable only by an epicure of boundless means and boundless influence with those who control the kitchen. Then there was a bouillabaisse, to serve which the *chef* himself had arrived from the kitchen; a chicken which was a speciality of the house; wild strawberries, prepared with red wine; and a cunning mixture of liqueurs. Champagne followed the Chablis, and the brandy was served from a *bidon*. The whole meal was a wonderful effort.

“Never have I eaten better,” the Marquis declared, as he selected a cigar.

“A banquet!” Madelon murmured. “And now, please tell us everything.”

Mr. Billingham lit his cigar.

“I thought that for this little celebration,” he explained, “we were perhaps just as well outside Monte Carlo. However, the news is of the best. The *Société de Bains de Mer* has granted Doctor Stranz a *viatique* of—what do you think?”

“Five thousand francs,” the Marquis guessed.

“Don’t keep us in suspense,” Madelon begged.

“Of one hundred and forty thousand francs,” Mr. Billingham announced impressively. “The forty thousand francs I have already parted with.”

“For the smells?” Madelon exclaimed.

“Precisely—and to cover Doctor Stranz’s losses, which I understand amounted to nearly four milles. If ever I need a friend who can make smells he is at my service. I had hard work to escape from his embraces.”

“And the remaining one hundred thousand?” the Marquis gasped.

“The remaining one hundred thousand is for us three,” Mr. Billingham declared.

The Marquis’ fingers trembled.

“It is incredible!” he murmured.

“It is the adventure of our lives!” Madelon faltered.

Mr. Billingham produced three packets of mille notes; one he returned to his own pocket, the other two he handed to his companions.

“Marquis,” he said, “I congratulate you. The idea was mine, but a considerable part of the execution was yours and Mademoiselle Madelon’s. The organisation certainly never dreamed that the real Doctor Stranz left Monte Carlo twenty-

four hours ago, perfectly well content, with my forty thousand francs in his pocket. They believe that he departed at noon to-day with one hundred and forty thousand. However, the result to them is the same and they can afford the money. They paid that the *contretemps* of the last two nights might not happen again. They will have value for their money. Those *contretemps* are finished!”

“We only had six little bottles,” Madelon remarked.

“You have now a little over thirty-three thousand francs in your pocket, Marquis,” Mr. Billingham concluded. “You will not reproach us any longer, I trust, with those few efforts towards philanthropy which have wasted some of our time. On this occasion we have taken the great lesson to heart that philanthropy begins at home. There is also a little trifle which we have not mentioned—a little trifle to which I believe you helped yourself.”

The Marquis coughed.

“I helped myself to nothing that I did not win,” he replied. “Incidentally I discovered—the night of the second smell—how to win at roulette.”

“Tell us,” Madelon begged.

“That might be worth hearing,” Mr. Billingham observed.

“Stake your money,” the Marquis said impressively, “after the ball has ceased to roll!”

## 41: CHRISTIAN, THE CONCIERGE

Monte Carlo, on a moonless night late in May, is not without its sombre effects. Mr. Billingham, loitering on that extension of the Terrace promenade which passes the post-office and reaches to the bottom of the hill, took note of the changed aspects of the place during the last six weeks. The Sporting Club, once gaily illuminated, with blue-liveried servants waiting at the top of the steps to welcome visitors, and rows of automobiles drawn up against the pavement, was closed and dark. The great hotels which lined the hills no longer presented a semicircle of glittering lights. Here and there a few lamps twinkled out from the different villas, but, for the greater part, the hillside had become a chaos of unbroken blackness.

Mr. Billingham, standing with his back to the stone balustrade, smoking thoughtfully and looking landwards, was suddenly aware of a touch upon his arm. He turned abruptly to find Madelon by his side, a black silk cloak thrown over her evening gown. Her approach had been, perhaps purposely, noiseless. She seemed to have crept out of the void.

“Useless!” she laughed. “I came to make discoveries and behold I find you alone and apparently star-gazing.”

“Not star-gazing,” Mr. Billingham murmured.

“Seriously, I am disappointed,” she went on. “I thought there must have been some reason for these mysterious nocturnal strolls of yours.”

“There is a reason,” Mr. Billingham confided.

“An assigation?”

He shook his head.

“Look carefully,” he directed, “exactly where I am pointing and tell me whether you see anything.”

She stood by his side and obeyed.

“I see something,” she admitted, “which looks like a rapidly-moving glow-worm, appearing and disappearing.”

Mr. Billingham nodded.

“I will tell you what it is,” he said. “It is some one with an electric torch moving about in a room of an hotel which is closed for the season.”

“A caretaker, perhaps,” she suggested.

“Perhaps,” he assented. “Yet one wonders why a caretaker should be wandering about always in the same room at night-time.”

“He may be sleeping there,” she observed.

“Then why not use the electric light in an ordinary way?” Mr. Billingham rejoined. “Of course,” he went on, “there may be a very simple explanation. There probably is. Yet there are other things which have made me wonder about that light.”

“As for instance?” Madelon demanded.

“The first time I noticed it there was just a little moonlight and I could see that the light came from the fifth window of the third story of the Hôtel d’Angleterre. It was at that hotel, as I dare say you remember, that Seth Dickerson, the American who had been gambling so heavily, committed suicide a week or two ago.”

“I remember,” Madelon murmured. “They closed the hotel because of it a few days earlier than they meant to.”

“Just so,” Mr. Billingham agreed. “And the hotel has remained closed ever since. There is no caretaker in it. Whoever is moving about that room with an electric torch is an intruder.”

“An empty hotel!” Madelon mused. “It doesn’t sound exactly like a happy hunting-ground. And why that particular room? The poor fellow committed suicide because he had lost every penny he possessed at the tables.”

Mr. Billingham did not reply. He was watching the faint flashing of the light. Sometimes it disappeared altogether for several minutes. At no time was it more than a glimmer.

“Nevertheless,” he said at last, “whoever is moving about that room is searching for something. You see the light is turned in every direction, but never for a moment straight at the window.”

“Shall we go up?” she proposed.

Mr. Billingham shook his head.

“Not to-night,” he replied. “To-morrow morning I shall call upon the manager of the Royalty Hotel, which belongs to the same people. If you are interested you can come with me.”

She thrust her arm through his.

“Meanwhile,” she begged, “let us go to the Casino. I am rather uneasy about my uncle. He has borrowed no money for two days and he is becoming mysterious.”

The manager of the Royalty Hotel and Mr. Billingham were from the first on the best of terms. Mr. Billingham in a very few words explained his mission.

“That poor chap Dickerson’s folk have been writing to me,” he said—“the fellow who committed suicide over at the Angleterre, you know.”

“That affair is all finished with,” the manager exclaimed hastily. “The hotel at first paid for the funeral and all expenses, but the *Société* has now refunded the amount.”

“That’s all right,” Mr. Billingham declared good-humouredly. “Seth Dickerson’s people don’t want any fuss any more than you do. Theirs is just a sentimental idea. They want me to have a look at the room where he died and send them a few trifling particulars.”

“Delighted to do anything we can for you, Mr. Billingham,” the manager assured him cordially. “Mr. Dickerson’s clothes and effects were all sent to an address in London, as I dare say you know. The loose change on his table was given to the servants. It amounted to less than their weekly tips.”

“That’s quite all right,” Mr. Billingham observed. “Naturally a fellow like Dickerson don’t commit suicide while he’s got anything left. How can we have a look at the room?”

“Christian, the concierge of the hotel, has the keys,” the manager replied. “He is here now helping our own man. I will send for him.”

He touched a bell, sent a message, and a few minutes later a tall, remarkably fine-looking man, in the uniform of the hotel, entered the room. He saluted Mr. Billingham, whom he knew slightly, and smiled at the young lady. To all appearance he was the absolute prototype of his class; brimful of knowledge, which he was only too anxious to impart, capable and good-tempered.

“This gentleman,” the manager explained, “has heard from the relatives of Mr. Dickerson in America. He wants to have a look at the room Mr. Dickerson occupied.”

For a single second there was something beyond ordinary interest in the man's face. Mr. Billingham, who had been watching him closely, took note of it.

"There is nothing belonging to Mr. Dickerson left in the room, sir," he pointed out.

"Quite so. I know that," Mr. Billingham intervened. "It's just an idea his people have. Want me to tell them when I get back what sort of a place it was he ended his days in. Silly idea—but folks are silly sometimes."

"You had better take Mr. Billingham and the young lady across," the manager directed.

"Certainly, sir," the man acquiesced. "If you and the young lady will step this way, sir," he continued, turning to Mr. Billingham. "I have the keys in my pocket."

They took leave of the manager and crossed the street towards the Angleterre. The concierge opened the front door of the hotel and they passed into an atmosphere of gloom and silence. There were dust sheets over the mahogany counter and the cushions of the lounge; a faint odour of tea leaves and disinfectants everywhere.

"I shall have to trouble you to come up the stairs, sir," Christian observed. "The lift is not running."

"On which floor was Mr. Dickerson's room?" Mr. Billingham enquired.

"The third, sir," the man replied.

They mounted the stairs in silence. In the corridors the sound of their footsteps awakened faint echoes. Even the stair carpets had been taken up and stood rolled together in corners. The concierge led them unhesitatingly to the door of a room which he unlocked and threw open.

“This was Mr. Dickerson’s apartment, sir,” he announced. “He shot himself in the easy-chair over there.”

It was a bedroom of the plainest possible description; spotlessly clean, bare now of carpet or even rugs, bedstead dismantled—an epitome of dreariness. There was a little dust on the floor and a little rim of dust which Mr. Billingham noticed as the door was opened. He looked around him in some perplexity.

“How long has this room been closed up?” he asked.

“About a fortnight, sir.”

“And you are sure that this is the room Mr. Dickerson occupied?”

“Quite sure, sir.”

“During that fortnight,” Mr. Billingham persisted, “has any one entered it at all?”

“Certainly not, sir,” was the confident reply. “No one has entered the hotel that I know of.”

The man stood, the keys in his hand, patient yet obviously anxious to bring this visitation to a close. Mr. Billingham

walked to the window, opened it and stepped out on to the balcony. He looked to the left. There were five windows to be counted. The one through which he had passed was the sixth.

“Have any of these rooms got more than one window?” he asked.

“The next door one has, I believe, sir,” the man answered, looking a little puzzled. . . . “Is there anything further I can do for you, or the young lady?” he added, after a moment’s pause.

Mr. Billingham looked around once more regretfully and sorrowfully.

“Well, I guess not,” he decided. “It’s a poor room, this. Pretty hard up towards the end, I expect.”

The concierge nodded.

“They stripped him clean, sir,” he agreed. “It’s a way they have down yonder. . . .”

The three descended the stairs almost in silence. Christian led them into the street, and Mr. Billingham handed him a twenty-franc note.

“I am very much obliged to you, sir,” the man said. “You are sure there is nothing more I can do?”

“Nothing at all, thank you,” Mr. Billingham assured him. “I will just have a word with your manager. . . .”

They re-entered the Royalty Hotel. Mr. Billingham with Madelon still by his side made his way to the bureau. The manager looked up and nodded.

“Satisfied your curiosity, sir?” he asked.

Mr. Billingham glanced behind him to be sure that the door was closed.

“I guess not,” he answered gravely. “I’m afraid there’s a little trouble ahead.”

The manager’s jaw dropped. Like all hotel proprietors he disliked trouble of the sort indicated by his visitor.

“Why, what is wrong?” he demanded.

“In the first place,” Mr. Billingham enquired, “what was the number of the room occupied by Seth Dickerson?”

“Number 167,” was the prompt reply.

“Precisely. Now your concierge Christian deliberately took us to 168 and showed it to me as the room occupied by Seth Dickerson.”

“I cannot imagine how he could have made such a mistake,” the manager remarked, with a perplexed frown. “He knows the hotel inside out.”

“Oh, he knew all right,” Mr. Billingham observed dryly. “Tell me now, have you keys to the hotel yourself, as well as the set Christian has been using?”

The manager opened his drawer.

“Certainly I have.”

“And a pass-key to the rooms?”

“I have both.”

“Then I want you,” Mr. Billingham begged, “to send Christian out of the way for half-an-hour and to take us across there.”

The manager glanced at the clock.

“That is easy,” he said. “I will send him down to the station to meet the four-thirty. There is always the chance of a visitor or two. . . . Excuse me!”

He spoke through a tube for a moment, then rose to his feet.

“Of course,” he continued, “I have not the least idea what you are driving at, Mr. Billingham, but I am entirely at your disposal. Come along, then!” . . .

They waited for a few minutes until the hotel bus had passed the window, then once more they crossed the road, entered the gloomy-looking building and mounted the stairs to the third floor. This time the manager opened the door of number 167. He had no sooner done so than he himself gave vent to a little exclamation of surprise, and Mr. Billingham, following close behind, whistled softly. The room—larger than the neighbouring one, with two windows and curved balcony—was in the wildest disorder. The carpet had been rolled back

and was lying in an untidy heap upon the floor. The bed-clothes had been pulled over the bottom of the bedstead, drawers stood open, an easy-chair had been overturned upon the floor and apparently the whole of its stuffing removed. The manager looked around him in blank amazement. Mr. Billingham was conscious of a feeling of intense satisfaction.

“I’m going to put you wise to something, Monsieur Lavallo,” he said. “You see for yourself that some one has made a systematic search of this room. What do you think they wanted? . . . I’ll tell you. They wanted the money Seth Dickerson won at the Casino on his last night there.”

“Won?” the manager repeated incredulously. “Why, Mr. Dickerson came home a ruined man. That’s why he shot himself.”

“Dickerson did nothing of the sort,” was the confident reply. “That’s what put me on the track of this trouble. I happened to know the croupiers at the tables where he played and two of the chefs. Seth Dickerson played at four tables on the night of his death and he brought home with him to this hotel a matter of between sixty and seventy mille. He had no more idea of committing suicide that evening than I have at the present moment.”

“Then why did he?” the other demanded.

“He didn’t,” Mr. Billingham rejoined. “He was murdered.”

Monsieur Lavallo had no words. It was Madelon who intervened.

“Murdered!” she gasped. “By whom?”

“By Christian, the concierge,” Mr. Billingham pronounced.

There was a moment’s breathless silence. In the midst of it Madelon raised a warning finger. From somewhere outside they seemed to hear the sound of a muffled footstep. Mr. Billingham moved to the door and looked out. There was no one in sight. He closed the door again.

“Listen,” he said. “I guess this is mainly conjecture, but I have a sort of knack of putting things together and this is how I build up this little affair. I knew Seth Dickerson. He wasn’t much of a man, but he wasn’t the sort to use a gun against himself, although I know he kept one handy. I saw him in the Casino the night of his supposed suicide and he couldn’t contain himself—told me he had been winning at every table. I asked the croupiers afterwards. They all said the same thing. He had been losing before, but he had been picking it up all the time that night. The long and the short of it is this. Seth Dickerson left the Casino and came back to the hotel with a packet of mille notes in his pocket and as nearly drunk as a man may be and keep on his feet.”

“He hadn’t forty francs when his things were gone through,” the manager objected. “The *Société de Bains de Mer* paid for his funeral.”

“Just so,” Mr. Billingham agreed, “but nevertheless he brought home sixty mille with him and unless I’m mistaken the sixty mille were at one time or another in this

room. I've a friend at Police Headquarters here, and although not a word of the proceedings at the inquest crept into the press, I got to know all about it. When Seth Dickerson reached home that night there was only one man up in the hotel. That man was your concierge—a man with whom Dickerson was always too friendly. He invited him up to have a drink. Christian went off to get the bottle of whisky Seth ordered, and brought it up to the room. When he arrived, I'm figuring it out that Seth had hidden the sixty thousand francs or whatever it was. He was just sober enough not to be an utter fool. They sat and drank together, those two, and Seth bragged about his winnings. When he did it, I don't know, but I reckon that your man shot him when he sat in that chair drunk, went through him for the money, failed to find it and got out scared. Or it's likely enough that Seth told him he had hidden it without telling him where. Anyway when he shot him he expected to get hold of the sixty thousand francs right away. He couldn't find them and he had to clear out. What happened then? The room was closed up for a time, until after the inquest. No searching was done because no one had any idea that there was anything to look for. Your concierge knew, though. You closed the hotel and I don't blame you. Your man didn't want to come in during the day-time, although he had the keys, but for the last two nights he has been ransacking this room."

"How do you know that?" Monsieur Lavalley demanded.

"Because I have a fancy for moonlight strolls," Mr. Billingham explained. "The last three nights, from the promenade down below, I've seen some one hunting round here with an electric torch. It fitted in with my own ideas, so

I came to you and asked to be shown this room. Just as I imagined he might, Christian took me to the next room. I could see from below that the room he was searching had two windows, because every now and then the light disappeared.”

“There is some one outside,” Madelon interrupted suddenly.

They all listened. There was nothing to be heard. The silence of the great empty hotel seemed almost oppressive. Mr. Billingham moved softly to the door and threw it open. He stood there for a moment, listening, his right hand underneath his coat. A peculiar gloom seemed to envelop the place. There was no one in sight, however, no sound to be heard. Yet, curiously enough, Mr. Billingham had the same idea as Madelon. He felt that there was some one near. He closed the door carefully and this time he turned the key in the lock.

“Christian killed Seth Dickerson all right,” he declared, “but as yet he hasn’t lifted the money.”

Monsieur Lavallo took out his handkerchief and dabbed his forehead.

“I do not understand, Mr. Billingham,” he said, “how you dare take all this for granted.”

“Will you explain to me the lights in this room for the last three nights, then?” Mr. Billingham demanded. “Will you tell me why your concierge, when ordered to show me this room,

showed me the adjoining one? Will you tell me what all this disorder means but a systematic search, and by whom? Who else has had access to the place? No, sir, Seth Dickerson never shot himself. He lost his life because he drank like a fool and hobnobbed with a ruffian. The sixty thousand francs for which he was murdered are in this room and I'm laying odds," Mr. Billingham concluded, "that I find them within ten minutes."

"It seems to me that some one has searched the place pretty thoroughly already," Monsieur Lavalle remarked grimly. "They have torn the stuffing out of my chairs and ruined my carpet."

"They have searched," Mr. Billingham admitted, "but they didn't know what I know. Seth Dickerson had been a sailor in his younger days and was just as handy with his needle as any woman. They didn't remember that in the lapel of Seth's coat when he was discovered there was a needle. I'm taking a chance, perhaps," Mr. Billingham added, "but here goes!"

He produced a penknife from his pocket, and, moving to the bed, ripped up one of the pink damask curtains which hung from a movable brass rod at its side. He thrust his hand into the space and a beatific smile parted his lips. Suddenly Madelon pointed to the door. They followed the direction of her finger. There had been no sound, but the handle was slowly moving. The door was pressed inwards until the lock was strained. Mr. Billingham withdrew his left hand from the interior of the doubled curtains upon the bed, whilst his right hand went to his hip pocket. He motioned Madelon over to his side, and pointed at the door.

“Open it,” he whispered.

Monsieur Lavalley hesitated. The sight of Mr. Billingham’s gleaming revolver, however, reassured him. He turned the key. Almost immediately the door opened. Christian, the concierge, passed across the threshold. He seemed to bring with him something of the ghostly silence of the great closed hotel. He said not a word. He looked from one to the other and it was as though a sudden lunacy had seized him. His cheeks were chalk white, his gracious smile, his portly demeanour, his magnificent self-assurance, were all gone. He was like a person stricken with mortal fear. Nevertheless he did not flinch at the sight of Mr. Billingham’s revolver.

“I murdered Mr. Dickerson,” he confessed. “He told me he had eighty thousand francs. He was a fool to tell me. I murdered him with his own gun. I knew they would bring it in suicide. I have given myself away looking for the money.”

“The money was here all right,” Mr. Billingham observed.

Christian looked at him steadfastly, yet incuriously, looked at the notes upon the bed, looked at the ripped-up curtain.

“He put them there when I went for the whisky,” he muttered, in a dazed tone. “I thought I had searched the room, too!”

Monsieur Lavalley was standing at the bottom of the bed. He seemed unable to take his eyes off his employee’s.

“You must have been mad, Christian,” he exclaimed.

“I was mad,” was the dreary admission, “but eighty thousand francs seemed a great deal against the life of a man who drank, drank, drank until one could see him passing. I was mad. Now I am not!”

He spoke so coldly and so entirely without any trace of agitation that no one had any idea, until too late, of his purpose. He crossed the room and stepped out on to the balcony. They saw him silhouetted for a moment against the sky, saw his knee upon the balustrade, saw him go over—a shapeless mass, a gleam of white from his face underneath—and Madelon covered her ears with her hands. The two men stood silent. From somewhere beneath, in that deep gulf of blackness, came the sound, faint but unmistakable, of a dull thud. Mr. Billingham thrust his revolver back in his pocket, and moved anxiously to Madelon’s side. From below they could hear the sound of shrieking voices and pattering footsteps along the gravel path.

Mr. Billingham, like the vast majority of his compatriots, thoroughly enjoyed the ministrations of an efficient barber. He was just completing his second session of the day in the chair of his favourite operator—a light, before-dinner shave—when he happened to glance towards the door. Mercifully his attendant had completed his offices with the razor and Mr. Billingham’s violent start and sudden leaping to his feet were not accompanied by any disastrous results. With a towel still around his neck he made for the door just in time to confront a tall, thin, very obvious fellow-countryman who was on the point of entering.

“For the love of Mike!” Mr. Billingham exclaimed. “Eli Herd! Say, what are you doing here anyhow?”

If Mr. Billingham’s surprise at recognising his friend had been great Mr. Eli Herd’s amazement amounted to consternation. He was a man of sallow complexion who wore gold-rimmed spectacles and might presumably have been the subject of some nervous affection. He shook hands time after time with Mr. Billingham through sheer incapacity to do anything else.

“Well, well!” he faltered at last, with belated eloquence. “Some meeting, this!”

“Nothing wrong with linoleum, I hope,” Mr. Billingham demanded anxiously.

“Booming!” was the reassuring reply.

“Then, darn it all, why don’t you look glad to see an old friend?” Mr. Billingham insisted.

The new-comer made manifest efforts to regain some measure of poise.

“Say, Samuel,” he begged, “take that towel away from your neck, get your hat and come right along with me.”

His friend obeyed and the two men strolled off together.

“Well, what’s the good news anyway?” Mr. Billingham enquired.

Mr. Eli Herd was afflicted with another fit of silence. He shook his head. He had apparently arrived at some mournful resolution.

“Sam,” he said, “we will sit down together at one of those little tables outside the Café. You will find another—friend—there. You shall know everything!”

“What the hell is there to know?” Mr. Billingham, who was a little irritable that evening, demanded.

“In three minutes,” his companion groaned, “you will understand why my meeting you like this has been something of a shock.”

In less than three minutes Mr. Billingham understood perfectly. They crossed the Place in front of the Casino and approached the solitary figure seated underneath one of the striped umbrellas, reading a newspaper. At their approach she removed the newspaper for a moment from in front of her face and promptly dropped it. If Mr. Eli Herd had been surprised to see Mr. Billingham the lady was even more so.

“Samuel!” she cried breathlessly.

“Harriet!” Mr. Billingham gasped.

The lady rose to her feet. She was tall, good-looking in a severe way, of Junoesque proportions. She was somewhat severely dressed in the costume of an American lady travelling round the world with a suit-case.

“Say, what are you doing here with Eli?” Mr. Billingham continued.

As usual it was the lady who possessed the courage.

“Eli and I,” she announced, “are on our honeymoon.”

“My God!” Mr. Billingham exclaimed. “What about me?”

“Our divorce,” the lady went on, having now fully recovered her composure, “was pronounced last month. You should have had the papers by this time. In your absence there was no defence to the charges which I was compelled to bring against you.”

Mr. Billingham looked helplessly around. A waiter, full of unworthy suspicions, assisted him into a chair.

“Let me get the hang of this,” he begged. “You’ve divorced me and married my lawyer here, Eli Herd.”

“Samuel, be calm,” she enjoined.

“I’m calm enough,” Mr. Billingham assured them, his voice gaining strength at every moment. “Why didn’t you let me know about it all?”

“We thought it best to keep the matter to ourselves,” the late Mrs. Billingham explained. “Eli said that the divorce would cost us less pronounced in your absence. Our separation, Samuel, as you know, was irretrievable and final. I make no excuses for my action. Eli has looked after my interests in your absence with care and discretion. He is in a position,

fortunately, to release me from any financial obligations towards you.”

“I’ve cleaned up a little lately in New York,” Mr. Eli Herd confided—“over a million on that Ardington deal you may have read about.”

Mr. Billingham looked around for a waiter. Then his face fell.

“Only one way of celebrating an occasion like this,” he sighed, “and alas! that don’t go with you folk. Still as hot on prohibition as ever, Harriet?”

Mrs. Eli Herd coughed.

“To tell you the truth, Samuel,” she confessed, “although my principles remain unchanged, Eli’s health during the last few months——”

“The doctor has been most insistent,” the latter intervened.

“At this time of the day,” Mrs. Herd continued graciously, “we have slipped into the habit of taking what I believe is known as a ‘champagne cocktail.’”

Mr. Billingham fanned himself with one hand and summoned a waiter with the other. His order was given in such terms that within five minutes the suggested beverage was brought. He promptly raised his glass.

“Well, here’s how!” he said, a little weakly—“I mean,” he went on, correcting himself, “my best wishes to you both.”

“Say, I’m glad you’re taking this right, Sam,” his friend declared with an air of relief. “It didn’t seem to me you’d any kick, but still we didn’t reckon upon coming upon you like this before you’d heard the news.”

“It might have been more considerate to prepare me,” Mr. Billingham remarked, “but we’ll forget it.”

“I’m sure I shall always wish you every happiness, Samuel,” the lady went on, looking thoughtfully at her empty glass. “You and I were wholly unsuited to one another. You must forgive my saying that I looked for more principle and a more serious outlook from a man to whom I gave everything. You, from your point of view, required from me greater tendencies towards frivolity than I was able to indulge in. You took no interest whatever, for instance, in my work for the Women’s National Association.”

“Or in your campaign for prohibition,” Mr. Billingham murmured under his breath as he replenished the lady’s glass from the bottle which the waiter, according to instructions, had brought. “My dear,” he concluded, “let bygones be bygones. I bear neither of you any ill-will. To-night I am engaged, but during your stay here we must arrange a little dinner. Eli and I, too, must have a talk about business.”

Temporary addresses were exchanged. Mr. Billingham bade his friends farewell and made his way over to the Hôtel de Paris, where Madelon, seated at one of the little tables upon the Terrace, was awaiting his arrival. She looked at him curiously as he made his excuses, ordered the cocktails and called for the menu.

“I will forgive you for being late,” she said, “but tell me who those strange people were to whom you were talking.”

Mr. Billingham sat down.

“One of them,” he said, “was my wife.”

“Your what?” Madelon exclaimed, with a very queer little note in her tone.

“My wife—was a month ago, I mean,” Mr. Billingham explained. “She has just divorced me and married my lawyer. They are on their honeymoon.”

“And you didn’t know?” Madelon gasped.

“Not an idea,” was the emphatic rejoinder. “We parted many years ago. We couldn’t hit it off together. She is great on good works and all that sort of thing. And now——”

Mr. Billingham broke off. He was looking across the Square. In the distance he could just see Mr. Eli Herd replenishing his companion’s glass from the bottle. Suddenly Mr. Billingham began to laugh. He laughed till the tears stood in his eyes. He laughed till Madelon began to laugh too out of sheer sympathy.

“What a ridiculous story!” she exclaimed. “And a ridiculous situation!”

He wiped the tears from his eyes.

“Talk about adventures!” he murmured. . . . “Why, where is your uncle?”

Madelon shook her head a little sadly.

“He is behaving queerly again,” she confided.

“Borrowing money?”

“He didn’t ask me for any at luncheon-time,” she admitted. “He was looking dazed, though, and he scarcely spoke a word. I saw him again later in the afternoon coming out of Wedderburn’s, the English solicitor’s.”

“Can’t see how he could touch Wedderburn for anything,” Mr. Billingham observed thoughtfully.

“He changed his clothes some time ago,” Madelon continued, “so when he does come out he will be ready for dinner—and here he is,” she added. “Look at him, on the steps.”

Mr. Billingham glanced towards the Marquis who was standing with his hands behind his back, gazing out across the gaily-lit Square—lit not only with those tree-shaded electric lights, but with the glamour of the moon which was just showing from behind the hills. He stood for a moment like a man whose thoughts had wandered away. Then with the utmost deliberation he descended the steps and came towards them.

“I bet he’s got it stiff,” Mr. Billingham sighed. “I don’t care. He can have what he wants from me to-night.”

“Are you really so happy?” Madelon whispered.

“There’s one thing,” he began——

Madelon withdrew her hand—not abruptly, even, perhaps, with some reluctance. A *sommelier* had invited Mr. Billingham’s attention to the wine-list, and before he had departed the Marquis had entered, nodded to them both and taken his place. He drank the cocktail which was immediately presented to him, holding it for a moment a little away.

“Forgive me,” he begged, as he set down his empty glass, “if my toast is a silent one. You will understand it better, perhaps, when I tell you that I have paid my last visit—my last visit as a gambler, that is to say—to that pleasing but grotesque-looking edifice opposite.”

“I thought so,” Mr. Billingham groaned.

The Marquis leaned a little forward so that the few words he had to say could be heard by both his companions. His elbows rested lightly upon the table. His elegant finger-tips were pressed together.

“My farewell,” he confided, “is not of the nature you imagine. To-day has been for me the wonderful day of which I have always dreamed. I entered the Rooms at eleven o’clock this morning with the scanty remains of a mille note in my pocket. At luncheon-time I deposited at the *Credit Lyonnais* the sum of six hundred and fifty thousand francs. In the middle of the afternoon I handed to my solicitor a further

sum of four hundred thousand francs. I have in my pocket—forgive the bulge, which I know is most unsightly—a further two hundred and eighty thousand francs.”

Mr. Billingham and Madelon exchanged glances, their expressions instantly betraying one common thought. The Marquis smiled tolerantly. From his waistcoat-pocket he produced a banker’s receipt to which was attached a receipt signed by Peter Wedderburn for the sum he had mentioned. From the breast-pocket of his coat he withdrew for an instant an enormous pile of mille notes.

“Systems,” he declared, “will never win or even hold their own against the inevitable laws of chance.

Inspiration may at times make any man a fortune. The only reason why over there they do not fear inspiration is because there is no man who wins by reason of it, who does not lose by afterwards following a false one. To-day I have been inspired. I started with two modest *en pleins*. I found my numbers at every table. I increased my stakes to maximums. I still won. In the ‘Kitchen,’ before lunch, I had broken every record known. I had had forty-two *en pleins* for my three numbers, three-quarters of which were in maximums. Not only the *en pleins*, mind you, but when I saw this great wave of fortune I let myself go. I heaped on the *carrés* and the *chevaux*. Nothing stopped me. At the first sign of slackening off, however, I buttoned up my pockets. I had been playing for two-and-a-half hours only. I lunched without a word to Madelon. I visited the bank. I returned to the *Cercle Privé* with five mille in my pocket and no more. At twenty minutes past four I had won seventeen maximums on *en pleins* alone with many attendant stakes. I was being followed about so

that my progress became almost uncomfortable. For years they will talk of my fortune. The banks were closed, so I saw my friend, Mr. Wedderburn, the lawyer, and deposited my money with him. Thereupon I changed my clothes and I returned to the Casino with five mille. I lost four and was preparing to leave. With the last mille I once more struck that amazing streak of luck. *En plein* followed *en plein*. Fourteen, for instance—on which I had the maximum with all the *carrés* and *chevaux*, the *transversal* and the middle column—turned up four times following. You could have heard the roar from the centre table in the ‘Kitchen’ outside in the Square. People left off playing at every table to see what was happening. Twenty minutes ago I lost three times following. I smiled. So often I have seen these huge winnings returned to where they came from. I could see it in the faces of the croupiers. I could feel it in the atmosphere. I smiled. I buttoned up my pockets. I lounged outside. I looked around at this beautiful scene. I strolled across here. I dine. Roulette with me is finished.”

“This,” Mr. Billingham declared solemnly, “is the most amazing evening I have ever known.”

The Marquis talked on. He discussed his winnings calmly without the least trace of excitement.

“I have always felt this in my blood,” he declared. “It is why I have been so persistent. But I will tell you a strange thing. My great fortune has done this for me. I am no longer a gambler. At the conclusion of our dinner this evening I am telegraphing to Paris to my old friend, General Hernais, who has three times lately begged me to share his apartment and

his very pleasant life in Paris. I am in a position now to do so. I regret very much, my friend Billingham," he added, "to so break up our pleasant little companionship, but you will, I know, not blame me. For you, my dear Madelon," he concluded, "I shall make whatever arrangements appeal to you most strongly. I need not say that you will share to the fullest extent in my good fortune."

Madelon squeezed his hand.

"You are a dear, uncle," she said, a little vaguely. "I cannot tell you how glad I am."

"Confessions and new resolutions seem to be in the fashion," Mr. Billingham observed. "I will make one. You do not know, Marquis, although your niece does, that I have been married all these months of our acquaintance."

The Marquis was evidently disturbed. Mr. Billingham, however, continued without giving him an opportunity for speech.

"My wife," he went on, "has divorced me. We have not lived together for many years. Our temperaments were entirely different. Our marriage was a mistake and my freedom is very welcome—especially as my late wife has found all the happiness she desires with another man. Furthermore, my position as an adventurer has been to a certain extent a fraud. All the things which go with adventures are in my blood and part of my life, but I sold out of my business a few months before I came here for a cash sum of over two million dollars and I still have an interest in the firm."

“More than once I suspected it,” the Marquis admitted, after a breathless pause. “You had never the appearance of a poor man, my friend Billingham.”

Madelon’s eyes were fixed upon her plate. For some reason or another Mr. Billingham’s confession had seemed to be lacking in interest to her. Presently the Marquis took his departure. Mr. Billingham leaned across the table.

“Madelon,” he said, a little hoarsely.

She raised her eyes and looked at him.

“It seems our partnership of three must come to an end,” he continued. “Would you—would it be possible—to start a partnership of two?”

The surroundings were very wonderful, even inspiring. The moon now was clear of the hills and the faintest of breezes brought the perfume of the flowers from the gardens, and even of the orange blossom from beyond, across the Square. The orchestra was playing in the Café. It was all very beautiful, but the most beautiful thing that Mr. Billingham had ever seen in his life was the strange softness in Madelon’s eyes and the little quiver of her lips.

“Couldn’t we have coffee in your *salon* and then walk along the Terrace and talk about it?” she whispered.

THE END

## Transcriber's Notes

- These stories were originally printed in 1927 under this title. This eBook was transcribed from “The Oppenheim Omnibus,” 1931. The preface, page and story numbers apply to that Omnibus edition.
- Copyright notice provided as in the original—this e-text is public domain in the country of publication.
- In the text versions, delimited italics text in `_underscores_` (the HTML version reproduces the font form of the printed book.)
- Silently corrected palpable typos; left non-standard spellings and dialect unchanged.

[The end of *Mr. Billingham, the Marquis and Madelon* by E. Phillips Oppenheim]