# TAKE IT CROOKED

BY

Francis Beeding

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*Title:* Take It Crooked
*Date of first publication:* 1932
*Author:* John Palmer (1885-1944) and Hilary Aidan Saint George Saunders (1898-1951) (as Francis Beeding)
*Date first posted:* Nov. 15, 2023
*Date last updated:* Nov. 15, 2023
Faded Page eBook #20231115

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# TAKE IT CROOKED

NOVELS BY
FRANCIS BEEDING

*The Three Fishers*
*The Four Armourers*
*The Five Flamboys*
*The Six Proud Walkers*
*The Seven Sleepers*
*Death Walks in Eastrepps*
*The Hidden Kingdom*
*The House of Dr. Edwardes*
*Pretty Sinister*
*The League of Discontent*
*Take it Crooked*

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# TAKE IT CROOKED

BY

FRANCIS BEEDING

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

LONDON MCMXXXII

# DEDICATION.

THIS STORY IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMBERS OF THE SOCIÉTÉ GASTRONOMIQUE ET DES SPORTS D'HIVER. THEY MAY EACH AND ALL OF THEM SUE ME FOR LIBEL, BUT, IF THEY DO, I SHALL PLEAD FAIR COMMENT.

FRANCIS BEEDING.

*July 7th, 1931.*

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# I I SET OUT FOR LYONESSE

"Here," said Peter Hamilton, "is your collar and tie, though I was under the impression that the condemned man . . ."

I paused in my dressing and looked sorrowfully at my friend.

"That jest," I said, "was old when Adam died."

"You know best," replied Peter soothingly, "but I'm a trifle hazy on the subject. I was under the impression that Adam never wore very much—either before marriage or after."

I turned quickly and picked up a large sponge lying on the washstand. It missed Peter and landed at the feet of Bob Hardcastle.

"On hearing that his appeal had been rejected," said Bob, "the condemned man broke down utterly."

He pressed the bell as he spoke.

I received my collar and tie with dignity from the hands of Peter and adjusted them with care. I had given much thought to their purchase. The collar was of the butterfly breed and the tie was of grey silk inwoven with a cunning pattern. It produced an effect of gravity which, as my hosier had pointed out, would be suitably corrected by the white camelia in my buttonhole. I sighed as I tightened the knot and might have sighed again. But I then perceived that under my nose a hand was silently proffering a silver pot with froth upon the brim.

I took it and drank deep. Slight but unmistakable noises in the rear suggested that Bob and Peter were similarly engaged.

"Beer for breakfast," said Peter, "an ancient custom which should never have been suffered to lapse. Make the most of it, Toby, for this, I fear, is the last occasion."

Let me say, in parenthesis, that Toby is not my name. My name is Granby—Alistair Granby—of whom to my shame you may possibly have heard. I have read, but not approved, certain stories in which I have been made to figure rather prominently by some of my younger and more enthusiastic colleagues. For these narratives I disclaim all responsibility. Therein I am made—on slender evidence or no evidence at all—to figure as

an habitually aggressive person of infinite resource and sagacity; and it is mainly to avoid the distress of being again presented to the public in so preposterous a habit that I am telling you this story myself. Incidentally, I am called Toby by my friends because it is absurd to be called Alistair and because—as they monstrously allege—I am usually to be found with my face in a jug.

I turned about, meaning to be bitter, biting, and not to say harsh; but when I saw my best and my second best man regarding me solemnly above their lifted tankards of ale, the words died on my lips.

For these were my friends. We had been in much together, from that evil business of the Archbishop of Toledo's ring in the days before the war to our encounter less than a year ago, with Two Faced Jack. Two Faced Jack. . . .

But I hate digressions. Let it suffice that these were my friends. Peter is tall, fair, with the neck and shoulders of an ox. Bob is a less humiliating person for a man of my moderate stature—being small, wiry and dark. Their further characteristics will appear.

"The wine," Peter mourned, "will be red, but not for you. The eyes of the lassies will be bright, but . . ."

"Goodbye to all that"—Bob now took up the tale. "Toby will stand aside."

They fell silent then. I looked at them and they looked back at me; and I saw in their looks that they were thinking of the past.

So we remained, till Peter put a hand on my shoulder.

"Toby," he said solemnly, "we will see you through. We will stand by you. We will deliver you to the altar. And then you shall go home and we shall come to see you in the ripeness of time. And you will grow your own vegetables and tickle the prize cow in the ten acre and discourse with us of shorthorns and the price of cheese."

I turned back to the window and felt their hands gripping my shoulders. I saw their faces flicker for a moment in the glass. Then I bent down and went on with my dressing.

I put on my splendid black coat and pulled down the waistcoat so that the white slip appeared to advantage. I was thinking of Julia. I wanted, but fought shy of it, to tell these two friends of mine, big Peter Hamilton and little Bob Hardcastle, that their thoughts were misdirected. Julia knew full well what they meant to me. How should she ever seek to spoil or limit a

friendship woven of the very stuff of life and how well I knew that she would and could do no such thing. Had I not warned her as solemnly as she would allow that she was marrying a man of mystery, at the beck of strange errands and ancient loyalties? But she had laughed and enquired whether I expected to be told all *her* secrets.

As I bent to the mirror I saw her very clearly in my mind's eye, serious and, being from New England, entirely unashamed of it.

"I do not expect you to be less of a man for marrying *me*," she had said.

Julia would never want to come between a man and his job—or, as her father would have preferred to say, his duty. Once already we had put the matter to the test. For we had meant to be married in the autumn, but here we were in midwinter and the business still to do. Julia had postponed our wedding so that I might try to discover why a certain gentleman in Cairo had grown suddenly rich and singularly well-informed as to the intentions of His Majesty's Government in respect of a concession not a thousand miles from the Persian Gulf.

"It's been work first with you, Toby," she had said, "and work most of the time. You must act accordingly or I should be marrying a stranger."

A secret agent, of course, has no right to marry. I had settled that question quite definitely years ago. Love for him must needs be light and flitting, a little breath that comes and goes, not the great wind that sweeps men off their feet and carries them to the stars. That had been my conviction for thirty years, to the day, in fact, when I had met Julia; and then the great wind had begun to blow and I had discovered that there were holes in my philosophy.

So now we were to be married with Duty First for a sky-sign and a secret hope in my mind that I should never be called upon to choose between the old faith and the new.

And here I will open just one more parenthesis. I had met Julia less than a year ago in Spain with her father, Julius P. Hazelrig, when I had been about that business of the Four Armourers—of which you may have heard. She is an only daughter and, having lost her mother as a child, had managed her father almost as soon as she could walk. She is tall—giving me, alas! at least half an inch without her heels. She is fair. She is slender. She is wise, yet full of laughter. Her eyes—but of what use are these items? I might describe to you her several perfections but the sum would not be Julia.

So let me close my parenthesis and come, for better or worse, to my tale. My friends are waiting. I gripped them by the shoulder.

"Sweet men and true," I said, "I am to be married in an hour. Do you consider that you have done your best by me? Is there nothing further that suggests itself to your kind hearts?"

I looked significantly at the empty tankard beside me on the dressing table.

Peter rang the bell and in due course Blenkins appeared. I should perhaps mention that I was being married from the Voyagers, of which I had been a member for twenty years. Blenkins is the club valet. The expression of his face might have been taken to imply that he deeply disapproved of my intentions, but I fortunately knew Blenkins. That is how he always looks.

"You rang, sir?" he enquired sadly.

Peter nodded.

"Three glasses of the Amontillado '87," he said.

"Very good, sir," replied Blenkins.

Five minutes later, a little fortified, I walked down the broad Georgian staircase. The Gainsboroughs and Romneys nodded at me, so it seemed, to wish me luck, and I passed into the hall of the club where all good fellows meet, and where, if you come from Honolulu or the wilds of Arabia, from the lakes of Africa or the chilly peaks of the Andes, you will always find half a dozen who were at school with you in '98 and who will greet you with a nickname wholly prized and half-forgotten. I walked between them as in a mist, in my splendid raiment, out into the winter sunshine, for it was December and the day was clear and cold with a touch of frost in it. The sky above London was blown clean and a little wind ran down Piccadilly whispering of frozen hills and northern seas.

For a hundred yards or so I continued thus between my two friends, only just not arm in arm. My silk hat shone upon my head and the slip of my waistcoat gleamed as white as the camelia in my buttonhole. And then I had an altercation. For Peter fussed and Bob was worried, having something or other on their minds—I forget exactly what it was—respecting the ceremony that awaited us. It was imperative, they said, that they should be at the church in three minutes precisely and were for hustling me then and there into a taxi, whereas I had all along meant to walk to my wedding.

So finally we parted for a moment and I passed to my fate alone.

It was between Dover Street and Bond Street that I ran into him. He was a man of medium height and he was wearing checks so loud that I must have heard him coming had I not been utterly oblivious of the common world. His breeches were white and black, ending in leggings of a tawny hue. But they were no match for the coat, and the cap successfully held its own against all the rest of the outfit. He wore a toothbrush moustache; the eyes were vague and watery; the ears red and amazingly detached. He was making the most of a row of discoloured teeth, being socially disposed and smiling affably within a few inches of my nose.

I cast a glance over my shoulder, but Piccadilly even at noon on a winter's day, offers little in the way of a run-back. Just behind me were a group of noble dames, apparently up from the country, upstanding mothers of Britain. Looking to right and left, I discovered a choice between instant death in the gutter and imminent apologies to a gentleman of uncertain temper carrying a needlessly large umbrella.

So there I was, isolated with this appalling little man in the check clothes who was so devastatingly pleased to see me. For just a moment we stood there ridiculously pressed together and I saw that he would insist on exchanging with me the compliments of the morning.

He stood solemnly rocking on his heels, his feet clad in the most appalling pair of mustard coloured boots that it has ever been my lot to see —not in the least like a figure of doom. Yet I could swear that, from the first moment of our encounter, I had a swift desire to push him out of my life then and there. For I looked into his eyes and saw there something that I had seen more than once in the eyes of a man—a signal, a warning, I don't know how to express it—which told me in that fraction of an instant that the man was neither drunk nor anything else that he seemed to be.

"Be a sport, guv'nor. 'Ave a li'l bet with me, guv'nor. What abart Golden Arrow for the three-thirty at Lingfield?"

His eagerness was such that he lost his balance and fell forward so that his chequered frontispiece brushed my impeccable waistcoat. To recover his equilibrium he thrust his arms vinously about my neck.

Then, abruptly, a voice whispered in my ear:

"Don't you know me, Colonel? It's Thwaites. I've put it under your collar. Where can I see you? Vital."

Even after twenty years in the Service one may be surprised, but one does not show it.

I knew Thwaites—a good man with some notable things to his credit; but he had surpassed himself that morning, and I doubt whether, even if I had not been on my way to be married, I should have recognised him. For he had changed even his ears.

“If I ’ad a quid to my name or even a clean shirt I’d back Silver Star for the 4.50.”

He was on his heels again, blinking persuasively.

“Very well,” I said. “Put one on for me and half a one for yourself.”

And, feeling in my waistcoat pocket, I produced a couple of notes with a visiting card, upon the back of which I wrote “Admit Captain Thwaites to the reception,” and handed it to him.

“Wedding breakfast,” I added, “Claridge’s Hotel, but for God’s sake change your clothes.”

His eye flickered a moment. Then his face assumed an air of indescribable cunning.

“It shall be done, guv’nor,” he said. “A quid for you and ’arf a quid for me.”

A second later he was gone and I was free to resume progress.

I need hardly say that my thoughts were bitter. I will remind you, in case you have forgotten it, that I was on my way to be married. There were half a dozen men in London to whom Thwaites might have appealed at his leisure. But he had come to me—intercepted my passage to the altar.

And somehow, under my coat collar, was a message presumably urgent.

I paused to readjust my ruffled garments and as a slip of paper invisibly found its way into my waistcoat pocket I made some disturbing but unavoidable deductions. Thwaites would not have parted with that communication in the manner just described without good reason. Someone must have known that he had it and it had become urgently necessary for him to part with it. He had been hard pressed—very hard pressed indeed. Thwaites was not the man to play hunt the slipper for the fun of the thing. And it had been my cursed luck to be in the right place at the wrong moment, with the result that I was now faced with the immediate prospect of a business appointment with one of the most enterprising and reckless members of the service. Incidentally I was presumably henceforth under observation. Who were the observers? The dames from the country? . . . the old gentleman with the umbrella?

I looked carefully about me, but saw nothing to indicate that my late encounter had given rise to any unusual interest. But duty had come at me, wearing the habiliments of farce, and for an instant I was overcome with a feeling of arrest.

I bent all my faculties to shake it off. At that moment, if at none other in my life, I must think only of Julia and there was room, humanly speaking, for little else. For there, at last, was the church—St. James's, Piccadilly—and when I saw Wren's smoke-weathered pile of stone with the palings about it and heard the sounds of music from within and found my friends awaiting me, I was caught and shaken by an emotion at which I had not even leisure to be surprised. It is all very well to jest at weddings, make small jokes about possible disasters with the ring and discount the pageantry of such occasions. But when the moment comes—well, I realised very forcibly why it was necessary for the bridegroom to have at his elbow a very present aid in the shape of a cool, efficient and devoted friend to prompt him at the right moment, to be his rod and staff, to direct him in the way he should go, speak and generally comport himself.

For I moved in a haze of noble sound—Julia has since told me it was Bach in B minor, whatever that may mean; and there was pale sunlight from the storied windows and Julia walked beside me, marvellously transformed; and tremendous questions were asked and answered at the altar rails. Of all this I remember nothing clearly, but here and there a detail of no special account—the stiff folds of a surplice, the face of a boy chorister, mouth open, who sang like the birds that nest in the evergreen bowers of Paradise; a merry dame of sixty summers resolutely confined within a satin frock that seemed about to fly asunder; the sad verger who led us firmly to the vestry; a scratching of pens and the small blot I made in signing the register; the strange tears that stood in the eyes of Julius P. Hazelrig, my father-in-law, and the grey top hat held desperately in his left hand.

I must then suppose that I came again to myself. For I remember clearly how we emerged from that little room into the big church, Julia and I together. Her hand was light on my arm, and I stole a glance at her sideways as the organ burst upon us in a tune that even I at that moment could recognise. And surprising, as I did so, came a voice in my ear:

"Bear up, old thing. It will soon be over. My show to-day . . . yours for ever after."

And that must be one of the kindest things that ever a woman said to a man.

Outside a carriage awaited us. For Hazelrig had insisted that motors and matrimony did not go together. So we drove behind the tossing heads of black horses, with white favours on the coachman's whip and round his hat. Everyone looked at us and laughed, for the world will smile always when a wedding passes by, till we reached Brooke Street and the sombre pile of Claridge's. Then there were a hundred-and-one people with whom to shake hands, and champagne to keep us from falling to earth, and my old friend, James the head waiter, to wish me luck, and I suddenly realised that in an hour I should be in the train for Paris alone with Julia, that life was before us and that we should be facing it together.

I am telling you all this, not because I expect you to be interested in my wedding, but merely to explain how it was that I came to forget all about the slip of paper in my waistcoat pocket and why I neglected to notice that Thwaites had not come to the reception. I must confess that, from the moment I entered the church to the moment I reached the platform at Victoria, I never gave a single thought to the matter. Otherwise. . . . But I hate digressions.

The reception drew to an end and I left Claridge's for a moment to change my clothes. I drove to the Voyagers, flung my wedding garments to Blenkins, made certain of my money, passport and tickets. We meant to sleep that night in Paris, going thence to Klosters on the following day. Julia was a fine performer on skis and it had seemed to us that the clean snows of the Alps were preferable to the uncertain ardours of the Côte d'Azur.

I returned to Claridge's and there Julia and I took leave of our friends and relatives. That was Julia's wish and she had been very firm about it. There were to be no farewell scenes at the railway station to mark us down for the rest of the journey as bride and bridegroom.

At Victoria we had but ten minutes to spare, which was, I thought, fortunate, for despite Julia's prohibition, some of her friends were on the platform and it even became necessary to restrain a certain Cuthbert, cousin to Julia, from deluging our compartment with confetti and rice.

It was then—wanting three minutes or so to the time of the train's departure—that I felt a tap on my arm and on looking down, saw with a shock that Chief Inspector Wilkins of Scotland Yard was standing beneath. Wilkins and I were old friends, and my first thought was that he had come to wish me God-speed.

I held out my hand.

“This is good of you, Inspector,” I began. Wilkins smiled and shook his head.

“I’m sorry, Colonel,” he said, “but I must ask you to look at this.”

Without a word he held out to me one of my own visiting cards. I turned it over and on the further side of it was written: *Admit Captain Thwaites to the reception.*

“You gave that this morning, sir, to a man in checks.”

I nodded.

“He is now at Charing Cross Hospital,” said the Inspector, “*on the slates*.”

# II I LOSE MY COMPANION

"He was knocked over by a motor car in Cockspur Street," the Inspector continued. "He died only half an hour ago."

My first impulse was instinctively professional. I must go with Inspector Wilkins to that familiar chamber of death, built at the end of a corridor reeking with iodoform and disinfectants, and there I must take up this matter of Thwaites slain suddenly in the street within a few minutes of passing to me what was presumably a vital message. But that was merely habit and I reacted violently. Julia was still on the platform, surrounded by her friends. This, I again assured myself, was my wedding day. I had not the slightest idea what Thwaites had been doing with himself for the last twelve months and it must have been pure accident that he had stumbled on me. All I had to do was to hand over that slip of paper and the Service would carry on.

I leaned further out of the windows.

"Did he say anything, Inspector, before he died?"

Chief Inspector Wilkins nodded.

" 'Colonel Granby . . . explain . . . message,' " he replied. "Just those words."

"This is how it was, Inspector. I met Thwaites on my way to the church. . . ."

"Yes, sir. My congratulations, sir."

"We got jammed in Piccadilly and under pretence of booking a bet from me he passed me a slip of paper. I gave him my visiting card and told him to come to the wedding reception."

"And then, Colonel?"

"And then, Inspector, I forgot all about him."

The Inspector's eye went to Julia standing amid a crowd of passengers, porters and railway officials.

"Yes, sir. I quite understand. And the message, Colonel?"

"I put it into my waistcoat pocket. It must still be there."

"Did you read it, sir?"

I shook my head.

"I didn't stop to read it. I thought we might possibly be watched. Then, as I say, the whole thing went clean out of my head. I should, of course, have remembered it later on. But for the moment. . . ."

The Inspector nodded and made sympathetic noises.

"Yes, sir. . . . Nothing to what happened to me, sir. I was supposed to be one of the smartest young detectives in the force in those days, and my tie-pin was stolen from me on the way to church. That was my old friend, Slippery Sam. . . . He did it for a bet. I nabbed him shortly after the honeymoon for burglary and we had a good laugh together."

The Inspector looked along the platform.

"Then the message is in your luggage, sir," he continued. "We must hold the train for two minutes while you unpack."

Again I shook my head.

"No," I said, "the message is still in the waistcoat of my wedding suit. I left it at the Voyagers. All you have to do is to find the man who is packing my clothes. Then perhaps you might get into touch with Mr. Hamilton or Mr. Hardcastle."

"Take your seats, please."

A railway official was advancing, shutting doors as he came. A shrill chorus of farewells came from the group surrounding Julia. I turned from the window and made quickly for the door in time to give her a hand as she boarded the train. In the course of this manœuvre I brushed past a tall stranger in a fawn coloured overcoat with a fur collar, who stepped aside with an apology as I passed.

He wore a dark brown beard and looked like an ancient Assyrian.

The train was moving. Julia waved from the window to her friends and from behind her I nodded farewell to the smiling Inspector.

A few minutes later I was sitting, with immense relief, in a reserved compartment opposite . . . my wife. A kind conductor—the egregious Cuthbert had given us utterly away—had already seen to the tickets. And now I really looked at Julia. Up to that moment I had hardly dared. She sat, rather serious and upright, in the opposite corner.

“Well,” I said cheerfully, “we’ve done it now.”

“And nothing on earth would induce you to face it again.”

“Twenty times rather than not at all.”

“Toby, dear, I have married a hero.”

“*You* enjoyed it, of course?”

“It was meat and drink to me.”

“Women are cruel by nature.”

“What do you know of women?”

“Nothing, sweetheart. That’s the right answer—isn’t it?—for a married man?”

“ ‘My only books, Were women’s looks, And little good they’ve taught me.’ But I forgive you, Toby. I couldn’t bear to marry an ignorant man.”

“I know nothing, Julia.”

“Sweet liar.”

“Nothing,” I repeated firmly, and looking at her, as she sat smiling under her blue hat, a sort of helmet affair without a brim, cunningly disposed to show her hair, I realised that I really did know nothing—well, nothing of consequence.

She put a hand on my knee.

“We will learn the rest together,” she said.

There came a stir and a flutter and the next moment she was beside me—in my arms.

At last she drew back.

“When I set out for Lyonesse,<br>
A hundred miles away——”

We had read that together on an autumn evening several weeks—or was it years?—ago, and she quoted it softly under her breath.

I took the cue. For these words were better than any of which I had the secret:

“What should bechance at Lyonesse,
When I should sojourn there,
No prophet durst declare.
Nor could the wisest wizard guess
What should bechance in Lyonesse,
When I should sojourn there.”

Her light weight scarce pressed my knees as I made to finish it.

“When I came back from Lyonesse,
With magic in my eyes . . .”

But there she stopped me.

“No, Toby,” she said, “there is no return. . . . Not for you and me.”

So I kissed her again and we sat silent while the continental train ran through the fields of Kent.

A shadow fell across the door of our compartment. The stranger in the fawn coloured coat was looking away from us out of the window of the corridor. Julia did not move and in a moment he withdrew. She then protested that this was no way to travel and would I kindly remember that we were a respectable married couple and had no business to be “carrying on” in a railway carriage.

But she kissed me again and I knew that I had been caught in the silver net and such happiness broke over my spirit as no words of mine can express.

The fields of Kent were not smiling as they should have been, but were grey and windswept with black squalls of rain heavily smiting them, and the short winter afternoon was drawing to a close. Gloomy faces met us at Folkestone where the wind had now risen to a gale. The boat was crowded. The passengers were depressed and with reason. We had scarcely left the harbour when a great sea struck our bows and the crossing took, if the notes in my diary are correct, three hours and ten minutes. Thrice did we try to enter the harbour at Boulogne, and thrice we failed. Of the scenes upon the boat I will not speak. Julia and I are both good sailors and suffered no harm; but, if at that moment someone had invited me to subscribe to a Channel tunnel, I would unhesitatingly have paid up. No one came near, however, save the tall stranger with the fur collar to his light coat. He, too, had remained master of his fate, and seemed disposed to exchange with me a word or two.

"Bit of a storm," I hazarded.

He made a broad gesture at the tumbling waste of waters.

"Whether it be a storm within the technical meaning of the word, I do not know," he replied in sonorous tones. "According to the Beaufort Scale, used by seamen since 1838, we progress from dead calm through light wind, moderate wind, strong wind, gale, storm and hurricane. Storm point is reached with the wind travelling at not less than thirty-eight miles per hour."

I looked at him in astonishment. He was impressively tall and he wore his fawn coloured overcoat as though it were the robe of a gartered knight. His Assyrian beard fluttered in the gale.

"I think I shall call it a storm," I ventured at last.

"You are probably right," he said with a grave courtesy. "And it is just as well not to be too pedantic in these matters."

He had fine, arrogant eyes, and they fell at this moment upon Julia.

"Madam is also, I perceive, a good sailor. Personally I enjoy these rough grey seas . . . where every prospect pleases and only man is vile. That gull, for instance . . . he has been following the ship from Dover . . . the kittiwake, I think, with no heel to his foot. You may not know it, Madam, but the gull is the only bird that has ever had a monument erected to it. It is in Salt Lake City and was commemorated by a grateful public for its good services in destroying a plague of grasshoppers."

"Help!" murmured Julia, to me aside, and help arrived. For at that moment we heaved past the lighthouse at Boulogne and rocked towards the jetty.

At long last we found our seats in the Paris train and concluded that our troubles were over.

They had, in fact, begun. For the train was three hours late and it was after midnight when we reached our hotel. I will not mention it by name. Let us call it the Bristol. Doubtless it is all that may be expected of a hotel within a stone's cast of the Arc de Triomphe, but the keeper of it had served us ill. For there was no one to receive us but a night porter, who told us that the manager, having concluded that we should not arrive, had given up our room, bespoken a week previously, to another couple who were now doubtless warm and asleep therein. Of other rooms there were none, save two, single and both far apart—one being on the fourth and the other on the first floor.

I looked at Julia and saw then—what I ought to have seen before—that she was tired out. We would not seek another lodging that night. I, therefore, took her to the room on the first floor. It was pleasant enough, but very small.

At the door she turned, and we looked at one another dolefully a moment. Then she flung her arms around my neck and kissed me.

"Poor old thing," she whispered. "But there are three hundred and sixty-five days in the year and you shall come to breakfast with me in the morning. You shall have eggs and bacon."

I had not then persuaded, I do not think I ever shall persuade, Julia that for me a continental breakfast is hardly possible, but that the English repast, except on a hunting morning, is a thing of horror and doom.

I kissed her quickly again and followed a lift boy down the corridor to the hall.

And there another misfortune awaited me, for a man in a light overcoat and a fur collar, my familiar, tall and most informative stranger from Victoria, was standing in converse with the night porter. He looked up as I approached the desk and seemed about to speak, but the porter intervened.

"I am sorry," said the porter to me, "but there has been a mistake. The room I mentioned to monsieur as available on the fourth floor is engaged. This gentleman booked it by telegram to-day."

The camel's back was broken, and, drawing a deep breath, I let myself go. I told that night porter in the French of the Foreign Legion, of which I have never been a member, and of the barrack room, of which I have some experience, precisely and in detail what I thought of him, his forefathers, his way of life and his future destiny. My friends tell me that I once knew how to swear. I will only say that my allocution lasted for several minutes, and that I was not aware of having to repeat myself. When, at last, I paused for breath it seemed to me that the night porter was about to burst into tears. But just as I had thought of something else to say and was about to begin again, he burst into a gust of laughter, leaning forward and putting his hand on my shoulder.

Monsieur, he said, was an artist, and he turned for confirmation to the tall stranger beside us.

"Sir," said the stranger, very polite and formal, "to hear you is a liberal education. I could almost beg you to continue, though I am genuinely sorry to be the unfortunate occasion of a wrath so overwhelming. That, however,

may soon be remedied. I would beg you, sir, to accept the room which, owing to some mistake, has just been placed at my disposal."

I started to protest, but he raised a hand.

"Please," he said, "you will allow me to do this little service. I am at home in Paris and I can easily find accommodation elsewhere."

We wrangled courteously for a moment and eventually compromised by what he described as an appeal to destiny. In other words, a coin was tossed.

"Heads," I said, and the attic was mine.

I could hardly fail to insist—though tired and in no mood for company—on splitting a bottle with my new acquaintance. The night porter produced a wine list, and the lift boy was despatched in quest of a Vosne Romanée '15. The talk, thereafter, was of wines. We agreed that the Romanée was a prince among the vintages, that '15 was probably the best year for it, and that the combination, if by chance it figured on the list, must be instantly preferred.

I complimented my new acquaintance on his knowledge of wine.

"Ah," he sighed, "if that were all."

He looked at me with his fine, arrogant eyes, and added in tones that breathed the sepulchre:

"I know everything, sir. That is my misfortune. I can forget nothing that I see, hear or read. I can tell you what I had for breakfast on July 25th, 1896, the horse that won the Derby in the following year, and what was quoted for Argentine Railways deferred on any date within the last six months."

Half-an-hour later, staggering under a burden of acquired information, I bade farewell to my strange Assyrian and went to my room. There I made to undress—pondering absently the events of the day. Automatically, as is my habit, I began to empty my pockets, putting the articles one by one on the dressing table.

Suddenly, between the finger and thumb of my right hand, I found myself holding a slip of paper.

I looked at it idly for a moment, then spread it flat. There were some words scrawled upon it in indelible pencil: "Perigordine. 7.45. 21st. Pink Carnation. Bramber Bequest G."

Perigordine—that was the name of a restaurant, with memories. There is, in particular, a way they have of baking truffles in a crust of pastry. But I hate digressions.

Whence, I wondered, had this paper come? Then, all too soon, I remembered. This must be the message which had been thrust beneath the collar of my coat in Piccadilly. Automatically, as I had taken it from my waistcoat pocket a moment ago, I had transferred it from waistcoat to waistcoat—as is my habit when changing—in my bedroom at the Voyagers. And I had told Chief Inspector Wilkins to look for it in London!

Wilkins, at Victoria, had shown that he was ready to make allowances for a man on his wedding day; but this must make me a flouting stock to the Service.

With which heartening reflection I finished my undressing and climbed into bed. I would telephone in the morning to London and set the matter right. It was all I could do and, though confession might be bitter, it was said to be good for the soul.

It was Julia who awakened me—not alas! in person, but by means of a discordant telephone bell that rang in my sluggard ear.

"That you, Toby?"

"Yes, darling."

"Sleep well?"

"Too well."

"Coming to breakfast?"

"Is it so late?"

"Eight o'clock."

"Very well, dear. Eat all before you and I'll join you for dessert."

I rang off and, remembering Thwaites and his message, thought the matter over carefully while I shaved.

Someone was expected to go to the Perigordine at 7.45 on the 21st of the month—in fact, that very day—wearing a pink carnation. That must be the meaning of the message, and Thwaites had met his death within a quarter of an hour of its delivery. I had no intention of keeping the appointment myself. I knew no more of the business than any of my colleagues, and it was clearly the turn of somebody else to do a job of work. Had not the Foreign Secretary himself been good enough to send for me and to insist that for the next six weeks I must assume that the Empire and civilisation at large would be kept reasonably safe till my return without my troubling so much as to remember my own name? By 7.45 that evening I should be preparing to board the train

for Klosters with Julia. She was to spend the day in Paris among the shops and we would speed away that night to the Alpine snows.

So I would telephone to London or—better still—find someone in Paris to take up this small matter of Thwaites and his slip of paper.

Who was there in Paris that I knew? I ran over the names in my mind—not very numerous as it happened; for it was some time since I had been in touch with any of our French agents. Then I remembered Davis. Davis, of course, was the man. He had left the Service some years before, but he was still good for casual employment. Davis was shrewd and reliable; had his nerves been equal to his intelligence, he would have gone far. I felt that he would do. He had merely to keep the appointment and hand over the mission to someone else if he found the waters too deep for him. I would go to Davis, explain the situation, advance him the necessary funds and despatch him to the Perigordine with a pink carnation in his buttonhole.

I did not come to this conclusion easily. I was suffering from a tendency, common among overworked officials, to regard myself as one of the irreplaceables, and that, as the Foreign Secretary had pointed out, was the beginning of the end.

"Granby," he had said, "there is only one thing to do with a man who regards himself as indispensable—send him away for a holiday till he ceases to care."

I saw the point, of course, but must still confess to being a little uneasy at the thought of referring to another man an appeal which Thwaites, in desperation and with death at his heels, had so very pointedly addressed to me.

I broke the news to Julia over coffee and rolls—that is to say I humbly asked to be allowed that morning to absent me from felicity awhile so that I might go in search of Davis. She received the information that she would spend most of the morning shopping without her husband with remarkable fortitude. It seemed, indeed, that she had been unnecessarily racking her brains that morning in her bath to find a plausible excuse to prevent me from accompanying her. She was going into action and it was important that she should be in no way hampered or distracted.

"I like to feel," she explained, "that my dear ones are safe and sound—well away from the front line. But I shall expect to see you at lunch."

"Certainly for lunch," I agreed. " 'Oh, what's a table richly spread, Without a woman at its head?' We will meet at the Café de la Paix and there

decide which of the many famous cooks of this delectable city shall feed us."

I accordingly put her into a taxi going East and went my solitary way by Metro in the direction of St. Germain des Près, emerging from the station to wander in the pale winter sunshine up the broad bustling Boulevard St. Germain. The next hour was perfect peace, such as I have rarely known. Surely the walls of Lyonesse were very close:

> "More I could tell, but more I dare not say;
> The text is old, the orator too green."

That mood lasted all morning, even though I discovered that Davis had left his old lodging and would be found only at the bar of the Moine Gourmet between four and six in the afternoon. Noting the address, I set forth again, deciding that, the day being fine and yet early—it was still short of eleven o'clock—I would go to the Rue de la Paix on foot.

So back I went, down the long Rue Bonaparte, with its bookshops and narrow pavements, to the Quai Voltaire and over the Pont des Arts, and so through the spacious Louvre, till I entered upon the bleak magnificence of the Avenue de l'Opéra. It was past noon. There were many people and much traffic in the streets, but I was in no hurry. The winter sunshine was brilliant and no cloud was in the sky. My heart had never been lighter as I stood a moment on an island while the traffic roared upon either hand. To the left was the Boulevard des Capucines and to my right the Opera House.

Then, quite suddenly, I became aware that something was happening. A crowd, increasing at every moment, was collecting near the Café de la Paix, and a number of police, a dozen I should think, in their blue capes had formed a cordon and were holding the crowd back while the traffic, I noted, was being diverted to the further side of the avenue.

I found myself in the front rank of a compact group on the island. A couple of men in shirt sleeves, one with a green eye shade, were standing in the open space in front of the crowd. One of them was addressing the policeman who had taken charge of the cordon.

"The taxis will be here in a minute," he said. "We shall shoot from the car."

As he spoke, I perceived an open touring car, about ten yards off, with two men in the back steadying between them a large camera on a tripod while a third man was sighting it through a view-finder.

“Here they come,” shouted the man with the eye shade, and the crowd leaned forward to get a better view, as a taxi hove into sight running towards the Café de la Paix. It was not, like the other traffic, diverted, but made straight on and I saw that behind it was another taxi.

The first of them drew opposite the café. Its passenger alighted, but I could not see who it was, for the vehicle was between us. The chauffeur received his fare and, with an air, as I thought, of some bewilderment, drove on.

I then saw that a girl was standing on the pavement. Her back was towards me and she made to enter the café. She was in pale blue and I knew suddenly who it was.

I started forward in amazement, but found myself being pressed back by a hand like a leg of mutton, planted firmly in my chest.

“Stand back, monsieur, stand back. Do you not perceive the camera?”

The gendarme in charge was speaking, and before I could answer him the second taxi had swung in to the pavement. Out of it sprang two men. I heard a light scream, instantly stifled. Then came a low, whirring sound and the open touring car passed slowly in front of me, its occupants training their camera upon the taxi and the group beside it.

Julia, with a scarf twisted about her mouth, was being thrust into the taxi.

I made to spring forward but, even as I did so, the driver let in his clutch and shot past me in the direction of the Opera House, and I became aware once more of the strong hand of the gendarme holding me back.

“Stand back, monsieur, I beg you. It is not yet finished.”

I pushed him violently out of the way. The open car carrying the camera, with the men in short sleeves on the running board, was moving swiftly in pursuit of the taxi, and the crowd, suddenly released, surged forward and obliterated the scene.

I darted into the road. The press was thick, but I could have torn it asunder. I made to charge violently forward when I felt a sharp tap on the shoulder.

I started to swing round. A voice sounded low and clear in my ear:

“If you wish to see your wife again, Colonel Granby, you will make it convenient to call at the Ritz Hotel this afternoon at 5 p.m.”

I faced about. All around me was a cloud of vacant faces. Which of them held the lips that had spoken?

## III I ENTER THE ROOM OF MASKS

I STRUGGLED back to the gendarme on the island and he was passing short with me. He had received his orders from headquarters about half an hour ago. All was quite regular and he was there to see that the laws of the Republic were respected. The Franco-British Film Company had obtained permission to shoot a street scene in the neighbourhood of the Opera; the police had been warned to assist them when they should appear. It must have cost them a pretty penny, and they had held up the traffic at a most inconvenient moment of the day. No . . . he had not noticed the number of the taxi into which the young lady had been so realistically pushed. Why should he overload his mind with useless information? Presumably it had belonged to the Film Company. He did not know where the taxi had gone. It was none of his business. His job was to keep the traffic moving according to the regulations, and to that task he must very certainly, if I would pardon him, devote himself.

Was I to tell him that I had just seen my wife forcibly abducted with the kind assistance of himself and his colleagues? Either he would dismiss me for a lunatic or refer me to some higher authority.

I lost no further time with him, but, crossing to the terrace of the café, collapsed into a chair to think things over.

Beside me crackled a brazier for the comfort of such hardy clients as preferred to be out of doors in midwinter. A waiter with a white apron was bending towards me. The crowd streamed past—portly men with rosettes of the Legion; lean young men, wearing in their buttonholes a ribbon of the Croix de Guerre or the Medaille Militaire; a tourist from the United States, with the blue guide open in his hand; and an endless succession of women.

I saw them all, but heeded them not.

"What was I to do?"

The waiter put before me something which I had presumably ordered.

I must go at once to headquarters; and just then, as it happened, a taxi drew up beside the pavement and discharged its fare. I slipped a note under my saucer to pay for my drink, hailed the chauffeur and told him to drive to the Sûreté.

In the taxi I cleared my wits with an effort. My first thought was that Julia had been reft away by some filthy gang from Villette, swift practitioners of the Coup du Père François. But this kind of rough is a rare and slinking bird in the light and happy quarters of the tourist. He did not organise an elaborate comedy with the police to help him, the public to applaud and the broad boulevards of the city for a stage. His weapon was the knife in the twisted street or a swift strangling clutch upon his victim—a purse or pocket-book for his reward. It was impossible that such as he should have plucked, as it were haphazard from the crowd, someone to rob or ransom. There could be nothing indeed haphazard in this event. It had been planned, though at short notice, with astonishing resource. What was the object? Was this a sudden plot to capture, not the daughter of Julius P. Hazelrig, several times a millionaire, but the wife of one Granby of the British Intelligence Service, Secret Branch, poor in the goods of this world but rich in enemies. Who was it that had tapped me on the shoulder in the crowd? He had told me to be at the Ritz at five o'clock that afternoon. His voice had stabbed at me through the noonday chatter, and I had turned to see a line of staring faces from which to pick and choose.

I would keep that appointment at five o'clock; but, before I did so, there were certain steps to be taken.

I had reached the Sûreté and the taxi had drawn up beside the familiar grim building compassed about by the swift waters of the Seine. I sent up my card to Colonel Etienne Rhémy, an old friend of mine, a man who never hurried and was never late, who, as you may remember, had struck down the Seven Sleepers and revealed the hidden kingdom in Mongolia.

To him I told my tale as shortly and simply as I could. He sat quietly behind his desk as I strode up and down his narrow room that looked upon the flashing waters of the river. When I had finished, he lifted the telephone and, without a word to me, demanded certain information.

It came quickly and to the point. A well-known film company, the Franco-British Pictures, Ltd., with studios at Joinville had applied that morning to the traffic department for permission to shoot a scene in the Place de l'Opéra. They had paid twice the necessary fee, as they had not given the requisite notice. The police at the local section had been warned and everything had been quite in order.

Rhémy then rang up Franco-British Pictures.

The result was equally prompt and clear. The company had no film in preparation. It had made no application to shoot a scene in the streets of

Paris. It was at a loss to understand why the question should be raised.

I turned and stared at Rhémy. I could read his face, knowing him so well. For a brief instant there was a struggle which should be uppermost—a responsible officer humiliated by this egregious hoax upon his Service or my own particular friend.

It was the friend who got the upper hand, and I saw that he was deeply moved.

Rhémy, however, is the negation of everything that a Frenchman is supposed to be; he seemed scarce to be turning a hair.

"You are to see them at five o'clock," he said.

"By then it may be too late."

"No, Colonel, or they would not have summoned you. Your wife will be returned to you unharmed—on conditions. You must hear what they have to say, Colonel. That's all the advice I can give you."

"Meanwhile," I said, "if I send you a man, you will give him all possible help?"

"But, of course."

"He shall be with you in an hour," I said, and left the room without another word.

I glanced at my watch. It was past two o'clock already. Time had sped. The man I had in mind to send to Rhémy was Davis, whom, as you will remember, I had already thought of as my readiest aid in Paris for another quest. I took me nearly an hour to find him, and I ran him to earth at last in a little *bistro* off the Boulevard Raspail, whither I had been directed from the Moine Gourmet.

Davis is not the man to inspire confidence at first or even second sight. He had definitely let himself go at fifty—since when he had taken as little exercise, physical or mental, as his circumstances would permit. He is short of stature—blonde, stout, with a watery blue eye and a light, untidy moustache. His accent—but that is a sore point with Davis. He prefers, if possible, to speak French, for then, as he explains, no one can deny that he is as good as his neighbour.

I have often wondered what could have prompted him to join the Service. He dislikes danger and hates responsibility. I incline to believe that his real motive was an odd vanity that made it necessary for him to admire

himself as a unique person going in constant peril of his life and bearing about with him the secrets of nations. As a matter of fact, we never dared to tell him much. His discretion is so overpowering that he arouses suspicion wherever he may go. He has an air of being able to say so much if he were only free to do so—he looks always so knowing and mysterious—that the veriest novice spots him at once as a man with a mission.

He was nevertheless good, I thought, for the preliminary scouting that now needed to be done. He knew the ropes.

He was sitting at a table near the door when I entered the *bistro*. It had already occurred to me that I might be under observation and I did not approach him directly. For one thing I wanted to know whether he was still in touch with headquarters. So I walked casually past him to the zinc bar and ordered a Dubonnet sec, humming, as I did so, the refrain:

"My friend, Elizabeth,
Out of temper, out of breath."

At once I saw him prick up his ears. "Elizabeth" was our code tune for the month, and, since he recognised it, I knew that he was still on the strength.

Sure enough, in a few moments he came sidling up to the bar, carrying an empty glass.

"*Encore un cognac*," he said.

He looked fitter than when I had seen him last—leaner and less loose about the mouth. He glanced at me and waited. Normally I should have got into conversation with him as a stranger and come softly to my business in process of time. But I was in no mood for routine.

"Davis," I said, "are you free for a job of work?"

Davis, startled by so direct an attack, looked fearfully about him.

"Is this wise, Colonel?"

"No," I said, "it isn't wise to look as you are looking. I want you to go at once to the Sûreté. Report to Colonel Rhémy. Say you come to assist in tracing a taxi in which my wife was driven this morning from the Café de la Paix. Colonel Rhémy knows the facts."

"May I know what the game is, Colonel?" he asked. "I saw you were tied up yesterday. My congratulations, sir."

He held out a friendly hand, but let it fall suddenly on the counter.

"Steady, Colonel," he said.

He raised his hand again—this time to catch me by the arm; and I suppose that his gesture was natural enough, for his face was waning oddly before my eyes and my hands had gone stone cold.

"Drink this, Colonel."

He had seized the cognac which the waiter had put before him and was holding it to my lips. I drank it and his face, startled and solicitous, came abruptly into focus.

"I'm sorry, Davis," I said, and I hope my voice was under control. "But you must understand that four hours ago my wife. . . ."

I found it difficult to go on.

"Lord, Colonel. You ain't trying to tell me as you've lost 'er."

"She was taken off in that taxi, Davis, by persons unknown. The taxi is the only clue we have got."

He looked at me silently. His mouth moved; he was trying for words which no tongue in the world could have found.

Then, abruptly, he held out his hand.

"I'll find it, Colonel," he said. "I'll go round and get them busy. Leave it to me. I'll report to you this evening."

"Tell Colonel Rhémy that I'm keeping my appointment. He will understand. I shall then go straight back to my hotel—the Bristol in the Avenue Georges Cinq."

I looked at my watch. It was now a quarter to five.

I threw a note to the bartender and made for the door.

"Why, sir," came the voice of Davis, "you haven't touched your drink."

I pushed past the three or four workmen who had just entered, and made for the door.

"Good luck, sir."

The voice of Davis was somewhat obscured and, as I turned to go out, I saw that he was remedying my strange omission.

A taxi bore me to the Place Vendôme. Five had struck before we reached it, and there was a long line of taxis and cars waiting to draw up at the doors of the Ritz. I got out and paid the man, deciding that it was quicker to walk the remaining hundred yards or so. I paused a moment to let a car pass me and stepped on to the pavement. It was not yet dark, but the lights of Paris were brilliant just ahead of me in the Rue de la Paix, rich with spoils of the world which only that morning had been spread before Julia for her pleasure. I stopped a moment to pull myself together. I thrust back my head and looked above the houses to the infrequent stars. God, how indifferent was the sky! And against that eternal background was outlined the figure of a single man, a midget perched high upon a brazen pillar, Napoleon, Emperor of the French, averted and calm, with the names of thirty battles twisting beneath his feet.

I entered the hotel and looked about me. There were a good many people in the lounge, and from somewhere in the distance came the sound of dance music. A man approached me, tall, with fine, arrogant eyes and an Assyrian beard.

"So," I said to myself, "you, my friend, are one of them."

He bowed and smiled slightly.

"I have found good quarters, Colonel, as you see," he said, indicating with one of his ample gestures the luxury about him.

I looked at him squarely.

"You are here to take me to my appointment?" I asked.

"This way," he said.

He turned towards the lifts and we shot to one of the higher floors.

I followed the tall figure down a gently lit and carpeted corridor, turned a corner and found myself entering a room—a hotel sitting-room, but with a difference, for it had clearly been furnished and appointed to suit a customer of peculiar taste. In place of the usual Louis XV furniture there were three or four deep armchairs of slightly exotic shape and texture, covered with a black material, lustreless yet smooth. The walls were hung with black velvet, upon which stood out in sharp disconcerting relief six or seven death masks of famous men—including inevitably those of Beethoven and Napoleon.

As I entered the room there came a click followed by a soft whirr and some kind of blind or shutter descended over the windows, shutting out the

light of the square outside and leaving me for a moment standing in total darkness—till the seven alabaster faces on the black walls shone suddenly out, as seven lights were lit simultaneously behind them.

A thickset man, with a heavy jaw, expressionless eyes and a huge mouth, had risen from one of the deep armchairs on my entry. He was on the farther side of the room and owing to the curious lighting I had not at first perceived him. He was coming forward to meet me. He stepped one pace, two perhaps, then stopped, and, on that instant vanished. It was as though a puff of wind had blown him from the room, and I could see the walls behind him with the gleaming masks.

I turned in amazement as a hand touched my shoulder. The man I had gone to meet was standing beside me. My Assyrian friend came forward.

"Forgive me, Colonel, a touch of my mystery. You behold in me the Mighty Magistro, Prince of Magicians."

He spread his hands in a wide gesture as he spoke, and, as he did so, I remembered the name as that of a conjurer I had once seen at the Colisée. He had given a rather bright turn in a rather dull programme.

"Drink?"

It was the thickset man who was speaking. The monosyllable shot suddenly from his big mouth which shut down upon it like that of a dog snapping at a fly.

"He's got a face like a portcullis," I thought.

"A drink?" I echoed, "perhaps the Mighty Magistro will produce it out of the air."

I must have time to get these strange surroundings into focus.

"Certainly," responded the mighty one, "out of the air let it be."

He flourished his right hand. I could swear it had been empty a second before, but now it bore a long-stemmed glass, filled with what looked to me suspiciously like champagne wine. I raised it to my lips.

"Satan's barman," I murmured.

I turned to the man with the big mouth.

"To our better acquaintance," I said.

# IV I TALK WITH THE MIGHTY ONE

I TASTED my wine.

"Perrier Jouet '17," I ventured.

"There are forty-nine different kinds of champagne," said the Mighty Magistro. "Those grown in the communes of Apremont, Ardennes and the Marne are on the whole the best. But I thought we agreed last night, my dear Colonel, that a Vosne Romanée '15 is the wine of wines—an emperor among the vintages, of the truly imperial purple."

"Ruggiero," snapped the other, "control yourself."

The man then turned to me, baring a remarkable fine set of teeth in what I took to be a smile.

"Once known as the Human Encyclopædia," he explained. "All topics equally dangerous. . . . Chair beside you."

It hurt him apparently to make so long a speech. He turned back to his companion.

"Ruggiero," he said, "tell the gentleman what we need of him."

"Certainly, my dear Webster."

The Mighty Magistro cleared his throat and thrust back his shoulders.

"Moment," said the man addressed as Webster.

He turned towards a far corner of the room.

"Jeanne," he said, "no need for you."

I perceived for the first time that we were not alone. A girl dressed entirely in black, so that she could scarcely be seen against the sombre walls, had risen from a divan under one of the windows. Her pale face alone was visible, so that it seemed to float upon the air. She was slim, with large dark eyes, and she moved trancelike across the end of the room and passed silently away with never a word or even a look in our direction.

"Business," barked Webster.

Ruggiero at once took the stage.

“So you left it in your waistcoat pocket, did you, Colonel?”

It was clear at last. These men who had abducted Julia were interested in that slip of paper which Thwaites had thrust upon me in Piccadilly. All my misfortunes were now of a piece. Incidentally, I realised in that moment the effect which these men had desired to create upon me—first this mysterious room with the death masks gleaming from the walls, its cheap magic of golden wine pouring from thin air, and then this sudden thrust at the heart of the matter.

“Yes,” I said shortly, “in my waistcoat pocket,” and then I stopped.

That slip of paper was not, of course, in the waistcoat pocket of my wedding clothes. It was reposing in the pocket-book which I carried at that moment on my person. But how on earth did they know anything at all, right or wrong, about the matter I had spoken of to Inspector Wilkins leaning from the window of the train. The tall stranger had certainly not been within earshot, and a railway station is no place for an eavesdropper. To make oneself audible even at three feet is not an easy matter.

*Yet somehow he had heard.*

The Mighty Magistro was standing behind me, his arms folded. He had put on some kind of black dressing-gown with long sleeves, presumably to heighten the fantasy of his appearance. These were the men who held Julia, and they were smiling.

“A little farther off, Colonel, if you don’t mind.”

It was Ruggiero speaking. He had felt the blind impulse that had shaken me and read his peril in my face.

“Murder or blood lust,” said the Mighty Magistro, “has been classified by Freud, Wilson, Mackintosh, Hergesheimer, and Whitby under seventeen heads. First . . .”

“Control yourself.”

Again Webster had intervened.

Ruggiero nodded.

“Brief let me be,” he responded, and turned to me quickly.

“We were privileged,” he said, “to take a very charming lady for a drive this afternoon. Cards on the table, Colonel. You are aware that we hold a pretty high one—the queen of hearts, shall we say?”

With a great effort I controlled myself.

"Clubs, I think, or perhaps spades are trumps," I said, glancing at his sable figure.

Ruggiero laughed.

"Thank you, Colonel. I see that, like myself, you prefer comedy to melodrama."

"To business," I said. "That, I believe, was the idea."

"There is a message reposing in the waistcoat pocket of your wedding clothes."

"I am not denying it," I said.

"You have not read the message."

"How do you know that?"

"You informed Inspector Wilkins at Victoria that you had not done so."

"Your information is excellent."

"We do not exactly know what is in the message. But the late Captain Thwaites was an enterprising person, and his communication is presumably of some importance. Were you to read it, Colonel, you might even forget that you were married only yesterday. Therefore, we think it better that you should not do so. That, however, is not enough. It is more than possible, as a result of what you said to Inspector Wilkins at Victoria, that the message is at present being seriously considered by some of your colleagues in London. It is necessary that any such consideration should be discouraged."

Ruggiero paused and extended a graphic hand in my direction.

"There is only one man, my dear Colonel, namely yourself, whose advice in such a matter would be received with respect. We, therefore, suggest that you should telegraph at once to your friends. You have ascertained that the message has no significance whatever; that no further action is necessary; that the whole affair may be safely left to stand over—shall we say—till you return to London with Mrs. Granby after the honeymoon."

He leaned forward looking at me steadily. His fine, arrogant eyes were very dark, shining and little protuberant.

"Suppose my friends have read the message and already decided to act."

"An indication from you that they are looking for a mare's nest will at any rate be . . . disconcerting."

"You can hardly expect me to do as you suggest," I said weakly, after a pause.

Ruggiero laid a hand upon my shoulder.

"Colonel," he said, "you will comply with our suggestion because, if you do not, the consequences for your wife—if I may describe her by what, so far as my own personal observation goes, is as yet no more than a courtesy title—will be . . . untimely."

He waved a solemn hand, and there appeared between his tapering fingers a large quill pen, dyed green; and on a table by my elbow, which I could have sworn had been empty and bare a second before, was a telegraph form.

I took the pen with a resolute assumption of reluctance and distaste.

I had, however, already decided to send the telegram. It could do no possible harm. I should merely be asking my friends to disregard a message which they had not seen—which, indeed, was still in my possession. It even occurred to me that so odd a request might have an effect contrary to that intended by the Mighty Magistro and his confederate. It might arouse suspicion in London that something was wrong. I smiled inwardly, despite the predicament in which I stood, to think how mad they would have been to know that I carried, within a few feet of their itching fingers, the slip of paper that was causing them so much anxiety.

"I will address the telegram to Inspector Wilkins," I said. "He has the case in hand."

I bent to the table and wrote as follows:

> "Chief Inspector Wilkins, New Scotland Yard, London.
>
> "Please disregard message found in waistcoat pocket stop Have ascertained nothing in it stop No need to follow matter further stop Will explain everything on my return stop Warn Hamilton & Hardcastle GRANBY."

Ruggiero was looking over my shoulder.

"You will please add," he suggested, "that your friend Elizabeth is out of temper."

I stared at him in amazement.

“It is the code tune for the month, is it not?” he asked. “The Service will want to know that the message comes from you.”

I duly set down and signed the proposed declaration.

Ruggiero read the telegram, nodded approvingly and left the room.

I turned to the silent witness of these proceedings.

“And now,” I began.

“Wait,” he commanded.

I waited, and a moment later Ruggiero came back.

“And now, Colonel Granby,” said Ruggiero “There is another point to be settled.”

“Is this fair?” I complained. “The bargain is signed and sealed.”

“You have advised your friends that it is unnecessary to interfere with our plans. But we must also be satisfied that you will not interfere with them yourself. We require from you, in fact, an undertaking—surely not a difficult one to honour in the circumstances—that during the next week or so you will permit yourself to take the very pleasant holiday that is due to you.”

“Put your minds at rest on that score, gentlemen,” I said. “How could I act upon a message which I haven’t read?”

“There’s nothing to prevent you reading it to-morrow, if you wish. We cannot afford to take any risks. You must, therefore, consent to put yourself in a position in which it will be impossible for you to move in the matter. Captain Thwaites had evidently discovered something of importance both to him and to ourselves—something, moreover, which he knew would call you to prompt attention even on your wedding day. We must, therefore, be assured that you will take no steps to obtain a view of that message or to communicate with your colleagues in any way whatever till after your honeymoon—which, in that case, would follow its normal course.”

I took a step forward, upsetting a small table. Something had given way in my mind and I saw red. The fantastic room, with its masked lights and the posturing scoundrels with whom I was confronted had become a nightmare from which I must somehow break loose. I raised my hand to strike, to force my way out—I don’t know what. But my wrist was gripped suddenly and in that grip I was unable to move, while at the same moment I felt the breath of Ruggiero on my cheek.

“No, Colonel,” he was saying, “I can conjure, if necessary, with a full-grown man.”

“Colonel Granby,” he continued, as though nothing had happened, “you misunderstand, perhaps, the situation. We have no desire to injure or even to incommode your wife. On the contrary, we have what I imagine to be a most attractive proposal to place before you. Give us your word that you will do nothing for the next two weeks. You will then proceed as our guest to the Island of Caprera, off the coast of Sardinia, where you will spend your honeymoon unmolested. It is a famous spot and sheltered for a time the great Garibaldi himself. The influence of islands on men is very great. Napoleon was born and bred in an island. There were also Ulysses, Sapho, Alexander Selkirk and Hall Caine.”

“Caprera,” said Webster curtly, stemming the flow, “is uninhabited . . . two or possibly three servants . . . Russian refugees . . . no language but their own.”

“The only house on the island,” said Ruggiero, picking up the tale, “is simple, but it is solid and well constructed and the climate, even at this time of year, is delightful. You will retire to that pleasant spot and there you will pass the next two, or possibly three, weeks. At the end of that time you will be at liberty to go where you please.”

“And should I not fall in with this programme,” I said after a pause.

Ruggiero thrust back his gown.

“Need we consider the possibility?” he asked. “The consequences would be on your wife. She will remain your wife—in the sight of heaven. She may even eventually be restored to you. In the interim she will go alone to a retreat which we already have in mind in the charge of the Russian servants to whom I have already alluded and who will have our authority to ‘socialise’ her, as I think they term it in Moscow.”

I struck him across the cheek, and he started back. For a moment I thought there would be a knife between my ribs. His face had turned as white as one of the death masks upon the wall, save for a streak of red running from mouth to chin. Then he sprang forward and in a trice my wrists were in a grip which I could not break. I saw murder in both their faces.

“Not here,” Webster snapped.

He turned to me with his doglike grin.

“Do you accept, Colonel Granby?” he asked.

## V I WEAR A PINK CARNATION

For a moment I stood gazing, I hope steadily, at the man with the big mouth.

"No need to detain you further," he said at last. "Till eight o'clock . . . ring up hotel . . . ask for Mr. Ponsonby . . . signify your agreement."

"We shall then," continued Ruggiero, releasing my wrists, "give you an appointment at a more convenient place where you will receive notice of our arrangements in detail."

I turned and walked towards the door. The distance across the room seemed interminable. Behind me I felt their eyes fixed steadily on my back. Was it imagination, or did my ears catch a faint click? I heard, at any rate, the voice of Webster, low and urgent:

"Don't be a fool!"

I half-turned at the words, but the conjuror was standing with his hands stretched wide in a vague, almost it seemed to me a friendly gesture. There was nothing in the tapering fingers; the white face was in shadow. Then the door opened abruptly, letting in a shaft of clean light.

A grey-liveried page stood in the opening.

"This way," he said, bowing.

I followed him to the lift and in silence descended to the vestibule. It was half-past six, and the hotel lounge was filling up. I remember well a party of young men in evening dress with that slight emphasis at the waist and shoulders which indicated a French tailor. They went their ways, sleek and shining, towards the bar gleaming with polished steel and glass, where one of them, it appeared, was to be given a "corpse reviver" after, I gathered, a shattering afternoon with his creditors. As they passed, they eyed, with the insolence of their kind, the girls who had bedded themselves out like flowers in the deep armchairs.

I walked down the vestibule towards the street. Here was light and luxury. In a far corner a man, far declined in the vale of years, leaned confidingly towards a chair from which the back of a shingled head jutted invitingly. Life was proceeding as usual.

I found myself on the pavement outside. There was a chill wind in the street. Above my head were the blown stars and, as I looked upward, I saw again the man of bronze on his high pillar with his scroll of victories twisting beneath him. It needed that swift glance to restore to me something of the courage that had wavered in the sable room upstairs.

I had now to choose, and you who read coldly of my decision may find it hard of acceptance. I can only ask you to realise that it was made in such agony of mind as I could not hope to convey in these lines written long after the event. I saw myself upon that island with Julia, explaining how I had come to have her safely there. I saw her taking it in—that I had come creeping back to her under the yoke. And I knew in that moment, as I walked across the lit square with its rows of waiting motor cars, down the Rue Castiglione, across the Rue de Rivoli and stood by the gardens of the Tuileries, that for neither of us ever again, if I yielded, could there be one moment of whole content, that our love would forever be half-hearted, that we should have no pride or joy in each other. I saw the nights and days go drifting by in that quiet spot, with shame between us—our marriage sunk to the level of a poor refuge to which I had crept, finished and defeated. I knew, as well as though she had been there, what her own desire and counsel would have been. Had she not, facing just such a possibility as this, said to me that, if ever I stood at this crossways and came to her by the easy path, she would feel that she had married a stranger?

Already it was a quarter to seven. But I needed no further grace. My mind was made up. In that brief passage from the Place Vendôme I had come to my rest. I beckoned to a passing taxi and directed the man to drive me to the Sûreté. I would burn my boats and the first intimation the mighty Magistro should receive of my decision would be a visit from the Paris police. Not that I had much hope of their finding him still at home. He must have provided against the possibility of my refusing his offer and the Ritz would be seeing him no more.

My interview with Rhémy was brief. He met me sadly with the news that nothing had yet come of the inquiries of Davis after the taxi. I then told him of my meeting with Ruggiero, and before I left him I had the satisfaction of seeing him at work. Of Ruggiero he could tell me nothing from the files. Ruggiero had hitherto not come under observation of the authorities.

And now I was free to attend to the slip of paper in my waistcoat pocket. *Perigordine. 21st. 7.45, Pink Carnation. Bramber Bequest.* Already it was 7.15; but I had time enough and to spare, for the place of meeting was near

at hand. The Perigordine, as you may know, is at the corner of the Place St. Michel and the Quai de Montebello. It is approached through a pleasing barricade of oyster barrels and trays of sea urchins and other delectable ocean foods. I entered the restaurant at 7.30 p.m., washed my hands and persuaded the head-waiter that I preferred a table beneath the gallery not far from the door. It was then nearly a quarter to eight. I summoned the chasseur, sent him flying to the nearest flower stall and in five minutes was the possessor of a pink carnation which I pushed into my buttonhole.

And now I had only to wait, and not for long as it happened. For I had scarcely settled the carnation to my liking and began to sip the glass of sherry which I had ordered when a man came through the swing door into the restaurant and looked casually about him. In the lapel of his overcoat was a pink carnation and, as he peeled it off and handed it to the dame in black satin who presided over the cloakroom, I saw that there was another flower of the same kind in the buttonhole of his jacket. He glanced once in my direction, then away again and, turning his head, busied himself in lighting a cigarette.

I had time, therefore, to note his appearance. He was of medium height, slim, with small hands and feet, sleekly black hair, face oval and slightly sallow. Above the name of the match his eyes glowed bright and large. He had a neat moustache; indeed his whole appearance was neat without being effeminate. Spanish blood of high quality was indicated. He strolled, cigarette between his lips, down the length of the restaurant and disappeared round the corner, the ground floor of the hostelry being in the form of an "L." I lost sight of him, but presently he came in view again, walking rather fast and rather pointedly ignoring the murmured suggestions of the head-waiter following in his wake that he should mount the stairs and dine on the first floor. He was within six feet of my table when our eyes met. His glance was keen and steady. It travelled from my face to the flower in my coat and rested a moment.

I risked it and smiled. He smiled immediately in return, touched his buttonhole for a second as though to rearrange it, and then bent forward with outstretched hand.

"I hope I am not late," he said, speaking French with the metallic accent of the Latin-American.

I rose and held out my hand.

"Only a minute or two," I answered in the same language.

He sat down in the vacant chair on my left. At that moment the chasseur appeared and came to the table.

"Colonel Granby," he was calling.

I beckoned to him.

"I am Colonel Granby," I said.

The man handed me a folded slip of paper. I opened it and read:

"You have still five minutes. Mr. Ponsonby's number is now Opera 05.70."

I folded the paper, put it in my waistcoat pocket, and found my companion was looking at me with curiosity.

"Colonel Granby," he was saying, "I have heard of you. I must assume that you are taking the place of Mr. Prospero."

Prospero—the name prompted some immediate conclusions. It was an alias often used by Thwaites. Thwaites had, therefore, intended to keep this appointment himself, but at the last moment, presumably, had decided that it was necessary to enlist a substitute.

"That is so," I answered. "I am acting for Mr. Prospero."

There came a slight whirring sound. The clock above the door was striking eight low clear notes, just audible above the subdued clamour of the restaurant. I had passed the Rubicon.

"Allow me," I continued, "to offer you a glass of sherry."

"With pleasure," he answered.

I beckoned to a passing waiter.

The sherry was brought and I raised my glass.

"To whom, sir, have I the honour?"

"Manuel Gonzago y Sanchez," he said. "You will perhaps dine with me, senor? I must warn you that I am indecently hungry. I am a bad sailor and for several days my fare has been a fast. I arrived only yesterday from Rio and the sea has not been kind."

A waiter had thrust between us a menu card, one of those big broad sheets which lend dignity and expectation to the whole process of refreshment.

"Will you not allow me," I began, "as the older inhabitant?"

“Please,” he protested. “I am anxious to show that a barbarian from the other world has not altogether forgotten how to live.”

He spoke like an old gentleman of fifty, though he could scarcely have had twenty-five summers to his credit.

He turned to the waiter and, as I listened, my heart warmed towards the lad.

“*Foie gras*,” he was saying, “and I hope it is still as it was when I ate it here two years ago. You will be careful to use a silver knife and the water should be boiling.”

The waiter gazed at him in shocked astonishment.

“But, monsieur, it is *de rigueur*.”

I leaned back in my chair. Sweet words came to my ears. Manuel Gonzago y Sanchez knew how to order a dinner. The waiter departed with the short quick steps of his profession and that curve in the back which denoted that he had met a client whom it would be well to serve with care.

The boy opposite leaned towards me over the table.

“And now, Colonel Granby,” he said, “where is my friend, Mr. Prospero?”

“Mr. Prospero,” I answered slowly, “is unfortunately detained. You know what it is when one has affairs.”

Senor Gonzago nodded but did not smile. There was even a touch of offence in his expression. Clearly he was not used to having his appointments ruffled.

“My friend, Mr. Prospero,” he said, “is, no doubt, a busy man. But he seemed unusually impressed by the importance of the affair I was to discuss with him. I did not expect him to be giving his attention to other matters. But perhaps,” he added, “you are senior in the Service.”

“Service?” I said sharply.

Senor Gonzago put his head a little on one side.

“When I first met Mr. Prospero,” he said, “he tried to sell me a safety razor and half-a-dozen tubes of shaving cream. I fancy he is also a member of the Cavalry Club—or is it the St. James’s? I understood that he had a warning to convey to me. Well, Colonel Granby, I am here to receive it.”

I smiled at the young man.

“We will assume,” I said, “that there is more than meets the eye in Mr. Prospero.”

“Otherwise I should not be here,” said the young man a little impatiently. “Mr. Prospero presumably spoke for his Government. So presumably do you.”

A waiter was moving towards us. He set down the *foie gras* between us, plunged a silver knife into a bowl of steaming water and prepared to cut slices for our delectation.

“Colonel Granby,” Senor Gonzago continued suddenly with a charming smile, “I have a proposal to make. Let us postpone our business to a later stage. I hope you agree that it will go better with a cup of coffee, and perhaps a glass of brandy?”

“Capital,” I said; as indeed it was—for I was by no means ready for him yet.

“Meanwhile,” he added, “I have dared to choose the dinner, but I would not venture to choose the wine. I would leave that to the older inhabitant who, to judge from the glass of sherry which I have just drunk, has the greater experience.”

I looked at him suspiciously; but no, he was not pulling my leg. There was a grave smile about his lips and his eyes were twinkling. Yet there was a touch of respect. Was it for the flecks of grey which were now but too plentiful in my hair, or but common courtesy from a younger to an older man? Anyhow, that gesture warmed my heart towards the boy.

I took the wine card.

“With *foie gras*,” I said, after a pause, scanning it attentively, “one should drink the monstrous sweet wine of Montbazillac. Not more than a glass.”

“A very acceptable wine,” he agreed.

“But only with *foie gras*,” I insisted.

“Next,” I continued, turning the pages, “if the wines of Burgundy tempt you I would suggest half a bottle of Montrachet ’21—a thought young, but a fine wine.”

“In that case,” he said, “let us pass from white Burgundy to red.”

“Very right and proper,” said I, “especially as we have here—is it possible?—a Vosne Romanée ’15. Some call it a lady’s wine, but they are

men of no understanding."

"Vosne Romanée let it be," he said.

I gave the necessary instructions to the waiter, agreeing that the wine should be *légèrement chambré*. We continued our meal and respected our agreement. He referred no more to the object of our meeting. I did my utmost to get from his conversation some hint of what had brought him to Europe, and what was his way of life. But he either evaded me or did not realise that I was trying to give our talk a personal turn. He was well found in many subjects and liked the conversation to be of things in general rather than of himself in particular—a remarkable young man.

I must imagine that the human mind cannot react to emotion beyond a certain period and point. Otherwise I could never have sat there with my wits more or less collected and my mind taken up with this new companion. Deep in my heart was the agony of loss. Keen fear stabbed swiftly every now and then or came flooding gradually into my consciousness, overwhelming me with a sense of hopeless misery. But the preoccupation of my central self with Julia seemed to sharpen, rather than blunt, the edge of my sensibility to external things, and I watched with all my usual care the pouring of the wine from the dusty bottle in its wicker cradle.

Our glasses were filled. My host bowed slightly towards me.

"To our pleasant meeting," he said courteously.

I echoed the toast and drank, trying the wine on my palate. I sipped again, then set down my glass. Was it possible? Or had I perhaps been smoking overmuch? I broke off a piece of bread and ate it. Then I saw that my companion also had set down his glass. I raised mine again and this time took a full sup of the wine. Then, lowering my glass, I beckoned to the waiter who was standing beside our table with the countenance as of a mother displaying her children.

"There is something wrong with this wine," I said.

An expression of anguish overcast the features of the waiter. I looked at my companion.

"Is it not so?" I asked.

"The taste is certainly peculiar," he answered, "but I would not say it was corked. I do not quite know."

The waiter picked up the bottle and the cork, sniffing anxiously. His face wavered strangely as he did so, and the bottle assumed the shape of a flagon.

Or was it my vision that was suddenly distorted? I glanced round the restaurant with an effort. There was no doubt of it. The people, the waiters, the tables, even the lights I saw as though in a misted mirror. Fantastically the face of the clock above the door assumed an oval shape, the hands bulging oddly and pointing to the hour. . . . Twenty-five minutes past eight. I remember saying to myself—twenty-five minutes past the zero hour, but not a sign of the enemy. I looked at my companion. His glass, I saw, was empty, and his head was nodding.

I had one last, clear, devastating thought. This was an enemy that struck first and appeared in the sequel. I thrust out my hands vaguely and groped for the glass of water that sparkled beside the wine. Then came a clanging in my ears . . . all the stars of the firmament . . . suffocation and darkness.

I recovered myself to find that I had been laid flat upon the padded bench that ran under the wall of the restaurant. All about me were waiters. A man in a frock coat was in charge, apparently the proprietor and very prominent in succour. Something hot and sticky was trickling down my face. Blood was my first thought. I put a hand gingerly to my cheek and it came away covered with pea soup. On the table in front of me was a large metal tureen. Someone was bathing my head. I felt the sharp tang of ice at the nape of my neck. I moved impatiently. Instantly, as though a door had been flung wide, the voices of the persons around me became audible. My hearing had come back with a click.

The proprietor was speaking.

"A most unfortunate accident," he was saying; "most unfortunate . . . the gentleman upstairs, monsieur. It fell from his table and unfortunately it struck you, monsieur. You see it now, perhaps, monsieur, . . . the soup tureen. Monsieur will doubtless allow me to send for a taxi."

I raised myself on an elbow.

"Where is the gentleman who was dining with me?" I demanded.

Across the table, on the further side of the tureen, was an empty chair lying on its back.

"Your friend," said the proprietor, "was taken unwell, monsieur. It was at the moment of your accident. He appears to have fainted."

"Fainted?"

“Yes, monsieur. But monsieur must sit down and perhaps he will allow me to explain.”

“Quick,” I said, for the ice had momentarily restored me.

“The friend of monsieur fainted suddenly and fell across the table.”

He pointed with his hand, and I saw a broken glass and an overturned carafe.

“Fortunately there was a doctor in the gallery,” he continued pointing upwards.

I followed his gesture and perceived that we were seated beneath the gallery of the restaurant on which were several tables whence the diners were viewing me with interest.

“The doctor,” explained the proprietor, “was seated at the table above you. He saw your friend collapse and, darting to his feet—with the best intentions you must understand, monsieur—he upset the soup tureen which fell upon the head of monsieur.”

“Yes,” I said, “but where is my friend?”

“The doctor, monsieur, assisted his departure in a taxicab. He said it was nothing serious.”

“Who is this doctor?”

“I do not know, monsieur. I have never seen him before.”

“What manner of man?”

“Tall, monsieur, with a curly beard.”

“Which way did they go?”

“I do not know, monsieur. The doctor said that, if you called at the hotel of your friend in the morning, you would find him recovered.”

“What is the name of the hotel?”

“He did not mention it, monsieur.”

I may have asked still further questions. I cannot remember. The room had gone grey again and there came a moment when I realised that I must get away quickly, back to my own hotel, before full oblivion descended. With the assistance of a waiter I entered a taxi, and the chasseur kindly travelled with me. In slack fingers I grasped with my last ounce of resolution

the bottle of red wine which the proprietor, desiring, I suppose, to indulge the whim of a sick man, had allowed me to impound.

In this way did I leave the restaurant of the Perigordine.

## VI I RECEIVE A HORRID MESSAGE

Many years ago in a nightmare I attended twelve bump suppers simultaneously, being subsequently thrown into the college fountain which for that occasion only was flowing with old brandy; to save my life I was compelled to drink that brandy to the dregs; then I was taken and beaten about the head by fourteen strong men armed with crowbars thicker than a man's wrist. I remember waking from that dream and how I felt in waking; but it was as nothing to what I felt on that December morning in Paris when, at ten o'clock, I finally recovered the use of my five senses.

The weather had changed during the night and there was a chill in the air. Outside a fine, cold rain was falling. And I lay with a splitting head in a large double bed in the sumptuous room at the Hotel Bristol which I had reserved for myself and Julia a week ago.

I summoned up sufficient courage to leave the bed, order black coffee and aspirin, and stagger into a cold bath, but it could not have been far short of eleven o'clock when I first began to think at all clearly. Up to that moment my mind had been like Trafalgar Square freed from all forms of traffic control. My thoughts darted hither and thither, some large and moving with a Juggernaut precision, like omnibuses; others small and darting—light traffic slipping about the surface of my brain. The South American . . . love and duty . . . the harlequinade of the Perigordine . . . Julia . . . wine with a funny taste . . . the horrible crossing . . . Julia calling me to breakfast . . . Julia once more and, finally, excluding everything else, Julia. I was quitting the Voyagers' Club in the splendour of white spats, camelia and shining hat. I met again my destiny in yellow boots and chequered breeches. All my errors and omissions passed me by and nodded their heads at me. Not once but many times I received that slip of paper from Thwaites and thereafter neglected to remember it; despatched Chief-Inspector Wilkins to search my wedding garments for a message which was lying even then, unread, in my waistcoat pocket; saw Julia to her room and myself reading that same message at the day's end: watched, under the heavy arm of the law, my wife being torn from the heart of Paris; stood in the black room with the seven masks and took my bitter decision to defy the Mighty Magistro and all his works; walked into the Perigordine to be drugged for a novice and knocked on the head for a fool.

And now came the reckoning—a shock as icy to my pricking nerves as the cold shower under which I stood.

My clearing wits ran suddenly back to the moment of my leaving the Ritz on the previous evening. I had gone to the Sûreté and I had left Rhémy at work. Had anything useful been done? I paused in my dressing and crossed to the telephone.

The report from the Sûreté, as I had feared, was negative. Four plain-clothes men had reached the Ritz within twenty minutes of the receipt of my warning. They had found the covert empty and the birds flown. It appeared that the Mighty Magistro had not even been staying at the hotel, but had merely been giving an afternoon performance there at the charge of an American millionaire in a room which had been specially prepared for the purpose. Immediately upon my departure the room had been stripped by the servants of the Mighty Magistro himself, who had left the Ritz bag and baggage five minutes before the men from the Sûreté had arrived. The enquiries conducted by Davis had proved equally unavailing. He had telephoned, I discovered, twice while I was still unconscious, to say that so far he had been unable to find the taxi and that the police had been equally unsuccessful.

I had scarcely hung up the receiver when the door of my bedroom opened and a waiter appeared with a *petit bleu* on a salver. It was addressed correctly to Colonel Alistair Granby in block capitals. I tore it open as soon as the man had left the room and read the following:

> Dear Colonel,
>
> You called yesterday upon Colonel Rhémy of the Sûreté. You elect the path of glory which, as the poet assures us, leads but to the grave. You stand upon your honour, Colonel Granby. See *Henry IV*, Part I, Act V, Scene 1. Can honour set a leg? No. Or an arm? No. What is honour? A word. Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday. Read, mark and perpend.
>
> I would entreat you, not as you value your life—for I must henceforth assume you do not rate it at a pin's fee—but as you value in your wife the state of innocence in which she awaits her tardy groom, to resort no more to public authority. I am prepared to overlook your indiscretion of yesterday, and even to accept your clear defiance of myself and those whom it is my privilege to represent. Let it be a straight issue between us. Your lady shall remain with us unharmed so long as you make no further appeal to the representatives of the law. I challenge you at your own risk and peril, without official aid or backing, to uncover our designs. We shall take such steps as may be necessary to defeat you. It is probable that you will, in that event, die promptly and without unnecessary pain. Julia, however shall go unharmed:
>
> "A thousand liveried angels lackey her;
> Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt."

Is the position clear? The game is between you and me—a sporting contest—and only an appeal to the law, which might seriously incommode our projects, shall prompt us to remember that Julia is fair and that others beside yourself have the wit to see it.

You will receive this at 11.15. At 11.30 I shall ring you up. You will then, I hope and trust, take up the glove of

Yours, when the tucket sounds,
THE MIGHTY MAGISTRO.

I sat staring for some moments at the strange message. Then I looked at my watch. It wanted but ten minutes of the time when an answer would be required of me. I passed it striding up and down the room. My relief was such that only in rapid motion could I contain myself. Julia was safe, and safe she would remain if I was prepared to accept the swaggering challenge of the Mighty Magistro. What had prompted this romantic gesture? What manner of man was this paladin of the underworld? I was certainly in no mood to carp at his flourishing. I could at that moment have outfaced him in his own preposterous fashion. *Comus* indeed! Milton must serve his turn. At least I could cap him there:

"But for that damned magician, let him be girt
With all the grisly legions that troop
Under the sooty flag of Acheron,
Harpies and hydras, or all the monstrous forms
'Twixt Africa and Ind, I'll find him out;
And either force him to return his purchase back,
Or drag him by the curls to a foul death,
Cursed as his life."

The moment passed, and I saw that, if this were madness, there was method in it. Julia, after all, was his strongest card, and he would hold it against me to the end. Meanwhile, he feared the police—that was evident. Was it not then my duty to call them in . . . my duty . . . I would have no more of it. Here was a chance to risk life and limb for Julia, and who in my place could have refused it?

What was the use of calling in the police anyway? What could they do that I could not equally well do for myself?

Would the Mighty Magistro be as good as his word? That, for the moment, was for me the only thing that mattered. Somehow I felt that he would. He was that kind of man.

The bell rang sharply when I was in the far corner of the room. I ran in haste to the receiver.

"Good morning, Colonel. You have my message?"

"Just received."

"You are prepared to answer?"

"I am not sure that I understand your proposal."

"Surely, it is a simple one. Pledge your word to hold no further communication with the police, and, so long as you honour that pledge, no harm shall come to your good lady."

"I am free to do as I please?"

"Precisely."

"Provided I act alone?"

"Provided you act without official support."

"I am thinking of certain friends."

"There can be no reasonable objection to friends—as friends. Unfurl the banner, Colonel. Call to your musketeers. Renew the historic vow: 'All for one and one for all.' I shall be ready to receive both you and your comrades. Is it clear?"

"It is clear."

"And your answer?"

"I accept."

"Sound trumpets and set forward combatants. My compliments, Colonel, and, should the worst come to the worst, I wish you with all my heart a quick death and a merry one. We shall lose no time about it."

There was a click and the telephone was dead.

I moved away from the instrument. Life was simple again—no more heart-searching or smothered anguish. And first I must summon my friends—no men in red or blue, but men who would count it a holiday to come with me.

I picked up the telephone.

Bob Hardcastle, speaking from his office in London, was inclined to be peevish. With Peter Hamilton and Inspector Wilkins he had gone through all the pockets of all the waistcoats I possessed at club or flat. He gave me an

inventory of the haul: two tram tickets, the remainder of a voucher for three stalls at the Gaiety, one-and-eightpence in coppers (it is a habit of mine to carry small change in my waistcoat pocket), two lead pencils, a trouser button, a midget corkscrew, and . . .

"In fact, old boy, the only thing we did not find was a mouse's nest," he concluded bitterly.

Peevishness and banter ceased, however, when I told him my news. Bob Hardcastle is not easily startled. But I had to tell him three times that Julia was lost before he could take it in. The rest, on his part, was silence while I described briefly the position I was in and the bargain I had made. I could not see his face, but certain noises that came to me over the wire enabled me to imagine how he was looking.

"Get Peter, too," I concluded. "How soon can you be in Paris?"

"It's a quarter to twelve," said Bob Hardcastle, his first coherent sentence since I began my tale. "We can be with you at four o'clock—perhaps earlier, with a following wind."

"Till four then," I answered.

"Anything else?" he inquired.

"Yes," I said, "there's Hazelrig. I suppose he ought to be told, and I hardly feel like ringing him up and casually telling him that I have lost his only child. Cowardly, Bob; but could you manage to see him, before you leave?"

"Anything else?"

"No, Bob. That's all, except . . . no, Bob. That's all"—and I rang off.

A minute later I quitted the hotel, leaving a message that, if Davis should call during my absence, he was to await my return.

The first and most essential step was to find my host of the previous evening. This, of course, was the routine work which could so easily and so efficiently have been done by the French Sûreté, but which I had now to do for myself.

There was but one way in which I could track down Senor Gonzago. He had arrived the day before yesterday from Rio. My obvious course, was, therefore, to consult the passenger lists of ships arriving from that town. Should I find his name, the shipping company might be able to tell me the hotel in which he was staying in Paris.

The fish rose at three-thirty in the Rue Scribe, where the Compagnie Française Transatlantique produced a list of the passengers who had arrived two days before from their mail boat, *Simon Bolivar*. More fortunate still, they knew Senor Gonzago's address—for he had given them instructions to send his heavy luggage there: the Hotel de l'Etoile de Napoleon, a house in the Latin Quarter, which surprised me, for it was neither fashionable nor particularly convenient.

I sped round at once in a taxi and there my luck ended—almost before it had begun. Senor Gonzago had left the hotel that morning, and, to my inquiries as to where he had gone, the porter could tell me but one thing, namely, that he would not be long away—a few days only, he thought, for no letters were to be forwarded.

"How did he go?" I asked.

"He took a taxi, monsieur," said the porter.

"What address?"

"The Gare de Lyon, monsieur."

So there I stood, in the thin drizzle which swept the Boulevard Raspail, with all the four corners of Europe to choose from—Marseilles, Constantinople, Rome or Belgrade.

Dejectedly I returned to the Bristol.

There, in my necessity, I found at last my friends. Peter and Bob, who had arrived five minutes before, were awaiting me.

They took me to my room; I sat them down and told them what I knew. And, as I watched them, the load upon me was eased. They offered no comments. Only Peter put his hand a moment on my shoulder and Bob stood looking at the ice in his glass—for I had ministered to their needs—with a far-away, thoughtful look, so that I knew his mind was busy.

"So that's the way of it."

"No calling upon the minions of the law. We are just a couple of friends who have dropped in casually to bear a hand."

"Just you two," I said, "with myself and Davis. For I shall put the position to Davis. If he is ready to come in on his own and to forswear official aid, I think he would be useful."

"Well," said Bob evenly, "let's reckon up exactly what we don't know. We don't know where Senor Gonzago is to be found. We have no clue

whatever to the whereabouts of Julia. We . . .”

“One moment, guv’nor!”

The voice came from the door and we turned about unanimously. Davis was standing in the room. I have said that Davis was prepared to look extremely knowing on the most ordinary occasions. He had at that moment the air of having solved the riddle of the Sphinx. His shoulders were bowed beneath a knowledge too heavy to be borne.

“Guv’nor,” he repeated. “I’ve got it.”

“Got what?” Peter asked without enthusiasm. Peter is one of the many men whom Davis has too often frighted with false fire.

“The cloo,” said Davis triumphantly.

He was waving in the air an object that glittered and I suddenly recognised it for a small wrist-watch studded with brilliants which I had last seen on the wrist of my wife. I was across the room and my hand was on his arm in a flash.

“Where did you find that, man?” I asked.

“Where did I find it, guv’nor? I found it in the taxi. The driver only came back to work this afternoon. You see, they gave him his fare yesterday and a good fat fare it was. The fellow’s been as tight as a lord for the last eighteen hours. And he’ll be tight again this evening. For I took the liberty, seeing that I was working for the Service. . . .”

I nodded.

“But what did he say, man?”

“Nothing much,” said Davis. “He drove your good lady, sir, to the outskirts of Paris, where they transhipped her into a touring car—a big Hispano, it was. That much he did notice. The number he never thought to take. They had a cinema operator there, too, to film the transfer. Taking no chances, you see. In fact, the driver is convinced that I’m in the picture myself. Me on the screen. . . . I ask you!”

“But the clue?” I said impatiently.

Davis displayed the wrist watch.

“Here it is, guv’nor, I found the watch stuffed behind the back seat of the taxi.”

"Well," I said, "that only proves that my wife was in the taxi, and we know that already."

"Does it?" said Davis in accents of great scorn. "Just you look at its face, guv'nor."

I took the watch and looked at it carefully.

Across the glass of it was scratched roughly, with the edge of a diamond, the following single word—"*Combloux*."

## VII I AM WAYLAID

THE watch glittered in my palm, gleaming under the rays of the electric light which Davis had switched on when he entered the room.

"Combloux," said Peter, "where's the good old gazetteer?"

"No need for map-reading," put in Bob. "Unless there is more than one place of the name. Mine is a little village in Savoie on the way to Mont Blanc from the North."

I looked again at the wrist watch. The letters were scratched faintly, but unmistakably, across the glass.

"Pretty bright of Julia," said Peter.

"She wears a ring with a pear-shaped diamond," I said. "It belonged to her mother."

I had a swift vision in my mind of Julia, her hands behind her back, tossing in the taxi with her captors in the seat opposite, scratching away quietly while they talked freely in front of her.

"How do we get to Combloux?" I asked.

"There is no railway," said Bob. "The nearest station, if I remember rightly, is at Sallanches. I once spent a long week-end there . . . a most delectable pub, 'La Chaumière' it was called. The sole *à la Normande* that *grand-mère* cooks . . ."

"How ethereal is his mind," put in Peter; "so spiritual, I mean. I think we had better make quite sure that there is not another Combloux somewhere, where perhaps they stew larks *à la Pompadour*."

"*À la Pompadour*," said Bob, "I have never heard of that. Are they basted with brandy or merely garnished, so to speak?"

"Hell's bells," I protested. "This isn't an international meeting of head cooks. To our muttons, for the love of Mike!"

"Hell's bells to you," responded Peter. "And glad I am to hear them ringing out once more. Toby is himself again—what?"

"Davis?" he continued, "what about that gazetteer, or possibly a Bradshaw?"

Davis moved towards the bell. He had stretched out his hand to ring it, when an expression of infinite caution spread over his face, and he placed a stubby finger to lips extravagantly pursed. He looked rather like an elderly and improbable Actæon about to surprise Diana and her nymphs.

Finally he spun round on his heels and stabbed the air two or three times with a forefinger in the direction of the bathroom.

I raised my voice.

"By road or train?" I asked. "That is the question."

So saying, I motioned to Davis to reconnoitre in the bathroom. He hung back, however, and his face had gone a little white. I moved instantly towards the door myself, but Peter was before me, and Davis, pulling himself together was level with me by the time we reached the door. Someone obviously was there, and Peter snatched at me suddenly, at the same time falling flat on his face.

There was a startled cry, but no shot, and Davis bounded into the bathroom.

Out of it, sneezing loudly, fell a buxom pageboy, in the blue uniform of his profession, covered with buttons.

"What were you doing in there?" demanded Davis, with a fairly accurate kick at the place where kicks are usually bestowed. The boy leaped into the air in response to this stimulus.

"I was . . . cleaning the bath," said the boy. "I do not know what you do. Why you treat me like this? I speak to the manager. I . . ."

"Look out," Peter cried.

But it was too late. The boy had ducked under the heavy arm of Davis, and with an agility presumably born of long practice, had reached the door and torn it open. Bob measured his length on the floor trying to collar him low, but just missed his ankles. Davis, now full of fire and fury, bolted after him down the corridor and I saw them disappear round the bend. For a moment there was silence. Then came a sharp crack, which for an instant I took to be the sound of a pistol shot. It was followed, however, by a good round English oath. Another crack resounded, and then a babble of French in which the equivalents of pig, dirty man, idiot, disgusting personage and licentious one were just distinguishable. Davis was getting it hot. In column of three we approached the end of the corridor, to find a crestfallen and defeated Davis. He had encountered, it seemed, not the pageboy of his

pursuit, but the chambermaid of his dreams, and, as he had sped round the corner, had clasped her all unwittingly in his eager arms. The five-fingered marks on his cheek sufficiently explained the sharp sounds we had heard. She was a fine, upstanding girl of some thirty summers, and, even as we reached the end of the passage, she paused for breath and slapped again.

We rescued Davis, albeit with difficulty. We then enquired after the pageboy. It appeared, however, that he had disappeared, so Annette the housemaid informed us. In some confusion we retreated once more to my bedroom, where Davis was soothed with whisky, while we returned to a discussion of the situation.

"Combloux," repeated Bob. "When do we start?"

"Listen a moment," I begged. "You don't know everything yet. Last night I started to dine with a gentleman from Rio. . . ."

"*Started* to dine, old boy?" said Bob.

"Yes," I said, and thereupon told them as shortly as I could of my adventures in the Perigordine, of the drugged wine and the soup tureen, of Don Manuel Gonzago y Sanchez.

I was interrupted suddenly by Bob.

"You traced him to the Gare de Lyon?" he explained. "Why not assume he was going to meet our friends in Combloux—William the Silent and the Mighty One."

"The inference is good," said Peter. "Bob has read the situation. Everyone in this bright particular show is heading for the Alpine snows. The only question that remains is whether the gentleman who has come rolling down from Rio went willingly."

"He quitted his hotel a free agent," I replied. "He left word, in fact, that he would be away only for a few days and then took a taxi to the Gare de Lyon."

"Then he has gone to keep an appointment," Peter declared. "And from the Gare de Lyon one steps off for Combloux."

"Simple as pie," said Bob. "You take the winter sports express to St. Gervais-le-Fayet, where the railway ends. You get off the train at Sallanches, the station before St. Gervais. Then you go by car to Combloux, a distance of about six or seven kilometres."

"And what does Gonzago do when he gets there?" said Peter.

“He binds on his skis over the splendour and speed of his feet and tackles the practice slopes in the intervals of talking with William the Silent—a somewhat one-sided affair, I imagine. Or he amuses himself by learning from the Mighty One how to conceal goldfish or produce rabbits or admiring his host’s famous impersonation of an encyclopædia.”

“It is possible,” I allowed.

“And anyhow,” concluded Peter, “Julia is there.”

I felt his hand grip my forearm as he spoke.

“Don’t worry, old thing. She won’t be there for long.”

“There isn’t time to worry,” I rejoined. “My God, Peter, if I could only get that Assyrian by the beard.”

“Exit Murgatroyd the Merciless to his Mercedes,” put in Bob unfeelingly. “Davis, you fat ruffian, go and buy a motor car.”

“A motor car,” Davies echoed.

“A motor car,” Bob repeated firmly.

He threw down on the table something that looked like a bundle of Bank of England £100 notes.

“Hazelrig,” he explained laconically. “We had a word with him before we left. We explained the situation, and, of course, he insisted on coming, too. I was quite unable to prevent him.”

“Then he is here?” I said in alarm.

“No,” replied Peter. “We couldn’t prevent him ourselves, but the doctor did. I found the dear old thing in bed with influenza—temperature a hundred and two.”

I breathed again. I am devoted to my father-in-law. I have for him the utmost admiration but, had he turned up at that moment, serious, fussy and inclined to be fretful, he would have been decidedly worse than useless. It was better that he should stay behind and supply the sinews of war, of whose abundance and power there could be no manner of doubt.

“A train would be cheaper,” observed Davis, his eyes glistening upon the notes which Peter had thrown upon the table.

“It would also be watched,” I observed. “Peter is right. We must go by car.”

Davis sighed.

"So I'm to buy a car?" he said. "Not very easy at this time of day."

That might be true enough, for it was now six o'clock of a winter afternoon, and darkness had long since fallen.

"Nonsense," said Peter. "I spend several hours a day avoiding men who want to sell me a car. This evening I shall be found. We will go seek the concierge. Within half an hour, Toby, we shall return. Meanwhile, old boy, you had better see about some sandwiches."

"Maps!" exclaimed Bob suddenly. "We must have maps."

"Six o'clock," said Peter, "just time if you hurry."

"Toby," said Bob, "I am going to buy maps. You, on the other hand, are in no fit state to wander abroad. See to the commissariat, old boy. Food is essential. In an hour we shall be bound for Savoie and the snows and . . ."

"Lyonesse," I added slowly.

He looked at me queerly for a moment in silence, and then together my two friends, with Davis in tow, turned and left the room.

It was just after six when Davis and Peter went forth to buy a motor car. I collected food and drink, but could eat none myself; and I had an unsatisfactory conversation with Colonel Rhémy on the telephone. He rang up about seven and could make nothing of my attitude. I could not tell him of the terms of my bargain, for he might not have consented to be bound. I could merely tell him to take no further action, and the vagueness of my replies both irritated and confused him. He was distinctly peevish at the last.

Bob returned at half-past seven with a collection of maps which he had procured from various friends in Paris, the shops being shut, and we spent an hour plotting the route. The prospect of action relieved my sense of impotence. I bent over the maps, holding distress at bay and thus grew oddly content. Was it the prospect of action? That, I suppose, had much to do with it. Was it the close aid of two old and tried friends? That, perhaps, had even more. Was it, finally, the hope, which I strove to regard as sound, that I should see Julia again before many hours had passed? I was soon in a strange exalted state, due possibly to the drug beneath the influence of which I had slept the night before. Indeed, I felt oddly light-headed, though that passed away after we had dined—for Peter and Bob rightly insisted on departing as full men.

We settled the trivial details of paying the bill and getting away from the hotel. The concierge throughout was most helpful.

It was past eleven before we left. Our car was a large open tourer of an American make—second-hand and complete with the necessary papers. Davis assured me it was a peach, but it looked more like a potato, being of an earthy hue, complete with brown hood and side curtains.

We took the road for Versailles, past the Arc de Triomphe and down the Bois. Paris was still shrouded in a fine drizzle and the windscreen wiper was working overtime. I was at the wheel, with Peter beside me; Davis and Bob were in the back with a hamper of food and some necessary luggage.

Our first mishap occurred at the *octroi*, where an official, whose temper had not been improved by the weather, demanded to see the car's papers and was delighted to find that the quarter's tax had not been paid. For a moment I thought we should have to put back to Paris and await the tax gatherers. Bribery, however, blandishment and an impressive display of dignity on the part of Davis, eventually got us over the hedge. The local collector, run to earth hard by in a near café, was persuaded to open his office, give us the required permit and collect the money. But it was nearer one than twelve in the morning before we got going again.

The car had started well, but the weather was appalling. The drizzle of rain had covered the roads with a slimy film and to add to the driver's misfortune (we took it in turns to drive for an hour apiece), the lights on the dashboard had gone wrong—trivial, if you like, but annoying when you are driving at night and like to see exactly what you are doing.

We made, however, fair progress, passing through Sens about four. The rain was still continuous, and the spire of the great cathedral was dimly outlined against driving clouds. Thence had set out Thomas of Canterbury for England and his violent end in just such a stormy night as that through which we ran.

It was between Auxerre and Autun that our troubles really began. The engine first spluttered and then ceased to perform its office. Davis was at the wheel and he pulled to the side of the road. The petrol had given out, but we had spare tins in the back of the car and we filled up the tank and made to start again. The engine, however, warm and running sweetly up to that moment, stubbornly failed to respond either to self-starter or crank. With the aid of an electric torch we examined the plugs—all clean as a new pin, for the thoughtful Peter had put in six new ones before we left Paris. The

ignition was in perfect order. We examined the distributor and other vital parts, but could detect nothing wrong. The carburettor was brimming.

We stood blankly in the road. It was past four o'clock in the morning and we were miles from anywhere.

I was just about to shut down the bonnet and suggest walking to the nearest town on the map when Peter once more unscrewed the top of the carburettor and examined the contents. He soaked his handkerchief in some of the liquid, smelt it and looked unhappy. He then threw his handkerchief on the ground, struck a match and held it to the damp patch. The match spluttered and went out. He straightened his back and looked up.

"We filled up with water, chaps," he said quietly.

"Water," echoed Bob.

"Gawd, water," said Davis with an anguish such as he might have felt if called upon to drink it.

"I know what I want to do," said Peter.

"Yes, Peter? What is it?"

"Go back at once to Paris."

"For what purpose?"

"To kill the concierge."

I looked at him in bewilderment.

"He helped us to buy the car," Peter reminded me. "Doubtless the pageboy had reported to him that all was by no means quiet on the Western Front."

"I ought to have warned you, Peter," I said. "On the night I came to the Bristol, Ruggiero was deep in counsel with the fellow. Ruggiero had taken my room, and he gave it me back with a flourish."

"Old boy," said Peter solemnly, "there are no flies on the Mighty One!"

I will pass over the next hour or so. Peter and I drained the tank and cleaned the carburettor, while Davis and Bob went in search of petrol. They returned two hours later with a tin obtained with difficulty from a farmhouse. With this one tin we reached a café on the roadside where there was a petrol pump, wasting yet another half hour knocking up the proprietor.

It was seven in the morning before we got upon our way again and by that time we were utterly exhausted. The unending rain was pouring down upon the fair land of Burgundy. At Autun we called a halt. It was now nine o'clock. We had finished our provisions and we had none of us slept a wink. The hospitable inn of the Poste received us and for two hours we slept, awakening at about eleven, not exactly refreshed, but at any rate capable of further effort.

The journey as far as Bourg was uneventful, but again, between Bourg and Nantua, we lost time, for we took the shorter road, which is very steep and difficult, preferring it in our ignorance to the longer and easier route by way of Pont d'Ain. The blinding rain obscured the sparse country through which we plodded and put lead upon our heels. We had all begun to feel it would have been better to go by train despite our suspicion, amounting in my mind to a certainty, that the stations would be watched. That incident of the petrol cans had given us something to think about. It showed conclusively, if we needed showing, that our enemies were awake and determined beyond a common measure.

At Nantua we drank wine.

Thereafter we passed a lake, green as an emerald, and ran down the long valley towards Bellegarde. Here, though the road was open, there was a fair amount of snow at each side and the grey bulk of the Credo on our left was thickly covered. At Bellegarde—the railway frontier between France and Switzerland—we stopped for the last time to take in supplies of petrol, and at four o'clock in the afternoon started climbing out of the town. To our right was the Rhône in a deep gorge, to our left rose the outcrops of the Jura. We passed the derelict fort of Napoleon set in the jaws of the defile, turned right and, descending yet again, crossed the Rhône and climbed to the little village of St. Julien en Genevois. Here we made a slight detour to avoid passing the Swiss frontier, ran along the foot of the Salève, an ugly ridge of mountain that oppresses Geneva from the south. Its flat top covered with snow was desolate and chill. The winter afternoon was now drawing swiftly to a close. We were weary and out of spirits—with everything yet to do. I had started in the belief that our hardest problem would be to find our enemies, but I was now becoming convinced that our enemies would shortly be finding us.

It was dark when we started up the valley of the Arve towards Mont Blanc and the great *aiguilles*. The roads were full of pot-holes, with every now and then a village straggling and unkempt. The prickling drizzle through which we had driven from Paris had turned to sullen snow, and it

was impossible to advance against the drifting flakes even at the poor rate which we had maintained since leaving Autun.

It grew darker. I was taking my turn at the wheel and I drove with but one idea in my head—shared, I think, by the others: to make Sallanches as quickly as possible. Bob, who was beside me, peered through the talc curtains of the car from time to time. He was working the spot light. Thick though the snow was, I could yet see the road a good seventy yards ahead. I dared not drive fast, however, for we had no chains on our tyres and the snow must, in my reckoning, have been not far short of four inches deep and increasing every minute.

Down the long valley of the Arve we passed, through Bonneville with its castle and then along an interminable stretch of road to the small town of Cluses, huddled against the shoulders of a great mountain. The air grew keener and more bitter. At Cluses we crossed the railway in a narrow cleft, and now there were but ten miles to go. On our left a tall mountain running right down to the road, its lower slopes clothed with beech and fir, lowered blackly above us; on our right was the river, silent beneath a thin sheet of ice; beyond the river were fields, leading in turn to another great mountain. I concentrated on getting the car along. The road followed the contours of the valley, constantly crossing and re-crossing the river.

It was at a spot where the woods came right down to the road which there crossed the Arve that it happened. I was approaching the end of a straight run and had slowed up a little to take the turn which would bring us to the bridge, when I heard an exclamation from Bob, and at the same instant perceived, outlined sharp and clear against a dark background of pines, the figure of a girl. My heart gave a great leap and I cried out. For the woman standing in our path was Julia. She was wearing the same blue frock, fur coat and hat which she had worn in the Place de l'Opéra, two days before. Only her face was hidden in the shadow of a great fir tree which hung with its burden of snow, strange winter fruit, above the road.

"Julia," I cried.

Then I realised two things: First, that we were going too fast for me to pull up short; and, secondly, that Julia seemed blind and deaf to our approach. She neither moved nor stirred. I sounded the klaxon. Thereat she started and moved to the side of the road just as we made the bridge. But the mischief was done. Reflexively I had swung the wheel right round and braked hard. There was a sharp cry in the night. The car skidded out of control for one sickening instant, broadside, before it crashed into the ditch.

I saw darkness and sharp light, blinding snowflakes hissing through the air. I saw all these things as through an inverted telescope, and then I saw them not at all.

Darkness fell and swift oblivion.

# VIII I STEP INTO A DEAD MAN'S SHOES

THE darkness stirred, was shot with flame. I thrust an arm through what, in sudden panic, I thought was glass, but discovered to be one of the talc curtains of the car. Cold flakes of snow fell on my upturned face as I struggled to free myself from the wreck. There came a sound of tearing beneath me—my trousers or the talc curtain? I did not know. What I remember most distinctly is the effort it cost me to climb through the window of the car. I had all the sensations of a caterpillar at issue with a peculiarly upright and difficult blade of grass. I had forgotten Julia, my friends, the driving snow, our quest; such things were gone. All my soul was bent on getting through that hole in the window. It seemed that I had eternity for the task and that I needed more.

At last I stood upon the side of the car—it had turned right over—one foot on a mangled mudguard. The lights had gone out, but the darkness was stabbed by flashes and there came to my ears the sharp crack of a pistol, followed by a number of dull, coughing sounds—inhuman and metallic, as though given out by some strange machine. I stood upon the car peering to right and left. Confused shouts came through the darkness but there was no sound of movement of men, only the shouts and the shots and the metallic coughing.

Someone started to crack a whip by my ear. I turned in dudgeon and in turning slipped and fell forward with arms outstretched into a deep drift of snow. I struggled to get free, and abruptly the sharp cold of the snow cleared my senses. I realised that I was falling lower yet and not climbing to the road and to an upright posture. I knew, moreover, what had happened. That was no crack of a whip I had just heard but a bullet that had passed me by. More than once had I heard that sound: when a bullet comes really near, you do not hear it; those that crack are safely away.

All this I realised as I rolled down the slope in a hopeless confusion of body and spirit.

There came a crackling sound beneath my feet, followed by a feeling of intense cold. I stumbled blindly forward. The cold grew more intense and, as I came to myself, really and completely, I found that I was on my hands and knees in the river, which was, there, fortunately not more than a foot deep. I

had broken through the ice and was lying spreadeagled, the water rushing about my knees.

I scrambled to an upright posture, turned lefthanded and began slowly to climb the steep bank opposite that which I had incontinently descended. The shooting had ceased. Where were my friends? Where was Julia? Where, above all, was Julia? I did not dare to think. But I must get at all costs to the road, climb from the ditch in which I was imprisoned.

The snow was deep, for here it had drifted. Each forward movement I made landed me up to my middle in clinging snow. Every step was a conscious effort. I made shift, however, to go forward and reached, at long last, the lip or edge of the bank.

So far, but not so good; for, to my great discomfort, I then found myself staring into the eyes of an unknown man. He wore a bristly beard which was half full of snow and he was sitting on the ground, trying to free an automatic with a queer metal snout at the end of it which had jammed in the course of battle.

We stared at each other. The man was breathing heavily, and his eyes were blank but resolute—the eyes of a man to whom thinking does not come easily, but who, being given a job, gives all his mind to it.

My hand went swiftly to my hip-pocket and made a devastating discovery. The automatic which should have been there was gone. It had tumbled out, I suppose, when I had rolled down the bank into the stream. My friend with the beard was, however, in no better pass. His pistol was jammed, and he was tugging vaguely at the breach action.

“Well, monsieur?” I said sharply in French.

He continued to pull at the useless pistol, but switched an eye in my direction.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Pull yourself together,” I bade him in my best parade-ground voice, for if he didn’t know who I was I might still confuse him. “Where are the others?”

The man struggled to his knees and so remained, regarding me with cold and solid deliberation.

“I have never seen you up at the château . . . never at the château,” he began, and ended his sentence by flinging himself at my throat. His thick hands came together beneath my chin and, thrust off my balance, I stumbled

backwards down that cursed bank once more, locked this time with an adversary. Through the snow, gasping like incompetent divers, we crashed and struggled till we fetched up at last on the ice of the river which broke beneath our weight. His hands were still at my throat. I struck at his face with my clenched fist and thrust a knee into his stomach. But his grip on my throat tightened. His face was red and battered under my heavy blows; his breath hissed from between his teeth; but he would not let go the grip that strangled me. Each blow that I dealt him cost me a greater effort and I knew that soon I should be unable to lift an arm.

Already the whole scene was growing vague and distant. This was a dream and I should presently wake to find Julia beside me and the white snow would be a white sheet of fine linen.

My adversary began to shake me as an angry nurse will shake a fractious child. I could not see him now. All was dark and I could no longer feel hurt or cold. Then suddenly came a sharp pain. He had thrust me to one side in a violent effort to end me, and my cheek had struck a splinter of ice. It was a warning conveyed to my fading intelligence. It told me that I was still fighting for my life, and I knew what I must do to escape destruction.

I ceased to beat at his face. I lay back, limp and seemingly at an end. The pressure on my throat did not relax, but he bent forward to see me the better. At that instant I put forth a last effort, doubling my legs for a heave and swinging my body to the right. The ice cracked and splintered so that our weight was borne by the boulders in the bed of the stream that was here, as I think I have already said, not more than a foot or so deep. My sudden movement over-balanced him and he fell sideways. For a brief moment I was on top. I thrust my hands to his chin forcing it backwards, till I felt the cold rushing waters of the Arve speed through my fingers. He wriggled and bucked. I was jerked about like a mongoose that I had once seen with its teeth fixed in the neck of a cobra, but I held fast. The pain in my throat had come back, but I was still blind and could hear nothing but the blood in my ears.

At last, when it seemed that, come what might, I could hold on no longer, the grip on my throat relaxed. The big hands were still there, the cruel thumbs pressing on my windpipe, but they no longer performed their office and the writhing body beneath me was still. For a moment I sprawled helpless across it, drawing the air into my lungs, getting back the use of my sight and hearing.

Thus for a space I lay across the inert body, over whose blind eyes streamed the sharp glacier water. One, at any rate, of the servants of the Mighty Magistro would serve no more.

I found myself a few minutes later on the bank by the side of the stream. I was ice-cold, except for my eyes and throat, which were burning. I got with difficulty to my feet. The snow was still falling, and the place so silent that the air seemed full of its rustling. Where were my friends? I must find them soon for I was almost incapable of further movement. I took a step forward and fell weakly to the ground in a drift of snow. I put out a hand to feel what it was that had tripped me up, and found it was the feet of the man with whom I had just been fighting. They were shod with what first appeared to be tennis racquets, but which, on looking closer, I discovered to be an ordinary pair of snowshoes, such as are worn in the north of Canada and other parts of the world where snow and ice are frequent. If you have tried walking over a snowfield in ordinary boots you will understand my content.

With some difficulty in the darkness I removed his boots, the snowshoes being bound to them with a thong which I could not unfasten. The boots were rather large for me, but that could not be helped, and I was thankful to put them on in place of my own sodden shoes.

As I finished tying up the laces a light shone suddenly twenty yards or so to my left. It was the headlight of a car and it lit up the drifting flakes. A voice called something that I could not catch. I moved cautiously upstream beside the river and stood a moment just below the bank. I then saw that the car was in charge of a breakdown gang, such as you may see on any road on the continent—a large antiquated chassis carrying a small crane with chains and pulleys. Three or four men in goatskin coats were about it, and their object was at once apparent. The car which had brought us from Paris was to be dragged from the ditch in which it lay and set on its wheels again.

What had happened? Was this the work of Bob or Peter? Had they perhaps gone into Sallanches, picked up the gang and returned? I moved soundlessly up the bank and, with head and shoulders clear above it, I saw a man who was adjusting a steel hook attached to the main frame of our late car.

"What is this?" I asked.

The man whipped round at the sound of my voice. At the same instant, from beyond a blaze of headlights, I heard a sharp exclamation. I looked up and I saw before me a thickset man, whom I instantly recognised.

It was William the Silent—whom I had last seen with the Mighty Magistro in the Ritz at Paris.

"Get him," he barked.

The man with the hook in his hand dropped it and turned to face me. Also I became aware of three other shapes, clad, too, in goatskin coats, long and hairy.

All four moved in my direction, and there came a spurt of flame from one of them followed by a soft whine near my right ear.

For the third time that night I rolled down the bank, but this time of my own will and motion. At the foot of the slope I struggled to my knees, half smothered and wildly kicking, my snowshoes more of a hindrance than an aid. Confused shouts came from the roadside.

"Did you get him?" someone asked.

Dimly I perceived all four hairy figures preparing to descend the bank. Then, abruptly, the lights of the breakdown car went out and darkness fell thick about me.

I stood for a moment straining my ears. Whence would the attack be coming? I could hear nothing, only the tired whisper of the Arve beneath its coat of ice. I turned and padded off silently in the snow, deadly cold in body and at heart. From somewhere behind me flashed out a light again. Someone was working a spot lamp. Its beams traversed the snow and came to rest on the body of the man whom I had killed. My pursuers gave tongue when they caught sight of him and two of them came down the bank now with torches in their hands.

"Good God," said one of them, "he's lost his boots."

A light was playing on the stockinged soles of my late antagonist. I heard no more but moved softly away into the darkness. Behind me, fifty or sixty yards perhaps, the torches bobbed and wavered. The snow whispered about me and I heard the heavy breathing of my pursuers. They moved but slowly, for with each step they sank well above their knees, while I in my snowshoes was lighter of foot. To track me, however, was the simplest of problems; for, as I floundered desperately forward, I left a spoor like that of an elephant.

Even at that moment I had wit enough to admire the cunning of my adversary. Of my friends there was no sign. In all probability they were dead or taken. Meanwhile, here was a breakdown gang, removing all traces of

their ambush. My car would be towed away, and within an hour, under this snowstorm, there would be no trace to tell of the sudden and unexpected end of four strangers in a Savoyard valley.

And where was Julia? My frozen heart leapt for a moment into warmth and bitterness. How had she come to be standing in the road? Under what spell of the Mighty Magistro had she fallen?

To my left I heard the muffled creak and whirring of wheels on the snow. The lights of a car passed me fifty yards away. Someone cried out behind me and my spirit again took fire. They might pursue me to the ends of the earth, but they should not take me. I would yet escape to solve this hideous riddle.

In front of me shone the lights of a smallish town not more than, perhaps, a mile away. I strove towards it across the open fields of snow, keeping as close as I could to the river, for the chatter of its waters—it was not completely frozen—would deaden any sound I might make. So I continued, every step I took seeming like the last effort I should be able to make, till I was very close to the town.

Then I paused.

A car was drawn up at the entrance to the village. Two men were standing by it and one of them, looking eagerly to right and left, I recognised again as the confederate of Ruggiero. Their position was tactically sound. They stood at the very gate of the town, under the first lamp which, as is common with mountain villages in the Savoy, was a naked electric globe hanging from the eave of a house.

I moved to within ten yards of the road. In front of me was a deep chasm. The river ran steeply between two banks and here it widened. I could hear the rush of its waters at my feet. The road into the village crossed it by means of a stone bridge and on the further side of the bridge my enemy was posted. The parapet on my side ended in a tall poplar tree, dark and handsome, and at its foot was a small pile of stones lightly sprinkled with snow, which owing to the tree had escaped the full force of the storm.

I stood for perhaps five minutes, freezing to the marrow. Then I realised what I must do.

I took my knife from my pocket, cut the thongs of my snowshoes and stepped free of them, for they would be useless on the road. Stooping I selected half a dozen flints from the pile to form the kernel of as many snowballs, which I kneaded in my hands till they were hard as rocks. Then I slipped into the shadow of the tree and waited. Behind me on the road I

could hear footsteps. The beaters were coming up and soon I should be taken in the rear. It was now or never, and an instant later one of my missiles flew straight at the head of the little man on the bridge just beyond me, and caught him, fair and square, on the side of the neck. He gave a great cry. Whereat I left cover and bolted across the bridge. The second man was a fraction of a second too late. My ball took him full in the face at a range of about five yards. He staggered back and the pistol in his hand swept the sky. In a flash I had passed between the two of them and was running with what speed I could up the village street. I had but one thought, to get somehow among my own kind, for they could not attack me in the company of men.

I dashed up the street with but one glance over my shoulder. It showed me four figures strung out behind me, the nearest about fifty yards away, running silently like hounds that had viewed their fox.

I turned a corner, spent and finished. Opposite me in the bright light of two lamps rose a yellow-coloured building set upon a little hill. The name was painted in bold letters across it—“La Chaumière.”

I staggered to the door and flung it open.

From within came a sound of bright laughter and human merriment.

# IX I JOIN THE BURGUNDY SQUAD

THE door of the hotel did not open straight into the hall, but into a small vestibule screened by a second door. The glass panes were misty from the heat within, so that I could not see, but only hear, the company. For a moment I remained in the vestibule, to recover my wits. Someone inside was singing

> "My friend, Elizabeth
> Out of temper, out of breath."

Was it an omen? I pushed open the door and perceived that the familiar ditty came from a portable gramophone lying on a low table. Thronging about it were many figures arrayed in ski-ing trousers and bright sweaters. They were flushed, noisy, and very much at their ease.

I stood a moment leaning against the door.

"Fall in the Burgundy squad," called a sharp voice somewhere to my right.

"Sir . . . sir . . . sir," came the response from three directions.

"May I come, too?" This time the voice was from a girl.

"Certainly not," said the commander of the Burgundy squad, "stay with the song, Peggy. The wine is for us."

I saw the speaker at last—a man on the short side, thickset, youngish, but growing thin on top and wearing a double chin. His face was round and red. He was wearing a dark ski-ing suit and a pair of fantastic slippers made of fur. He had obviously assumed charge of the proceedings.

The squad, now falling in, consisted of a tall young man in a scarlet shirt and blue trousers, a smaller man with yellow hair, obviously English, and a dark young man as obviously not. The sound of heavy boots was audible behind me. I turned round. A fifth man was descending the stairs, short and wearing an extraordinary costume consisting of mackintosh trousers and a jacket with an elaborate arrangement of strings to bind it carefully to his person. He had large round spectacles, greying hair and a benevolent expression.

“Late for parade,” shouted the man in charge. “Take his name, sergeant.”

“Sir,” responded the man in the red shirt.

“Guardsman Pilgrim,” he continued, “you are late for parade again. Fall in, you dozy-idle man, you.”

The man in the red shirt knew the words, but not how they should be delivered. He spoke with the deliberation of a master of elocution, each syllable distinct and unhurried.

Mr. Pilgrim joined the end of the queue in silence, his eyes twinkling.

What manner of merry riot was this? I shrank back beside a stand covered with a multitude of coats, but the officer, if I may so call him, in charge of the Burgundy squad had perceived me.

“Squad, stand at ease,” he barked over his shoulder as he came towards me.

There was a clatter of ski boots as the four men in a line obeyed the command. The officer bowed low.

“Monsieur,” he said in French, which nothing would ever save from being English in disguise, “you have, as I perceive, just entered the Chaumière. You are doubtless seeking a room.”

“You are quite right,” I answered in English.

The man with the red face bowed, and threw his French to the winds.

“Not a hope,” he said. “We’re chockablock. *La Société gastronomique et des sports d’hiver*, of which I am President, self-elected, has bagged the whole outfit. Unless . . .”

“Madame,” he shouted suddenly at the top of his voice.

There was a stir from the kitchen behind me, and a fair dame came through the door, young but smiling like a mother on the company. She was followed by an older woman, welcomed as *grand-mère*, and by a serving wench as dark as the other was fair.

“Madame,” said the President of the *Société gastronomique et des sports d’hiver*, “can you find this gentleman a room? The request is from me—the President.”

He struck himself on the chest—an insufferable fellow, I thought. Or perhaps I was not in the mood for him.

Madame threw up her hands.

"It is not possible," she exclaimed, "unless monsieur will sleep in the bureau."

"Monsieur will certainly sleep in the bureau," I said.

"Monsieur will sleep in the bureau," confirmed the President.

"And he will dine with us," he added, turning to me.

"One moment," I began.

"It is an order," snapped the President. "Fall in, sir, next to Guardsman Pilgrim and tell him to take his back off."

I hesitated a moment, glancing instinctively behind me. Was it my fancy, or was that a dark figure beyond the frosted pane, outlined, amid snowflakes, against the electric light? And had I really seen that face, pressed momentarily against the glass?

I had blundered into high carnival. I did not yet believe in these fantastic figures. The reality was outside pressing upon the warm four walls. My enemies were there, waiting and watching. I could not face them yet. I could scarcely trust myself to stand upright.

I pulled myself together and fell in.

"Squad, 'shun!" said the President.

We 'shunned.

"Number!"

The man with the red shirt spoke first.

"Mersault," he said, " '19."

"Poully Fuissé '21," said the second.

"Gevrey Chambertin, '19," said the third.

"Gin, Gordon '31," said Mr. Pilgrim unexpectedly. He received a cushion at his head from one of the female members of the Society, who had gathered in the dining-room beyond.

The President looked enquiringly at me.

"Vosne Romanée, '15," I said firmly.

"A man of taste and discrimination," said the President. "Squad right turn. Quick march."

With a clatter of boots we moved off in Indian file followed by a little man with tow-coloured hair, wearing an apron and bearing in his hand sundry empty wine baskets—soon, I discovered, to be filled.

We rumbled down some stairs into the deep cool of the cellar, where the squad was halted in front of an array of wine bins, which it warmed even my sick heart to see.

"A small party of ten," said the President. "Fifteen bottles will then be sufficient. I am counting you, Mr. . . ." He looked towards me graciously.

"Ponsonby," I said after a moment's hesitation.

"Ponsonby," repeated the President gravely, and then, indicating the squad, he reeled off a string of names which in the usual English fashion I did not catch.

We found ourselves presently mounting the stairs into the little dining-room which, I had not had time to notice before, was paved, as was the whole ground floor of the hotel, with tiles, and displayed a startling wallpaper of yellow and brown. A long table, spread with a white cloth and many glasses, stood ready. Down one side of it four or five girls in ski-ing clothes were gathered. They were young and, if I had not been so tired, I should have said that they were charming.

I sat in a corner, at one end of the long table, next to the wall and not far from the door. I chose this place deliberately. Should the Mighty One and his myrmidons dare to raid the hotel, it would take them a moment or two to catch sight of me and in that moment perhaps I could escape. Meanwhile, I must play my part—be one with this merry crew and hope that their merriment would be prolonged. For, while they were singing, dancing, drinking and generally disporting themselves, I was safe.

I ran my eye down the long table. Seated next to the fair young man with yellow hair was a slim girl with red hair and a freckled face, who addressed him from time to time as Algernon, whence I gathered that Algernon was not his name. On his further side was a blonde creature with hair coiled about her ears. Next to Mr. Pilgrim came a girl with dark hair and finely-cut features, in a grey-blue jumper, wearing red leather slippers. My own partner was a girl in green with a tilted nose and spectacles of light-coloured horn. Somewhere at the end of the table was a woman in a silk shirt, whose wide-set eyes and flattish cheekbones betrayed the Slav.

Had I the skill I would try to paint for you a true picture of that merry meal. Here was a room full of folk, mostly of my own race, as ready to take

the good things of the table as the swift downward rush over the smooth slopes of snow. Sick at heart, I could not help thinking how, with Julia beside me, I should have loved their laughter and their wine—even their small intimate jokes which were above my head, for though I was of their company, yet I was not of their fellowship.

But I sat as a stranger, without wife or friend, in peril of my life; while outside, in the falling snow, men were lying in wait as for a prey—*negotio perambulante in tenebris*.

I lifted a glass of wine, but set it down again.

The President of the Society was rapping on the table.

"The moment has come for the toast," he was saying.

I glanced about me. The fish—an admirable *sole à la normande*, smothered in mussels—had just appeared on the table.

The girl in the olive-green ski-ing suit and spectacles was looking at me as though to see what I made of it all.

"Poor idiot," she said. "He usually makes us drink it with the fish."

"He's not such a fool as he looks," she added unexpectedly.

"I hope you are in a position to know," I responded doubtfully.

"More or less," she answered, "he is my husband."

"I don't dislike him, really," she added a little absently.

The President was speaking. He had raised his glass, brimming with the golden liquor of the Côte d'Or.

"Take it crooked," he declaimed.

The company leaned forward above their plates, raised their glasses and chanted solemnly:

"*Take it crooked!*"

The glasses were set down as empty as a moment before they had been full.

"The origin of the toast," began the man in the red shirt in his deliberate way, "is wrapped in mystery."

"Silence for Polycarp," called the President.

"Polycarp always talks like that," said my companion.

I looked at her inquiringly.

“As though he were reading extracts from one of the hundred best books,” she explained.

“We drink it,” continued the man in the red shirt, “as a protest against those who sully the high Alpine snows with zealous competition, who debase the low Alpine resorts—I am not referring to their physical position—with that awful British spirit of dogged does it. Their motto, we believe, is, take it straight. They are led by hideous men with strong jaws and chins thrust out.”

“And the women look as though they made themselves up with sandpaper every morning,” put in one of the girls from down the table.

“And powdered the result with brick dust,” said the President.

“Now I,” said Mr. Pilgrim, smiling blandly at the company, “prefer always to be devious.

“Tennyson,” he said, turning to me with a twinkle. “Or it may be Swinburne or Humbert Wolfe. I never remember names; something about the longest, or is it the weariest, river that winds somewhere safe to sea. I like my angles to be acute.”

“You have, I trust, drunk our toast, Mr. Ponsonby.”

The President was leaning across the table towards me.

I bowed.

“I have been honoured to do so, sir,” I answered.

“We will drink yours presently in the wine of your choice,” he graciously responded.

After this exchange of courtesies I busied myself with the sole, which was excellent. It was then that the conversation of the girl with the dark hair and the pale face caught my ears.

“Good Samaritans,” she was saying. “It was all over when we arrived, and they were taking away the wounded.”

I pricked up my ears.

“Where did it happen, Celia?” asked the lively young man with the olive skin and the foreign face.

"About two kilometres from here," said the girl with the dark hair. "You know the bend where there is a bridge. The driver must have taken it too fast, skidded sideways and overturned. They were lucky not to have been all killed."

"Syncopated acceleration, perhaps," said the man in the red shirt, whose deliberate manner of speech I was beginning to find rather attractive.

There was a burst of giggles from the two young things further down the table. The head of one of them appeared to be reposing on the shoulder of Algernon, or so it seemed to me. But it may have been my fancy, for the next moment she was speaking, bolt upright.

"Syncopated acceleration? Explain yourself, Polycarp."

"Silence for Polycarp," said the President.

Polycarp thrust out his chest.

"The theory is roughly this," he proclaimed. "You sing to yourself, above or below the breath as the mood may take you, a popular jazz tune."

> "My friend, Elizabeth.
> Out of temper, out of breath."

responded the company.

"You mark the time by tapping upon the accelerator with the right foot. A well tuned car responds immediately and the consequences may be exciting."

"What happens when you come to a bend in the road, or if you meet a brass band in the village?"

"You can only hope," replied Polycarp, "that the composer has seen fit to insert a rallentando passage in the score."

"But the accident," I broke in, trying to keep my voice under decent control.

"There was blood on the snow," said the President cheerfully.

"I have married a ghoul," said the woman on my right.

> "Hell raked them, as they rolled
> Blood fruit and corpses up the hold,"

declaimed Polycarp.

“There were no bodies, not even one,” said Celia.

The President sighed his disappointment, and helped himself a third time to the *sole à la normande*.

“President’s privilege,” he remarked, noting the unanimous cold stare of the *Société gastronomique*.

“They were, as I said, removing the wounded,” continued Celia. “The first aid party had arrived in a long motor car before we came up.”

“How fortunate, Celia,” said Mr. Pilgrim, “you might have missed your dinner.”

“There would have been more for us,” said the President simply.

“Were there many persons injured?” I ventured.

Celia turned her dark head in my direction.

“Three,” she answered promptly. “The first was tall; the second was short; and the third was fat.”

“How classic,” exclaimed Polycarp. “Or perhaps I should say romantic. Dumas, you know . . . the seven and seventy times to be forgiven . . . Athos, Porthos and Aramis.”

“Did you . . . speak to them?” I asked.

“Of course not,” intervened the President, now, I noticed, nearly at the bottom of his bottle of Mersault. “She produced a tube of aspirin. She’s a doctor, you know . . . ten grains . . . she carries it about with her in case any of us should break our legs:

> “Not poppy, nor mandragora,
> Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world . . .”

Here the President caught his wife’s eye and subsided into his glass.

“Did you,” I persisted, leaning forward and addressing Celia, “happen to take note of the rescuers?”

“Not particularly,” she said.

“I did though,” said Polycarp. “The Lord High Rescuer was rather an amusing person—so very informative. He told me as they were tucking away the casualties in the back of the car that the number of street accidents in Paris averaged 27.03462 per diem or 9,867.6363 per year. He was bursting with data and contrived to give me statistics of all the railway

accidents that had occurred in Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Roumania and the Fiji Islands during the last twenty-five years. The poor man seemed to be suffering from a chronic distension of the brain. He was all blown up with knowledge. It pained him to keep it in. He was still talking when we left.”

I looked down the long table, and had a sudden itch to tell these merry folk of the pass to which I had come. That, of course, was hysteria—the effect of warmth and wine. For what could they do? The men who awaited me beyond those frosted windows were armed, and we could not cope with them. Nor was there any sense in trying, for I could not find Julia or my friends in a blind sally. So I sat back in my chair, trying at least to recover heart, wondering now and then what my companions would say or do if they knew that little more than an hour ago I had thrust the face of a man beneath the icy waters of the Arve, and held him there, bucking and writhing, till he drowned.

The fish had at last gone the way of all flesh, yielding to succulent lamb cutlets and a most remarkable salad served in a great white china bowl. I had disposed of my own share of these meats when I saw two figures pass from the street into the vestibule. I gripped the table ready for what might ensue. The hall door was opened and a couple entered, taking a small table far removed from our festive board. I looked at the newcomers warily—a man in a lumber jacket and breeches, a girl in ordinary winter outfit with a fur coat. The back of the girl was towards me.

“Not till after the wine.”

The President was speaking. He had three times prevented Algernon, none too gently, from lighting a cigarette, and I perceived that the Vosne Romanée was being served. By order of the President it was poured into tumblers and he was good enough to decree that mine should be larger than the rest.

“Mr. Ponsonby,” he said gravely, “your good health.”

I drank deeply of the red wine, and as I set down my glass I caught sight of the face of the girl who had just entered. Hastily I picked up the tumbler and drank again. It is not my habit or my training to forget faces. My memory shot back to a room hung with black velvet and the figure of a woman, also in black, who had drifted from the presence of the Mighty Magistro. She was dark, with fine features and the haggard beauty of a woman who has lived upon her nerves. Her companion, a thickset, red-faced man, was a stranger to me.

Did they bring me a message? Should I be called forth under some dire persuasion? Or did they come merely to spy upon my intentions?

Fruit and cheese had been placed upon the table, and someone started the gramophone. The man with the olive face rose, to a sudden outbreak of applause, and proceeded to entertain the guests, which he did to some effect, by dancing between the tables Slav fashion, arms folded and feet thrust out, while the company clapped hands in time to the music. Chairs were then thrust back and

"My friend, Elizabeth,"

served the turn of those who desired to dance. The President, shining with wisdom and indulgence, captured the proprietress of the house and led her to the floor. My end of the table was now deserted.

I sat there sipping my wine, debating what should be my next move, and admiring the deadly work of the Mighty Magistro. He had thought of everything—rescued his own victims and obliterated the traces of their doom.

I looked up to meet the eye of the girl at the table opposite. She was now alone—her companion having left the room a moment before. There was an invitation or rather a summons in her look.

I crossed the room and bowed to her.

"I have something to say to you," she said. She got up as she spoke, as though I had asked her to dance. I took her in my arms and we drifted aimlessly about the floor.

"Colonel," she said, as we moved awkwardly round the room—not even Julia had been able to teach me to dance—"it is very hot in here. Perhaps you will accompany me to the door."

"And be shot for my pains?"

She smiled.

"Not here," she said calmly.

We threaded a way to the vestibule. The whole kitchen staff, with the exception of *grand-mère*, was assembled watching the revels. We pushed through the door and into the glass alcove giving on to the street.

"Look," said my companion.

The snow had ceased to fall outside. The clouds had lifted, and the moon was shining down upon the white surface beneath. Two men were standing on the further side of the road and, even as I looked, a third moved into view. They were dressed warmly against the night air, with heavy boots and goatskin coats, and they cast dark shadows on the snow.

“Others are posted,” said my companion in my ear. “They have silencers to their pistols. All that will be heard is a loud cough, followed perhaps by a second from yourself, if the bullet happens to puncture the lung.”

She smiled and laid a hand on my arm.

“Cheer up, Colonel,” she said. “You never know what morning may bring forth. Will you now please fetch my coat.”

I did as she asked and helped her into a long coat of sables.

She looked at me sympathetically with her tired eyes.

“I am only a messenger,” she said.

In another moment she had left the inn, and I turned back to the revellers.

“Well,” asked the President, “has it stopped snowing?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“Good,” said the President. “Mr. Pilgrim will go down first to-morrow. He shall help to make the smooth way rough.”

“Hullo,” he said in surprise, “what is this?”

*Grand-mère* had appeared on the scene. Her fine eyes were shining with excitement and she grasped the *patronne* by the arm.

“It is a thief,” she said calmly to the assembled company. “But do not disturb yourselves. It is only a little one.”

“And he is very dirty,” added *grand-mère*.

I caught the eye of the *patronne* as she turned her head.

“Let me deal with him,” I begged, moving forward.

There was a general disposition to volunteer, but the *patronne* waved back the company.

“One is enough,” she said.

I followed her into the kitchen and there saw, standing in front of the vast stove on which various copper pots were bubbling, a slender young man—he seemed scarcely more than a boy. He was dressed in a pair of dirty blue overalls, and his face was smothered with motor grease.

Suddenly I bent forward and in another instant had sprung impetuously across the kitchen towards him.

"Careful, Toby," said Julia, "or the dirt will come off."

# X I LISTEN BY NIGHT

I STOOD with my hands on her shoulders, while *grand-mère* and the pretty *patronne*, and her tall husband in a woollen sweater worked in bright colours, gazed at us in astonishment.

But I had lost all sense of their company. I could see nothing but a smutty boy in bedraggled overalls, with a great smear of grease across his face and a glitter of tousled hair beneath a grimy beret. And the smutty boy was Julia, laughing at me and yet with something in her eyes of strain and terror.

"Toby," she said. "Do I get a kiss now or later?"

"Now," I said, regardless of them all.

But in a moment she was struggling to be free.

"Steady, Toby," she said, and stepped back, flushing, for the *patronne* was upon us and the little maid with her round eyes, and the husband of the *patronne*, and *grand-mère* and the *patronne's* little boy, holding in his hand a large model aeroplane. They stood about us in a ring, amazed, and I had no word to say to them. So we remained, I with my arm about Julia's shoulder and she with her face lifted to mine, her hair across her cheek and her lashes wet.

"What then is this?" said the *patronne* at last.

"This," I stammered, "is a miracle. It is my wife. She has arrived most unexpectedly. There has been an accident."

Julia nodded gravely.

"There has been an accident," she echoed. "I came . . . on a motor-bicycle . . . from Albertville up the valley . . . towards Flumet. I ran into a drift."

"From Flumet," said the *patronne*. "But, madame . . . what madness . . . what folly. . . . Do I not know it? Has not my worthless husband, here, a motor-bicycle? Does he not fall off in the ditch, once, nay twice, a week regularly? Has it yet arrived that he has ever completed a course without failure or mishap?"

She was growing eloquent. But her husband caught her suddenly, swung her aloft, kissed her soundly on both cheeks and sat her plump on the kitchen table, to the enormous delight of her small son.

"Enough," he said. "It is as you say. So madame has attempted the Col de Flumet? Madame is"—he stopped for a word which would not be too devastatingly impolite—"English," he concluded triumphantly.

"American-born," corrected Julia.

"*Voilà!*" said *grand-mère*. "Now one can understand."

"Where then is the motor-bicycle?" asked the *patronne*.

I gazed at Julia, and Julia looked at me.

"In a ditch," she said swiftly, "at least a kilometre from here. It would not go any more. It was difficult to push it. I left it, you understand."

"But why did not madame enter by the front door?" protested the *patronne*. "It is incomprehensible."

Julia laughed.

"Is it, madame?" she said, and put her head on one side as she said it, in the way she has, which would draw an overdraft from the Bank of England.

"My husband . . . it was to be a surprise. We . . . have not been married very long. We . . ."

"Adorable, cherished one"—it was the turn of *grand-mère*, and she swept down upon us.

"Is it in the bureau that you shall couch yourselves. Shall they lie upon the miserable divan belonging to my worthless son?"

Here she pointed to a dishevelled youth with yellow hair, who had, I understood during dinner, a very light hand with soles, and who drove the hotel car in his spare time.

"For shame, Cecile. You shall prepare Chamber No. 7 in the Annexe—a lucky number—is it not? The stove, shall it not be heated? Heat the stove, Hannibal, and prepare the way. It is nothing, madame, nothing, you understand. In a little minute it is ready. There is a great bed there, and you shall be comfortable. Monsieur, too, is tired."

"Yes," I answered, "monsieur, too, has had an accident."

"It arrives to all the world."

"You are too good," I protested.

In a few minutes it was settled.

I sat in the kitchen, near the stove, screened from the merriment of the *Société gastronomique*, for I felt that this was scarcely the moment to introduce Julia to them, while she ate a rapid dinner. Her eyes gleamed rakishly at me.

"When are you going to tell me the story?" I asked.

"It will wait," she answered. "You shall know the full tale of my iniquities soon enough."

"My friend, Elizabeth,<br>Out of temper, out of breath . . ."

The tune came lilting from the open door, and no longer did it mock me. For here was Julia escaped by a miracle from the Mighty Magistro—mighty no longer, but a sniffling man, niddering, a man of no sprawl, an empty vessel such as ever makes the greatest sound. I would deal faithfully with the Mighty One. In a mist of exultation I rose to my feet, but found to my annoyance that I could take not more than two steps without staggering. My limbs refused their office. I was trembling like a horse after a hard race. I was not even half a man.

Julia rose from the table and put out a hand to steady me.

"To bed, directly minute—as my nurse used to say."

My exultation had departed from me as suddenly as it had come, leaving me weak and wordless.

The *patronne* saw my condition.

"Is it ready, *grand-mère*?" she said.

"Ready it is," replied the elderly dame, wiping her hands upon her apron.

She moved towards a door which was flung open giving on to a snow-swept space outside.

I recoiled.

"No," I muttered. "Not that way. Do you hear, Julia? We cannot cross the snow."

Julia nodded, patting me on the shoulder.

“Is there another way, madame?” she asked, not turning a hair.

The *patronne* pushed us about, threw open the kitchen door and led us up the stairs of the inn. As in a dream I picked my way over various recumbent forms, for the members of the *Société gastronomique*, male and female, were using the stairs, apparently, as a sitting-out place. Polycarp, the gentleman in the red shirt, made a splash of colour in the gloom. Algernon, I noted, was enjoying himself not a little, while the President’s privilege evidently extended beyond meat and drink. He called to me as I staggered up the stairs, urging me to share the good things of life, and seemed genuinely disappointed that I would not tarry.

“Tired, old boy?” he said sympathetically. “Let me send you up another bottle . . . anything you want. . . . Call on the *Société*. We are entirely at your disposal. Good night.”

“Good night,” I said.

A moment later, or so it seemed to me, we were moving down a short dark corridor which ended in a glass door, giving on to a wooden balcony. Opposite us loomed a dark building, perhaps a dozen feet away. Faintly I made out the words “Annexe à l’Hôtel de la Chaumière,” painted upon its walls. The only means of access from the main building was a bridge with a light handrail, and on the further side of it a single square of orange light showed the whereabouts of our room.

We crossed the bridge in the wake of madame, and a moment later found ourselves in a fair-sized room, rather bare, but apparently clean. A vast bed, with sheets turned invitingly back, spread itself delectably, while a stove glowed red hot in the corner. Here was warmth, comfort, and the delusion of security.

The door clicked behind us. I was alone with Julia.

My first action was not the gesture of romance which perhaps you might have expected. I sat helplessly down on the bed and realised, as never till then, my utter exhaustion. There were reasons and to spare for being tired, but I had been through times as bad before in my varied career, and I can only suppose that on this occasion my anxiety about Julia had unconsciously been at work—till now, with relief, had come something as near complete collapse as I had ever known. I seemed to be moving in a dream. The soft bed on which I sat, the white walls and tiled floor of the room, the hard outline of the window, the glowing eye of the stove—these were things of no substance. The sole realities were my aching head and limbs, my

ineffable fatigue and a sweetness, more piercing than a well-sped arrow, sharper than the keenest sword, in the realisation that here was Julia, in her oily dungarees, one hand against the window frame, the other shading her eyes as she peered out into the inhospitable night.

"There is someone outside," she said to me over her shoulder. "More than one person, in fact . . . two . . . and yet another."

I struggled heavily to my feet and walked uncertainly across the room.

"Keep back, Julia," I whispered, my voice very strange and hoarse. "These men are dangerous."

"Do I not know it, my love?" she answered. "I have been living among them for the last forty-eight hours."

She put a slim arm about my shoulders, and before I realised what she was doing she had me back on the bed again and began to unlace my sodden boots.

"No," I protested faintly.

"Don't be an idiot, Toby," she said, "I am fresh as paint. But you are for bed, old thing."

Julia persists in calling me "old thing." She thinks it is English.

"I will lock the door and the windows," she continued. "And I will stay awake. I will watch these gentleman of the shade, minions of the moon. But you will sleep till to-morrow."

Through the uncurtained window I could see that same moon shining upon white roofs and the face of Julia bending over me. Or was that merely a dream?

Thereafter I lay quietly and listened.

Julia was telling me the story of her escape. It came to me in snatches, through the mists of fatigue, but I will set it down here, as nearly in her words as possible, but clearly and currently.

Her tale began from the Place de l'Opéra whence I had seen her driven.

"There were three of them," she said. "One, I think, was French. The other two spoke French with a hard rolling accent, Russians, they must have been, or, at any rate, Slavs of some kind. The Frenchman sat beside me and the other two were in front. The taxi ran down the Avenue de l'Opéra and

turned into the Rue de Rivoli, taking the way to Vincennes. They talked freely before me. There was a suggestion that I should be gagged and one of them produced a filthy handkerchief. One glance at it was enough, and I promised to hold my tongue. I was utterly bewildered, but had sense enough to sit quietly in my corner. The chief, they said, would doubtless be pleased with them, and there would be a handsome reward when they delivered me at Combloux. 'So that,' I thought, 'is my destination.' They mentioned the place several times, and I cast about for a way of leaving some trace of my passage. Did you find the wrist watch?"

I nodded and she continued:

"We drove to the outskirts of Paris, and there I was transhipped into a Hispano, with an operator, as before, pretending to shoot the scene. Then we motored for hours. I had done that trip before with father, and I soon perceived that we were going to drive the whole way down. They had sandwiches on board, and we never stopped except to take in petrol. We passed by way of the Faucille, making a wide sweep from Gex to Bellegarde to avoid the Swiss frontier, and it was past midnight when we reached our destination—a house or castle not far from here in the mountains.

"They put me in a room at the top of a winding turret stair. I remained till the evening of the next day.

"Shortly after my arrival I had a visitor. He was not nice to look at, and his words were niggardly. I had seen him first as they led me through the hall. He came to see whether I was comfortable and had everything I needed. He also told me his name."

"Webster," I suggested.

Julia nodded.

"His other name was Michael," she added unexpectedly. "He told me that after I had made a modest but determined effort to appeal to his better nature. On second thoughts I gave it up. His better nature did not, somehow, appeal to me.

"It was snowing most of the time, and I could see little of anything outside except a dark pine wood and the main road, along which now and then an auto-car would pass, full of winter-sporters and bristling with skis. The castle was well out of earshot and the window was perhaps forty feet from the ground.

"My room was small, but comfortable enough. There was a bed, two or three Savoyard chairs, and a big press.

“Remember the press, Toby, for it is important.

“At noon or thereabouts—I did not know the exact time, having left my watch in the taxi—the door opened suddenly and a girl entered. She had dark hair; she was slim and about my height; she was dressed in ski-ing clothes, and she carried a tray with an omelette and coffee upon it. I suddenly realised that I was hungry.

“She set down the tray on a table near the bed. ‘Not dressed yet?’ she observed, and that was indeed the truth, for I was still in bed and had taken off my frock. She spoke in French, but was not, I think, a Frenchwoman. ‘That’s as well,’ she continued, ‘I have come to borrow your clothes.’

“On that I sat up in bed. ‘No, you don’t,’ I said, but she only laughed. ‘Little idiot,’ she continued, ‘why not be sensible? It’s no use making a fuss. I want your clothes and you can have these in exchange.’ She tossed on the bed a pair of green silk pyjamas and a silk dressing-gown; then, without more ado, began to collect my clothes that were lying on a chair. I bent forward to stop her. ‘My dear,’ she said again, ‘if you are going to be foolish, I shall ring the bell and get in a man or two to help. Mr. Webster would be delighted to bear a hand. How would you like that?’

“Well, Toby, dear, as I had nothing on but a camisole I did not like it at all. So she made off with my clothes leaving me, of course, with the pyjamas. I put these on and the dressing-gown, which was of peacock silk and really rather chic. Then I finished my breakfast-lunch and wondered what was going to happen next.

“Presently I heard the sound of a car, and looking out of the window, saw the Hispano making off down the drive towards the main road. There were several people in the car, and among them was the girl, wearing my clothes if you please—even my fur coat and hat.”

Here Julia interrupted her story, for I was moved to relate, as coherently as my state allowed, how I had seen her, as I thought, upon the bridge just below Sallanches and how, to avoid killing her, I had swerved in the snow and wrecked the car in which I was driving my friends from Paris. That led me, under her prompting, to tell her also of the fight that followed, and of my escape to the Chaumière.

Then Julia continued her story:

“The door of my room was locked, of course, and I think I mentioned that the window was forty feet from the ground.” She began to laugh.

“What is the jest, darling?” I demanded weakly.

“I remembered a trick I had once played on my old nurse,” she explained. “I had been locked in the nursery, and to give her a fright—for I was not always a good child—I dangled a rope from the window and hid in the cupboard to see what she would do. It didn’t work very well, for, when she came up to bring me my tea, I let out a great giggle and the plot failed. She hauled me out of the cupboard, and I will not dwell on what came next. She was a heavy-handed woman and of an indelicate turn of mind. This time, however, I did not mean to giggle.

“And now you know why I told you to remember the big press. It was locked, but with the steel nail file in my handbag I got to work on some screws—and pretty stiff they were. I managed at last, however, to get the door nicely open. The press was empty except for two or three rugs, and there was plenty of room inside. I then stripped the bed of its sheets, tore them up, made a rope, tied one end of it to a chair, threw the other end out of the window, slipped into the cupboard and waited. I should mention that it was now quite dark, and that I had switched on the electric light so that my peepshow should on no account be missed.

“Within five minutes I was hearing footsteps. Then, with a bump, someone halted outside the door. There was a rattle of keys and a scraping of bolts. Someone entered the room, breathing heavily. Then came a loud exclamation and the rattle of a tray hastily set down.

“I pushed open very softly the door of the press. A man was standing in the middle of the room. He was gazing at the window and at the little surprise I had prepared for him. Then, as I had hoped, he stepped quickly towards the rope and the window. In a flash I was out of the press and through the door of the room. I slipped the bolt and started off as fast as I could down the spiral staircase. I had no idea where I was going or what was going to happen. The staircase descended to a landing, and so, down again, to the central hall below—a dreadful place all hung round with sham antlers and stuffed trophies of the rod and line. The staircase was broad, with fine mahogany banisters which swept from the landing in a generous curve to the floor beneath.

“I stopped pretty dead at the top, however, for what should I see but a man coming up round the bend. What was more, he had paused to listen to certain noises from above which showed that the man I had shut up was getting impatient. So once again I remembered my nursery days, and, slinging a leg over the banisters, fairly let myself go. And very good going it was—let me tell you. I simply whistled down.”

“And the man on the stairs,” I said.

“He squealed.”

“Astonishment?”

“Pain. I caught him full in the mouth with my heel as I shot past. He lost his balance and began to fall downstairs. But I won by several lengths and, bolting across the hall, dashed through a green baize door. That meant servants’ quarters, and I found myself, after speeding along a short corridor, in a deserted kitchen—simply enormous, and full of shadows with a huge spit and a great hooded fireplace. Through it I went and found myself in a scullery or pantry. Here there was another door. I pulled it open and then decided to go back again. For this was the outside world. It was snowing heavily, and I was naked to the storm—nothing on but a pair of silk pyjamas and a wrap.

“I turned to push open the door, but found it would not open. The mean thing had a spring lock and had shut itself fast behind me. There was nothing to do but go forward and meet the weather, and I don’t mind telling you, Toby, dear, it was not of the best. In fact I soon realised that I should be driven to beating on the castle gates and begging to be taken back.

“Just then, however, I happened to see rather vaguely through the falling snow some kind of building or outhouse. It proved to be a garage. There was no car, but there was a long bench and on the bench, along with various tools and implements, was a set of overalls. At any other time I should have refused to pick them up with a pair of tongs, but, as it was, I simply jumped into them with hoots of joy. Then I made another discovery—to wit, a bicycle propped against the bench.

“I wheeled it to the door and looked out. On the private roadway torches were flashing. The hunt was up and it would take them just no time at all to discover that I had not escaped that way, for they would see no tracks in the snow. I pushed the bicycle out of the garage, slipped round the corner and waited behind it until I heard them coming. There were three of them, and they were talking some language I could not understand. One of them went into the garage, and after a moment’s pause his two companions followed.

“My dear, I am not very good on a bicycle. But I went down that private road as though I were doing the *tour de France*, and in less than a minute I ran into the main road and turned downhill towards Sallanches. The snow was ceasing to fall, and the moon was trying to shine. The machine just went by itself, and I only fell off about six times.

“At last I came upon the lights of this hotel, and in my excitement fell off the bicycle for the last time. And lucky it was that I did so; for, on getting up, I saw in the light of the lamp hanging above the front door of the hotel first one man and then another. They were watching the place from the further side of the road, and I had seen one of their ugly faces before. It belonged to one of the gang that had brought me to Combloux. So I decided to crawl.

“You know the rest. The crawling lasted for hours, but it brought me at last, by devious ways, to the larder window. And there who should I find but little Alistair eating heartily and drinking heavily as usual while his poor wife was slowly perishing of hunger and thirst in the snow outside.”

Such was the substance of the tale that Julia told me in small spells and rushes as we waited and watched—for I took my turn by the window—during that winter night. I have not included the questions I put every now and then, or the account I gave her, intelligent I hope, of my own adventures. Suffice it that in an hour we had linked our experiences together and held the chain firmly between us.

The conclusions were unanimous. Our enemies were abroad. They were ready to strike, and we must not be taken unawares.

And so it came about that the first night I spent with Julia was a night of dire fatigue and uneasy vigilance—wherein we kept ourselves awake with tales of what had gone before and sore doubt as to what might be coming after.

## XI I PLAY THE PART OF HORATIUS

It must have been towards one o'clock in the morning—I had been sitting in a chair and had fallen into a doze—when I became vaguely aware that Julia had moved from the bed and was standing beside the door. Then to my horror I saw in the dim red ray from the stove, for we had put out the light, that not only was she standing by the door, but that it was half open and that she was looking cautiously out upon the balcony.

I rose like a man coming to the surface in a heavy sea.

"Julia," I protested, "are you mad?"

I was across the room in a flash and drew her quickly aside from the door.

"Listen," she said.

I listened.

Someone was moving stealthily on the bridge outside.

The bridge, as perhaps you have realised, was the weak spot in our defences. It was true that there were two windows to the room, in the wall beyond the bed. But they were both shuttered and the shutters were in place, held with strong iron bars fitting into sockets. But the door, as I have said, gave on to a little balcony or outside landing connected with the main building of the Chaumière by a bridge which traversed the court. The annexe in which we had been set to sleep was, in fact, no more than a summer dwelling built above the garage, a place in which to bestow the surplus tourists who might come, from the end of July till well on to October, to climb the pleasant peaks set in a ring about Sallanches and to sit before the hotel in the evening light. Of access from below there was none.

Such was the topography of the battlefield. There was nothing between us and the hotel but this light wooden bridge with a rickety hand rail on each side. And Julia, thinking someone might be there, had opened the door—a target for any one of those pistols that coughed.

I made instantly to close and bar the door, but was too late. There came a patter of steps. The door was thrust back upon me and I almost fell upon the bed.

I snatched at the big white *duvet* or eiderdown. A dark shadow slipped round the edge of the door, as I raised the *duvet*, cloying and unwieldy, an ungainly buckler, and flung it as a *retiarius* might have flung his net in the arena. My groping hands encountered the head and shoulders of a man somewhat taller than myself.

His cry was stifled in the *duvet*, as he lost his balance, and we fell to the floor together. A fist struck me a glancing blow on the side. I retaliated with a jab from my knee which caught the man shrewdly, for I heard him grunt. We rolled over and the back of my head hit the lower panel of the door. Then the *duvet* burst and the air was full of feathers. I swallowed a mouthful of them. So apparently did my adversary, for he sneezed aloud.

I let go then as though he were red hot. For I knew that sneeze—could have picked it out of ten thousand sneezes.

"Peter," I said, through a mouthful of feathers.

He was on his knees, in the light of the stove, confronting me.

He rose to his feet.

"Quick," he said. "Shut out the hordes of Assyria."

We rose together. Peter was first in the breach, but neither of us was quick enough. Peter staggered back. Someone else, short and thickset, had struck him in the solar plexus. It was Julia that saved the day, for, as I jumped for the man's throat, she went for his ankles, and he crashed heavily back through the door and on to the balcony outside. Over we rolled on to the bridge, which boomed and rocked. Julia still had him by the legs. I remember hearing myself shout:

"For God's sake, Julia. Let me manage him."

Then, as in a nightmare, two dark shapes rose suddenly from the floor. Their shadows stood sharp against the dazzling snow upon the roof to the side of us, while, immediately beneath me, I heard the jingle of a bit where, oddly enough, a horse was tossing and stamping.

The man beneath me heaved and struggled. Peter came staggering through the door, making ready to join the fray.

I lifted up my voice: "*Aux voleurs*. *Aux assassins*. Murder. Help. *Au secours*. Help."

In my mind's eye I could see the members of the *Société gastronomique* tumbling from their beds. Surely not even the myrmidons of the Mighty

Magistro would stand in face of that, and so it indeed proved, but not immediately.

For I felt a tearing pain in my hand and realised that my man had fixed his teeth in the ball of my thumb. I saw, too, who it was—none other than Webster, a man of few words who apparently preferred to keep his mouth for more active purposes than mere discourse. The lips in his ugly skull were drawn back in a snarl. I pounded it thoughtfully upon the floor. He grunted and let go.

But where were the shadows? I looked up once more. There was now a struggling mass of men on the narrow bridge. It heaved and groaned and I could make out nothing distinctly save that Peter had gone into battle.

All this, you must understand, was very fine, confused and quickly over. That I can give any account of it at all is due mainly to Julia, who saw the whole field of action from the bedroom, whither she had run, hoping for fireirons.

Meanwhile, my cries had raised the house. Through the open door of the hotel on the further side of the bridge a bright light streamed suddenly, and, as I busied myself with Webster, who was impersonating a bronco with myself for a buster, I became aware of a medley of carnival figures. The *Société gastronomique* was afoot and a moment later the air was thick with hissing snowballs. They came, it seemed from the female contingent, which, in pyjamas and thick motoring coats, was firing joyously into the fighting mass on the bridge. They were taking things lightly, and their happy laughter gave a sharper edge to the perilous reality. Even as I thrust my knee firmly against Webster's protesting ribs, I waited in dread for the quiet cough that might at any moment come husky from the dark—when one of those thin silkclad figures might fall limp against the balustrade and the orange snow be spotted with a darker hue.

But a diversion fell upon us all. I had soothed Webster for the moment with a swinging blow to the chin, and sprung to my feet to go to Peter's rescue, who was floundering on the floor of the bridge with two of the enemy when, above our heads, on the roof of the hotel opposite, a skylight shot up with a bang. A hand came through, waving an electric torch; an arm followed; and, finally, the head and shoulders of a man. I caught a glimpse of the face as it emerged—rubicund, with a tousled fringe of lightish curly hair about a gleaming tonsure.

It was the President.

Already he was clear of the skylight, and I had a swift vision of him, sitting on the rim of it and thrusting hard with his feet.

My heart gave a great leap, for, even as I realised what he was trying to do, the entire mass of snow, clinging precariously to the tilted roof, broke loose and started down upon the bridge with gathering speed.

I was aware of a smiting cold as the avalanche rustled and thudded about us, and a moment later I was obliterated with friend and foe alike.

I struggled to my feet. About me other figures were struggling from the blurred white masses with which they were cumbered.

Webster staggered, swaying drunkenly.

"Stand by to quit," he shouted.

"Aye, aye," came a voice from the darkness.

Then came a splintering crash. The balustrade on the bridge had given way. Dark forms fell suddenly to the ground and were lost in the shadows. I heard the sharp snort of a frightened horse, a jingle of harness, and, a moment later, the beat of hoofs as, faintly outlined against the white wall of the house, a large sledge dashed round the corner of the hotel and away up the road to Combloux.

"Julia . . . Peter," I called.

"Here," they answered, and I saw them standing beside me.

The mass of snow at my feet heaved and stirred.

"Here's one of them," I said, but even before I had said it the mass parted and disclosed the shining face of the President who, having failed at the critical moment to maintain his balance, had ridden the avalanche.

He rose slowly to his feet; removed a large quantity of snow from his mouth and adjusted about his person a dressing-gown of peacock coloured silk embroidered with golden butterflies.

"Well, chaps," his voice rang out. "Is anybody missing? Polycarp!"

"Present," came a fruity voice from the shadows.

"Then fall in the grog squad, you lazy ruffian. The *Société gastronomique* will meet in extraordinary session in the dining-room in five minutes. The female members will wear dressing-gowns from neck to knee," he added severely.

This injunction referred, I imagined, to the red-headed girl I had met at dinner, who, in silk pyjamas, was hurling snowballs with a rhythmic intensity at a water butt in the court below.

I took the President by the arm and drew him towards the annexe, where Peter and Julia were waiting at the door. I introduced him to Julia, whom he had not yet seen. Instinctively he passed a hand over a bristly chin. He was only human, and I have noticed that men like to look their best when presented to Julia.

"I'm afraid," I said, "that we owe your friends an explanation. As you may possibly suspect, there is more in this than meets the eye."

He silenced me with an eloquent gesture.

"Old boy," he said, "nobody would want more than meets the eye at this happy moment," and he bowed extravagantly over Julia's hand.

"Then we will get together later," I said.

"There is," said the President sagely, "a time for all things, and now is the time for grog. Mrs. Ponsonby, perhaps, might care for a glass."

"Or two glasses, perhaps," said Julia.

"Come then to the kitchen," suggested the President.

He glanced at her pyjamas and at the thin silk dressing-gown which covered them. Thereupon, rising to the occasion, he stripped himself of his own fine garment of padded silk, wrapped it about her shoulders, snatched a sheet from the bed, and draped it in a complicated manner about his person, so that he looked like a disreputable Mark Antony about to climb the rostrum. With a bow he offered her his arm across the bridge.

Five minutes later, there was high revelry in the warm kitchen—the dining-room being unanimously voted too cold. The grog had an admirable effect. It stifled curiosity and induced sleep. The President was, anyhow, in no mood for explanations, and met my tentative efforts to prepare him for further possible surprises with vague but hearty phrases such as *carry on . . . noble fellow . . . pretty good show, what . . . another small lashing, perhaps*.

It was past two when we returned to the annexe. Julia was asleep almost before she reached it, and for the rest of the night Peter and I watched in turns until daylight. We were taking no chances, and it was not unlikely that the attack might be renewed.

Peter, during my own first watch, recounted his adventures since we had parted company by the bridge. He, like myself, had fallen clear of the car, and been instantly engaged in battle. His opponent had knocked him out, and he had awakened to consciousness to find himself lying on the floor of a small lorry in which, so it seemed, were the bodies of Bob and Davis. He had essayed, though vainly, to arouse them, and then, waiting his opportunity, had rolled from the car as it slowed to a walking pace to take a sharp bend.

"I fell into a snowdrift," he continued, "and for a time lay buried. When I emerged the car had disappeared. I then had the deuce of a time wandering about, trying to find the Chaumière and, when I did find it, I found also a sledge with three men, one of them being a short fellow whom I recognised."

"Webster," I said.

"He was crawling softly along the side of the hotel. I hopped up the outside staircase of the house and lay doggo on the bridge. All three men followed Webster up the stairs. They did not notice me, and I was hoping for the best when one of them began to cross over. I had no choice but to move on in front of him. So we progressed till, suddenly, I saw that the door at the end was open. I dashed in and was violently assaulted by you."

At breakfast next morning—which was brought to us in the annexe—we began seriously to consider what should be our next move.

"Clothes," said Julia.

"Well," observed Peter, "though I says it as shouldn't—there don't seem to be very much wrong with those pyjamas, my dear. It warms the heart to see you."

"That's all very well," said Julia, "but I'm not wearing my clothes to keep Peter's heart warm, and if you think I'm going to freeze to death to please any man you're much mistaken. Toby will buy me at once a practicable skirt and a woollen jumper."

"Certainly, my dear. I will buy you anything you like when I have seen the police."

"But the police are barred," said Peter.

"Not from this time forward," I pointed out. "We have recovered Julia."

“I was under the impression,” protested Julia, “that I had recovered myself.”

“Manner of speaking, sweetheart.”

Peter scratched his nose.

“Julia,” he said, “is here. But where is Bob and where is Davis? We shall have to walk softly till we know.”

“We are going to get them away,” I said. “And the police must help us to do so. I am going to the village.”

“Then take this,” said Peter.

He pushed a heavy pistol into my hand. From the end of the barrel protruded a tube-like arrangement.

“How did you come by this nasty looking weapon?” I asked.

“Souvenir,” he said. “From the stricken field. I think it must have fallen from William Longtooth. How’s the thumb this morning, by the way? No signs of rabies or anything? I mean you haven’t contracted a sudden horror of clear water or such like symptoms?”

“Not sudden, Peter. I have had it from birth.”

It was, I suppose, about nine o’clock in the morning when I set forth for the shops and the police station, leaving Peter in charge of Julia. As I turned into the road, a large car, built to hold eleven, but carrying fifteen souls, excluding the driver, swept into view and ran up the steep road in the direction of Mégève. It was piled with skis and ski-sticks, and the members of the *Société*, singing lustily; all waved their hands to me:

“De vigne en grappe<br>
La violà, la jolie grappe . . .”

The circle of the vine, which the singers had done their share to fulfil, went musically forward. The young voices rang as brightly as the sunlight in the sharp, clear frost of the morning. They were to climb to a hut on the Col above Mégève, and then over the Mont d’Arbois, so the President had said. But of what concern to me were their doings? Somewhere sat the Mighty Magistro, with two of my friends in his grasp. Somewhere lay Webster, smarting under defeat. Somewhere too, was a police station.

But all was far from well with the world that morning. It being Sunday, the shops were shut, so that the problem of clothing Julia would have to be

further considered. Secondly, the police station, when at last I discovered it, was in charge of an elderly and incompetent dame, the wife, grandmother, or some patriarchal relative of the local police officer. He, it seemed, was absent. He had been summoned, as I was impressively informed, to investigate the mysterious circumstances surrounding the discovery of a corpse lying face downwards in the Arve, at some little distance from the town of Sallanches, bearing upon it marks of extreme violence inflicted by some ferocious and sinister personage unknown. No policeman could, in the circumstances, be reasonably expected to pay the least attention to the fact that a stranger desired to interview him.

Failing utterly to persuade her of the importance of my affair, I next tried to persuade her that, if she allowed me to use the telephone, Paris might be more easily impressed. At last she yielded to my importunities, and I was permitted to ring up the local exchange.

I asked to be put through to the Sûreté in Paris—only to be informed that the wires to Paris—indeed, to the whole of France, with the exception of Mégève—were down. The snowstorm of the night before had laid them flat in several places. I looked bitterly up at the bright blue sky. The north wind had begun to blow. To the foul night had succeeded a perfect day, but it had come too late, except for the merry winter sportsmen who would soon be scattered far and wide over the passes.

And so, an hour after I had set forth from the Chaumière, I was forced to return with nothing done.

And there a surprise awaited me. Outside the inn door stood a superb sledge of exotic shape, gleaming with black paint and silver. Two fine roans were harnessed to it, and on the box, wrapped in a great bearskin, sat a driver, with the narrow eyes of the Slav. Upon his head was a white fur hat with an aigrette.

I made my way into the hall. Madame put her head out of the kitchen.

“A gentleman to see you,” she said. “He is talking with monsieur, your friend, in the dining-room.”

She handed me a visiting card.

Upon it, exquisitely engraved, I read the words: *Joanes Ruggiero*, and under them flourished an inscription in pencil: *The Mighty Magistro*.

# XII I AM ILL RECEIVED

He was standing at the far end of the room with Peter beside him. Their backs were towards me, and I heard a clink of glasses. The tall figure turned sideways a moment, so that I had, in full profile, his luxuriant Assyrian beard. In his large and supple hand he was holding a squat bottle, and the tide was in spate.

"It is a remarkable circumstance, Mr. Hamilton, that the preparation of cordial liquors should have been so pertinaciously associated with religious feeling. I need not remind you of Dionysus and his cult. Then we have the holy fathers of the Grande Chartreuse and St. Benedict. But we will now see whether an old hand has lost its cunning. Once, my dear Mr. Hamilton, I floated them up eleven. To-day, I fancy, six will suffice."

He turned more fully towards me as he spoke, and I saw that he was standing beside a table upon which was arrayed a regiment of bottles, mostly of the liqueur variety. He was placing a spoon, bottom upwards, on the edge of a small wine-glass. He poured over the back of the spoon a small quantity of liquid from the squat bottle in his other hand.

"A question of gravity," he explained. "The heaviest is the syrup of strawberries; next comes the maraschino, followed in turn by the crême de vanille verte. Then we add the orange curaçao and the green chartreuse, topping it off with old brandy."

"Good morning, Colonel Granby," he said, turning to me more directly. "Doubtless you come to tell us that the police are otherwise engaged."

Peter was raising his glass.

"I should *not*, if I were you, Peter," I said. "I once took something out of a glass which had been handled by this gentleman."

"Unkind, Colonel Granby, unkind. . . . Believe me, the most terrible moment of my life was when I was forced to spoil that exquisite bottle of wine you so carefully chose at the Perigordine. It was a crime for which I must make libation to Bacchus every day for the rest of my life."

Here he put his lips to the rainbow-tinted glass and drank the bright draught at a gulp.

"And now to business," he said.

He paused and stroked his curly beard.

"You, my dear Colonel, have paid a visit to the police this morning. I think you should first have consulted me. For one thing, I could have told you that they would be rather busy this morning. They are looking, as you probably know, for an assassin. Leave them to their searches, my dear Colonel, and keep well away. For who knows, if they were to seek hard enough, and if they were to be helped—shall we say?—by some disinterested lover of justice, it is just possible that they might be led to ask Colonel Alistair Granby to explain how his fingers marks come to be so firmly impressed upon the throat of the unfortunate victim."

"My explanation would, I think, be accepted," I made answer.

"No doubt it would, Colonel—in time; and time, as you know, is of value to us all. There is another point. You made with me a compact . . ."

"It was part of the compact that you would keep my wife safe and sound. Last night you permitted her to wander forth thinly clad into a blizzard."

The Mighty Magistro smiled.

"That reminds me," he said, "I have a trifling service to perform. Certain effects belonging to our late guest—I have taken the liberty of sending them up to her room. One of my assistants was forced to borrow them to execute a little fancy of mine. I'm afraid it must have given you rather a shock, my dear Colonel; but I have, as you may have observed, a dramatic temperament."

"This compact," I suggested.

"By all means. On reflection, my dear Colonel, you will not, I am sure, wish to denounce it. All that is necessary is slightly to change its terms. We have for the moment lost the privilege of entertaining your wife, but we have now the honour of entertaining your friends."

At that moment Julia entered. She was wearing the clothes in which I had last seen her in Paris. She looked enquiringly at the Mighty Magistro.

"This, perhaps, is my late host," she suggested.

"Madame," he returned, bowing with so lordly a gesture that he might have been the *Chevalier de la Rose* bearing his precious gift to the *Marschallin*. "I am glad of this opportunity to present my apologies; I should have done better to give you my personal attention. Unfortunately, I left to Mr. Webster the arrangements for your reception, and Mr. Webster, I regret to say, was remiss. Incidentally I may add that he is of an impulsive

temperament. He greatly resents your abrupt departure of yesterday. You have left him smarting under a sense of failure—so much so, that he must needs set off in the dead of night to recover you, *vi et armis*. Mr. Webster, I may say, is of a persevering and stubborn habit. He refuses to accept defeat. He is one of those that rise on stepping stones of their dead selves to higher things. Hence his deplorable conduct of last night, which might have ended so badly for us all. The tenacity of William Webster is of a superhuman, or perhaps I should say, of a sub-human type—only to be matched among the lower crustacea. Compared with Webster the limpet or barnacle is a rolling stone. Cast your mind over the more tenacious characters in history—Hannibal the Carthaginian, Oliver Cromwell, Moses, Attila, Florence Nightingale, Abraham Lincoln, Cato the Elder, Martin Luther, David Livingstone, Madame Curie, Woodrow Wilson, or Nurse Cavell. All these were as weathercocks twisting in the breeze; we may deem the Pyramids unstable, the Sphinx a study in caprice. My friend Webster throws himself into everything he undertakes."

"Why doesn't he dig a well?" murmured Julia.

The Mighty Magistro smiled tolerantly.

"Meanwhile," I said, "suppose we took now a strong liking to your company and refused to part with you. You are entertaining our friends. One good turn deserves another."

"I should be delighted," he replied, "but important business is awaiting me elsewhere, and my servants, the groom and the driver of my sledge, who are interested though silent witnesses of this scene—(he waved his hand at the window as he spoke)—have strict orders to ensure that I shall not miss my appointment. They are tall fellows of their hands, and well equipped for the purpose."

"He thinks of everything," said Julia.

The Mighty Magistro bowed.

"Permit me," he said, "to refer just once again to your friends before I go. I am sure you would not wish any harm to come to them."

"I retain my full liberty of action."

The Mighty Magistro raised an eyebrow.

"But I do not think you will go to the police or provoke anything in the nature of a public scandal. I feel sure you would not run so terrible a risk."

He was looking at me intently, his fine eyes soft and inscrutable, yet with a certain fire and menace in their depths, and he thrust his chin at me, with the beard upcurling from it, as he spoke.

"Do not mistake me, Colonel," he continued. "I find it difficult sometimes to screw myself to that heroic indifference to human suffering which marks the man of destiny. But a moment comes when the gates of mercy must be all shut up:

> . . . From this time forth
> My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth.

And I must warn you, Colonel, that though my weaker flesh recoils from inflicting even necessary pain, my friend Mr. Webster is of quite another disposition. I noticed this morning, when I happened to be discussing with him certain possibilities inherent in the present situation, that he took an almost unwholesome interest in the observations of certain persons in my service, whose former way of life has made them familiar with practices which have ceased to commend themselves to the gentler spirits of our time."

He broke off and looked dreamily into space.

"It is an interesting subject," he added softly. "It repels, it horrifies, it excruciates; and yet—there is also a fascination. It stimulates the mind to strange fancies and quaint inventions—the Torture of the Seven Gates, the Torture of the Rocking Cradle, the Torture of the Iron Tube, the Torture of the Russian Glove, the Torture of the Clay Funnel, the Torture of Little Ease, the Torture of the Scavenger's Daughter, the Torture of the Scottish Boot, the Torture of the Spanish Ass, the Torture of the Leaden Ball, the Torture of the Barbed Hooks, the Torture of the Hot Plate, the Torture of the Pilniewinkis or Thumbikins, the Torture of the Refining Furnace, the Torture of the Parrot's Beam . ."

He ceased, shook his head and sighed softly.

"We must bear them in mind, Colonel. We must bear them in mind."

He rose as he spoke, picked up his hat, which was of black astrakhan, shaped somewhat like an overgrown fez, swept a low bow to Julia, and stalked majestically from the room.

A moment later there came a jingle of sledge bells. The Mighty Magistro had departed.

"And that's that," said Peter. "Suppose we open the window."

Julia wrinkled her nose.

"Fleur de Pois . . . by Chanal . . . smallest size six guineas. But I agree that there is a little too much of it."

She paused.

"Well, Julia," I said, "at least you now have some clothes to wear."

"Clothes," she echoed. "These might be clothes in Paris."

"Darling," I protested. "You look perfectly charming."

"Toby," she returned. "One of these days I shall brain you, always provided I can find the place. This frock is all very well for the Champs Elysées, but it is an insult to the eternal snows."

"Anyhow," I continued, "the shops are shut."

"In Sallanches, perhaps, but not in Mégève. Mégève is a civilised town, and it is the chief function of civilisation to provide women like me with what they want immediately. Besides, we can get a cocktail in Mégève."

"I am all for Mégève," said Peter. "But how do we get there?"

"Toby will raise a bus or something," said Julia.

Then suddenly she laid a hand on my shoulders, and I realised that all this lightness was for me and from the lips only. Her eyes were grave.

"Old thing," she said, "it's no use sitting here. It will do you good to get into the open and choose me some lovely things to wear."

"Do they sell them under umbrellas?" asked Peter vaguely.

"You know what Toby is," she went on quickly. "He must always be doing something or the mind refuses to work."

"You seem to forget . . ." I began.

She stopped me with a gesture.

"I have forgotten nothing," she said, "but we shall not be getting any further forward by sitting here. I must be equipped to do or dare, and that means trousers. Then we are going to look for your friends."

Five minutes later we were driving up the valley towards Mégève, the little Citroën, hired at the local garage, climbing bravely, with a loud roar of gears, through the pines and snowfields, till, at the end of half an hour, we drew up in the town square and alighted for action.

Here, at eleven o'clock in the morning, all was alive and merry. The long street, in which old stone houses, modern chalets and shops of futurist design quarrel for a place, were thronged with folk who, for that day, at any rate, would leave no room for care. They were for the most part young men and girls, the men wearing the dark costume of the Alpine snows; the women, equally sober to the waist, but blossoming above into jumpers of every colour and shape.

We spent an exhausting, but from Julia's point of view, a remarkable hour.

First, from a booth beneath the ice rink she emerged in the boots, trousers, coat and jumper of her desire, Next, she urged, we must cease to dissociate ourselves so obviously from the life and landscape. Wherefore, in the space of perhaps three-quarters of an hour, we were all three arrayed much like anyone else in the town, and all three equipped with skis. Julia insisted on skis. We must not look conspicuous. We must mingle with the herd.

The herd, as we finally emerged into the street, was moving with a singular unanimity toward a large chalet, constructed with reddish logs. "Isba" was written above the portals.

"That," said Peter, "looks to me very like a bar."

Trusting to Peter's instinct, which rarely fails him in these matters, we entered the building. Inside were numerous small tables painted crimson, a bar at one end, and a great roaring fire of logs at the other. It was doubtless a delightful spot, but I failed to notice its amenities. Indeed, I suddenly stopped short, and stepped backwards on to Peter's foot, who refrained from thanking me.

Seated at one of the small tables, consuming what appeared to be a glass of cream, with every sign of satisfaction, was Senor Manuel Gonzago y Sanchez.

I pushed Peter and Julia hastily to the nearest table and went myself to speak to him.

"Good morning, Senor Gonzago. I am delighted to find you."

He looked at me a moment, and his manner was more chilling than the snow outside.

"It is Colonel Granby, I believe," he said.

“I haven’t changed my name since last we met,” I answered with a smile.

The smile found no response in the smooth olive face.

“It is essential that I should have a talk with you,” I said. “Might I ask where you are staying?”

“At the Mont d’Arbois Hotel,” he replied gravely, “but I am very much engaged.”

“In Paris,” I began, but he cut me short, and for the first time a little warmth appeared in his manner.

“I am surprised that you should mention Paris, Colonel Granby. I seem to remember accepting a glass of wine at your hands. You will understand that I am not eager to renew the experience.”

# XIII I TAKE IT CROOKED

You may not believe me, but I had not anticipated this. That Colonel Granby, agent of the British Crown, could be suspected of spoiling a bottle of Vosne Romanée 1915, and incidentally poisoning his table-companion, had not occurred to me. Whence you will infer that in odd ways imagination is blind—or rather, as the poet says, there are things imagination boggles at. Of course, now that I was definitely accused of the monstrous crime, I realised that the inference of Senor Gonzago was not only natural, but that, from his point of view, none other was possible. He had dined with me; I had been at special pains to make myself responsible for the wine; no one else had been within reach of it.

"Senor Gonzago," I said gravely, "I was your guest at the Perigordine. Did you form the opinion that I was the sort of man that poisons his host?"

He looked at me a moment.

"No," he said. "But unfortunately I have no alternative."

"I came that night to the Perigordine to warn you against certain persons. We were under observation, and we both of us suffered in the same way."

"The evidence," he began.

"Evidence," I exclaimed—for I saw that with this young chevalier it was necessary to take the high, romantic hand—"there are times when a gentleman is driven to prefer instinct to evidence. I have the honour to bid you good day."

I bowed and turned away from him as I spoke, as though he had ceased to be worthy of my very superior consideration. The move was instantly successful. The dark face of the boy flushed. He half rose from the table, stepped impulsively towards me, then checked himself, hesitated a moment and drew back.

"What else could I think, Colonel?" he asked, rather helplessly.

I ceased to move away from him, but stood quite still, looking at him as coldly as I could.

"What else could I think?" he repeated, with an eloquent gesture of his hands. "You were at the table when I arrived. You chose the wine. No one

else had access to it.”

“I am not arguing the matter, Senor Gonzago,” I replied quietly. “You are still young. Some day you will learn to tell one sort of man from another. If at this moment you really believe that I meddled with your wine, I can only live in hope of receiving your apologies.”

I turned away from him with the air of a noble fellow implacably incensed, and walked towards the table in the corner near the fire, whence Julia and Peter were watching me. I had not gone a step, however, before a hand was laid on my shoulder.

“You don’t seem to realise the position,” he expostulated. “You not only deny that you drugged my wine, but accuse my friends of the act.”

“Your friends?” I echoed, in the manner of one who picks up something not altogether clean.

“Senor Ruggiero has been most charming and considerate.”

“Then you have had every opportunity of forming an opinion as to his character and condition.”

Again he flushed. He was a nice lad, and I was not apparently overdoing it as between gentlemen.

“Incidentally,” he added. “He has offered me excellent terms.”

I looked at him with a notable increase of contempt.

“Terms,” I echoed. “I was not aware that we were discussing terms. You have allowed yourself to entertain an offensive suspicion, and you will forgive me if I do not show any appreciable interest in terms.”

Having ridden my high horse thus far, I waited for him to break the silence that followed.

“Colonel Granby,” he said at last. “You admit that I am in a difficult position. I am beginning to think that your resentment may be justified, and would like to give you every opportunity of proving your good faith. You appreciate, however, the importance of the contract which I am trying to secure.”

He paused as though to give me an opportunity of taking up his reference to the contract. Having no knowledge whatever of its character or purposes I felt it better to refrain.

"This is a business matter," he continued unhappily. "I cannot accept or refuse good terms on mere suspicion of one side or the other. If, however, you can make me an acceptable offer, and prove to me that the gentlemen with whom I am now dealing are unworthy of confidence, I should be more than glad to renew a conversation which I should remember with pleasure, but for its unfortunate conclusion."

"I shall have to forgive him now," I reflected. Conversation on these high levels would be difficult to sustain.

"Senor Gonzago," I began, with a low bow.

Just then, however, a voice broke in upon us soft, eager and exclamatory.

"There you are, Manuel," it said.

For Senor Gonzago, at any rate, it was a welcome diversion. Nor could I altogether blame him. For she was undoubtedly attractive. I should not, of course, being a married man, have noticed it myself; but looking at her with the eyes of Gonzago—well, she was slim, dark, pale, with red lips, unpainted too, and I have always thought—what I mean is that Gonzago was just the sort of man to like that sort of girl. She was wearing a dark green ski-ing suit, with a close fitting jumper of a lighter shade, showing the clean lines of her figure.

Incidentally, I have forgotten to mention the really important fact—namely, that she was the woman I had seen with Ruggiero at the Ritz, who had impersonated Julia on the fatal bridge, who had spied upon me at the Chaumière.

"Don't tell me I'm late, Jeanne," Gonzago pleaded. "And let me give you a cocktail."

"Certainly you may," she answered. "And some lunch afterwards. And then you shall teach me to do nice Christies in the lovely snow."

I began to realise that Gonzago's time would not be hanging too heavily on his hands that afternoon. Meanwhile, she had caught sight of me—or very prettily pretended to do so.

"I did not know you had a friend," she said. "Perhaps for this occasion I am Jeanne *de trop*."

"Not at all," I said boldly. "Senor Gonzago was merely giving me an appointment."

He looked at me quickly, and as quickly played up to my lead.

"You know my hotel, Colonel. If you will be good enough to telephone to-morrow morning, or perhaps later this evening, we might arrange a meeting."

"Meanwhile," I said, "I urge you not to take any final step. Much may depend on our conversation, and I do not think you will find us niggardly."

"Really, Manuel," protested the girl. "Business on Sunday."

"Till to-morrow, then," said Gonzago. "I will take no final decision till then."

Upon that he turned away towards the bar with his companion. Her hand was upon his arm; her head was close to his; she was saying something in a whisper. I heard Gonzago laugh. Decidedly Gonzago was in luck.

I returned to Julia and Peter.

"Well?" he said, pushing a glass of something that looked like cream towards me.

"Her name," I said, "is Jeanne."

"Indeed," said Julia, "don't let me stand in your way."

"It is the girl who lent you her pyjamas," I added.

"And pinched my clothes," said Julia. "I thought I had seen her evil face before."

I felt it was time to change the subject.

"What on earth is this?" I said, picking up the creaming glass.

"That," said Peter solemnly, "is the house cocktail."

"Well," I said, raising it to my lips, "it's a drink anyway."

"Any progress?" Peter inquired.

"The progress," said Julia tartly, "was visible. Toby combines pleasure with business."

"I am to meet Gonzago this evening or to-morrow morning to discuss terms," I said with dignity. "I don't know what I am trying to buy, or who is likely to pay for it. But the Mighty Magistro is committing every known crime to get hold of it, and has apparently offered a large sum of money as well. Think hard, Peter. Can't you give me even the smallest clue? Was there nothing in the papers left by Thwaites to show why he was holding on to this affair?"

“Nothing,” said Peter. “We went through every scrap we could find. There was nothing—nothing whatever. The only clue he left was the famous message.”

“Perigordine, 7-30. Pink Carnation. Bramber Bequest,” chanted Julia.

“Now,” said Bob, “if only we had *Whitaker’s Almanac* or the *Statesman’s Yearbook*.”

“Or *Wells’s Outline of History* or *What Every Young Man Ought to Know*,” interpolated Julia.

“But we haven’t,” I said shortly. “The annoying thing is that I seem to have heard of the Bequest. But I can’t quite place it for the moment.”

“Perhaps,” said Julia, “if we all keep very quiet for five minutes the brain will recover.”

“Try frowning,” suggested Peter. “I believe that, if you do your best to look as if something were happening inside, you may induce it to happen.”

“What else did the pretty gentleman say?” demanded Julia. “And why were you looking so proud all the time? He seems rather a nice young man. Though I don’t think much of his taste in females.”

“He accused me of putting things into his drink. So I came the high and mighty over him, till now he doesn’t know what to believe. He is prepared, at any rate, to give me another chance, and if only I can prove to his satisfaction that the Mighty Magistro is really a thoroughly bad man . . .”

“That oughtn’t to be difficult,” interrupted Peter. “Unless he has become a reformed character since we saw him last. What does Shakespeare say?”

“I don’t know,” said Julia sadly.

“But Toby does. And so will you when you’ve known him as long as I have. It’s one of his favourite pieces:

“The sight of means to do ill deeds
Makes ill deeds done.”

“That signifies, I suppose,” said Julia thoughtfully, “that I shall soon be catching Toby hugging that awful vamp from whom he parted so reluctantly just now.”

Whereupon she kissed me suddenly before them all.

“Julia,” I said sternly, “be serious.”

"Hark to him," she exclaimed. "Lovelace bidding farewell to his Jocasta on going to the wars."

"The first thing," I pointed out, "is to rescue Bob and Davis."

"I was discussing that with Julia," said Peter, "and we've more or less decided what to do."

"Expound," I suggested.

"Well," said Peter, hedging visibly, "we have decided as to general principles. Let us suppose that the Mighty Magistro is a nice, kind gentleman, who goes about looking for opportunities to be of service to his fellow men. Yesterday evening he was motoring home to his castle in Savoy —doubtless he had been away on some mission of mercy, being, shall we say, the President of the Local Friends of the Young Girl or Secretary to the District Association for the Protection of the Chamois; or perhaps . . ."

"Begin again," suggested Julia. "You'll never be able to finish this."

"Very well," Peter resumed, "the Mighty Magistro was motoring home."

"Yes," I said. "I've got that."

"There had been an accident on the road. Two persons had been injured. What does he do? He alights from his car, collects the wounded, and takes them to his house. All night he ministers to their needs, and early this morning he telephones for a doctor, and even suggests an ambulance. Unfortunately the doctor—the only doctor within miles—is not at home. In due time, however, say at about four o'clock this afternoon, the doctor arrives. He is taken to see the patients, and ten minutes later drives away with them to his well-appointed nursing home—shall we say?—at St. Gervais-les-Bains."

I stared at Peter unsympathetically.

"All right, Toby," he said. "If you feel like that about it. Anyhow, it was Julia's idea."

"The Mighty Magistro," I observed patiently, "is not a nice kind gentleman. He is, on the contrary, the sort of man who will take your doctor by the neck and eject him violently from the premises. And I hope it will be Peter."

"Certainly," said Peter. "And I shall wear a black beard."

"That isn't all the plan," said Julia. "The rest of it is rather more amusing."

Thereupon they unfolded to me in what the rest of the plan consisted. I need not tell you it now, for it will become obvious in its own time and fashion. I will say only this. The Mighty Magistro had more than once admitted that he desired to avoid anything in the nature of a scandal. Well—if this plan, outlined by Julia and Peter, beside the log fire in the wooden hut with its painted beams, miscarried, there would be enough scandal and to spare for everyone concerned. It was difficult and dangerous beyond a doubt, but I had no better suggestion to offer. We were to attack the enemy in force at the weak spot in his defences, and the Mighty One, if he insisted on winning the next move, would not at any rate be suffered to hide his light under a bushel.

We finished our drinks. Then Peter and I synchronised our watches, for our plan needed accurate timing. He then departed in search of a black beard and a bedside manner.

We parted at the door of Isba.

"Four o'clock on the tick, old boy," was his parting objurgation, "and four o'clock let it be."

To carry out our scheme we must first climb to the hut whither the *Société gastronomique* had that morning been bound. We accordingly bought two pairs of those very necessary strips of sealskin or black velvet which, strapped to the running surface of the ski so that it will not slip, render this kind of expedition less insupportable. We left the stores and found a throng of folk who were mounting a converted lorry, known as the "Blue Train," scheduled to take us as high up the hill as the road permitted.

Take us it did, but I soon began to doubt whether it would take us far. The road was cut on the side of a steep slope, and it was very narrow; and there was no form of traffic control. Three times we met cars descending, and at each occasion it seemed to me that our wheels were spinning in the void. But everyone was happy, and, in that clean air with the sunshine sparkling on the snow, my spirits rose. Life, after all, had its compensations. Julia was beside me, and that, I should have said twelve hours ago, was all that mattered. Our problems were ahead, but they would be solved. Here, in the meantime, was laughter, youth, sunshine, and a clean sky.

The "Blue Train" stopped a hundred yards from the Hotel Mont d'Arbois, in the middle of a tiny plain set in a semi-circle of mountains. To the front of us was the Roche Brune, its lower slopes covered with pines, beyond it stood the Tête de Chevre and, a little aside, the Mont Joli, which was our destination.

We left the lorry, put on our skis, and crossing the practice slopes, started upon our climb.

So began the first part of this new adventure, and, for the moment, heaven smiled. So genial, indeed, was its smiling that I was soon constrained to discard all but the ultimate shirt and trousers. Steadily we climbed, till presently, after passing some chalets, we dipped and crossed a frozen stream by a bridge of beaten snow. Every now and then a ski-runner would shoot past us on his way towards the hotel below, which stood, square and yellow, already half a mile or more at our feet. Beyond the stream the mountain rose more steeply before us. The sun beat warmly down, but so sharp was the frost that my fingers stuck to the metal of my skis as I kneeled to adjust a strap. A thin north wind blew pleasantly upon us.

We moved in a great bowl of the hills, hoar and jagged at the rim; we were covered by a sky more deeply blue than anywhere in the world. The only sound in that place was the hiss of skis cutting through the snow, as men or girls swept from the slopes above, or the thin voices of some bright company moving up the hill to our right. Was it so strange that, with each step we climbed, my heart grew lighter. Behind me Julia was humming a small song, just above her breath, and when I turned and looked over my shoulder, there she plodded, six feet or so behind me, with her face set towards the hill, her hair shining above the dark suit she wore, and her eyes very bright and clear.

Beside a chalet on the top of the hill we rested a moment. It was now one o'clock. On the further side of the valley rose the great Col des Aravis, miraculously distinct through the tenuous air.

"Sweetheart," I said suddenly, "how far to Lyonesse?"

She looked at me gravely.

"Perhaps it is here," she answered.

I bent perilously towards her over my skis, and, as we kissed, a great man with a bushy beard, his face red, wrinkled and happy, swept past with a wave of his hand.

"Yes, it is good to be lovers upon the snow," he shouted as he went past. "There is no discomfort upon these hills."

"Indeed," called Julia after him, "it is very good."

But already he was lost, speeding over the edge of the slope.

"Who was that?" said Julia wonderingly.

“The god of the mountain, perhaps,” I answered.

And then we set forth again.

Our way thence led more gently upwards to the edge of the Col, where we should find the hut to which the members of the *Société gastronomique* had preceded us. We climbed round the edge of the mountain dotted with little fir trees, laden with snow. The wind blew cooler here, but the sun still poured down, and the air was full of light.

Twenty minutes brought us to the hut. The slopes around it were dotted with skiers of all kinds and descriptions, practising turns, falling down, laughing, shouting, full of the pleasant air and the sunshine. The hut itself contained two white dining rooms, panelled with three-ply wood, both packed to capacity with people clamouring for food and making merry. Conspicuous among them were the members of the *Société gastronomique*, whom we had come to find, headed by their egregious President.

“Wine,” he shouted on catching sight of us, “red wine, hot and spiced. Lashings of wine.”

“We never thought to see you here,” said Mr. Pilgrim, with the air of one who had done valiant things that day.

“We are much impressed,” said Polycarp, who, in his red shirt was seated between Celia and the girl with red hair.

Most of them were engaged in demolishing a mighty dish of eggs and bacon.

Julia and I were urged into seats in the midst of them, and a large jug of hot spiced wine was thrust before us.

The President raised his glass.

“Take it crooked,” he intoned.

The toast was echoed. We drank deep, and helped to destroy the eggs and bacon. Meanwhile I lay in wait for the President. Already he had finished his fifth or sixth glass of spiced wine. I accordingly started a conversation about the waxing of skis, a subject near to his heart, on which he proceeded to give me a quantity of doubtlessly sound information. I suggested we should retire to the little room in the hut where skis were treated, as my own were in need of attention. Thither we went, and the skis were spread out for his inspection.

"And now," said I, "let us confer together. My skis, as you see, are in perfect condition, but I desired a moment's private speech with you."

The President looked at me with expectation.

"It may possibly have struck you," I said, "that my behaviour last night and the events that followed my arrival at Sallanches were a little out of the common."

"When the wind is north," said the President, "I can tell a hawk from a hernshaw. I have even discussed the matter with my friends. We have decided that you are a man of mystery, but under rule 76 of the *Société* we are bound to welcome the stranger. We ask no questions. There are chaps and there are no chaps. We have decided that you and Mrs. Ponsonby are chaps. The sinister individuals who attacked us by night were obviously no chaps."

"Thank you, Mr. President. This simplifies matters."

"I am a simple fellow," said the President modestly.

"I cannot tell you very much," I continued. "But I am on a mission."

"Say no more," interrupted the President. "Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from . . ."

He paused, incommoded for the moment by an audible reminiscence of spiced wine.

"Two of my friends," I continued, "are lying sick at a small château not far from Combloux. A doctor has been summoned. There are reasons why I should prefer witnesses to be present when the doctor arrives."

The President seemed disappointed.

"Is that all?" he inquired.

"It is more than you realise, perhaps. I am going to ask you, as a favour, to bring your party down to the château. You will not be invited to enter, but enter we must. I suggest that we stage some small mishap at the castle gates. One of us might sprain an ankle but not before four o'clock. The doctor to whom I have already alluded . . ."

"Celia is a doctor," said the President. "She prescribes aspirin for every ill. But possibly we have mentioned that before."

"My doctor," I insisted firmly, "has a black beard. He will ask to see my friends at the château. All I want you and your party to do is to enter the

house and there remain until I give the signal to withdraw. I would ask you to be as merry and unconcerned as possible."

"And that is really all you want us to do?"

"Yes," I answered. "And I hope you will not take it amiss that I haven't given you any really good and sufficient reason."

The face of the President clouded.

"I am an international official," he said. "My whole life is spent in doing things for no reason whatever."

"Your friends," I suggested, "may think it odd."

The President smote his chest.

"The members of the *Société gastronomique*," he said, "take their orders from me. My orders are frequently odd."

I followed him back to the dining-room.

"Guardsman Pilgrim," he shouted.

"Sir," came the response.

"You will sprain your ankle at four o'clock this afternoon."

"Sooner than that, I expect," replied Mr. Pilgrim gloomily.

From the table now strewn with empty jugs and derelict platters, several pairs of eyes were bent upon the President with varying expressions of docility and expectation.

The President continued:

"Celia will then refrain from giving you ten grains of aspirin. We shall carry you instead to the nearest house. You will be in great pain."

"No doubt," murmured Mr. Pilgrim.

"You may take it from me," pursued the President, "that we have changed our plans. Mr. Ponsonby here is anxious for us to pay a call on some friends of his somewhere near Combloux. The run is just as good. But Guardsman Pilgrim will sprain an ankle."

"I am beginning to know my piece," said Mr. Pilgrim mildly. "I will do my best to postpone the catastrophe as long as possible, but to keep myself uninjured until four o'clock may be beyond my powers."

“We leave in ten minutes,” said the President. “Unexpended portions of the day’s lunch will be carried in the left cheek.”

Promptly, in ten minutes’ time, we set forth from the hut, running downhill at first and then to the top of the Mont d’Arbois. Then came a stretch referred to by the company in terms of affection as “the bumps.” It seemed that they were the President’s peculiar joy, consisting of a terraced slope of snow running steeply down to a small hut. It was the custom, I gathered, to award a prize to anyone who negotiated them without a fall. Certainly it was a splendid run. The air was keen and cold, the snow crisp and light. My skis leaped and bounded over the uneven surface like live things. Those who could stay the course, like Shelley’s hours, might drink the wind of their own speed. But the way was strewn with corpses. Mr. Pilgrim fell sixteen times, once in the fairway of the President. I will not describe that cataclysm or the observations to which it gave rise.

The prize, a thimbleful of cherry brandy, was awarded to Julia; for Julia had been sly, descending the slope before any of the others and thus taking advantage of the new-fallen snow.

From the bumps we turned left and, crossing the brow of a hill, saw Combloux shining in the sun at our feet and beyond it the pointed roofs of the château for which we were bound.

All too swiftly sped that golden afternoon. I am not very good on skis, but I can stand up on occasion; and that day the snow was perfect, the slopes long and gentle. And if ever you have swept down five or six hundred yards on a long slant and turned at the end and stopped upon the edge of a wood and then looked back and seen your fellows swooping down to you, you will know how the time flies on an Alpine holiday.

We passed the village of Combloux and there at last stood the château, well in view at the bottom of a long slope.

The President assembled his company.

“Pilgrim’s leap,” he said pointing downwards.

“Good God,” said Mr. Pilgrim.

“And for once,” said the President, “you will take it straight. It is against the rules, but here and now, before it is too late, I grant you plenary absolution. *Noblesse oblige.* To you the honour, to you the glory.”

“And the broken limb,” said the gallant Pilgrim.

“Wait,” I called.

“Certainly,” said Mr. Pilgrim promptly.

I took the President by the arm and pointed down to where a sledge drawn by a single horse was winding to the château.

“That,” I said, “will be the doctor.”

“Excellent,” said the President. He turned to Mr. Pilgrim.

“Carry on,” he bade. “And if the worst should happen . . .”

“Rule 57,” said Polycarp promptly. “Bodies are brought down in the spring.”

It was a fine performance. Like a falcon the little man darted down the slope, gathering speed. Then, at the last, within fifty yards of the castle gate he turned three complete cartwheels, covering the last thirty feet without touching the snow and landing on his head and shoulders.

“Lord save us,” said the President, making to follow swiftly. “I told him to break his ankle, not his neck.”

We reached him simultaneously and bent over a huddled heap.

“How is it, man?” demanded the President.

“I don’t know,” responded the heap, “but you might look about a bit and see whether I’ve left anything behind on the way down. And in any case,” he continued, sitting up suddenly, “I wasn’t expecting that jump at the end.”

I looked back as he spoke and perceived that some village children had constructed a ski jump on the steepest part of the slope.

“Poor fellow,” said Celia. “And I’m not even allowed to give him aspirin.”

“Take him up tenderly, treat him with care,” commanded the President.

A sledge was drawing up at the castle gates, in which a bearded man was seated, as we lifted Mr. Pilgrim from the snow.

## XIV I ENTER PINCHBECK CASTLE

THEY laid him upon an improvised hurdle of skis, held together by ski sticks, with sweaters to lie upon and a rucksack for pillow.

"Groan," said the President.

Mr. Pilgrim groaned impressively.

We advanced with him slowly, a compact body, towards the château, treading carefully. The snow had been beaten down upon the small private road and we walked, therefore, without undue difficulty. We arrived at the door, as I had hoped, simultaneously with the bearded man, who, watching our arrival from his sledge, was evidently prepared to take an interest in our proceedings. He had already alighted and rung an enormous bell.

The President, walking beside the stretcher, hailed him urgently, but not before I had exchanged with Peter, thus transformed, a look of gratified complicity.

"A doctor," said the President. "We must find a doctor. There has been an accident."

At this moment the door of the château opened, and an oldish woman with very red cheeks appeared on the threshold.

The President at once included her in his audience.

"My friend here has massacred himself," he said. "We are seeking a doctor."

"I am a doctor," proclaimed Peter, from the ample shelter of his beard. He had done himself well, I observed, in the matter of that accessory. "Madame will allow me perhaps to examine this unfortunate person inside."

This was accepted by the whole company, now clustering round the door, as an invitation. Bearing the litter they pushed through the door in a bunch, all talking vivaciously about the accident and the splendid run and generally comporting themselves like any other party of heartlessly happy people.

I looked anxiously round on entering. Would the Mighty Magistro, when it came to the point, be resolute to avoid publicity at any price? Might he not

think that the rescue of Davis and of Bob, which was our object, was something to be resisted at all costs. And in that case——

I found myself in a large square hall, empty till then. The walls were hung with antlers and faked tapestry—the patterns being not woven but painted on the canvas. They depicted various scenes from the Acts of the Apostles, including, rather appropriately, the judgment of God upon Ananias and Sapphira.

On the further side of the hall was a large glass door, approached by a short flight of steps. Behind stood a fantastic figure, shapeless and wavering. I felt Julia gripping my arm. Then the glass door opened and I perceived that the deformity we had seen was but a trick of refraction. The man behind the door was Webster, who for a moment stood gazing down upon the invasion and more particularly upon Peter, who was well in advance of the rest.

"What do you want?" he demanded curtly in French.

A vigilant look—was it consternation or satisfaction?—came into his eyes. He had seen me and Julia standing behind the doctor with the rest of the party.

"First," said Peter in the accent of the *midi*—Peter does it rather well though often it carries him away—"I present Monsieur all my excuses. I was absent, alas! when the message came. But what would you? The day was fine. A man cannot always be the slave of his vocation."

"Your business," barked Webster.

"But I am the doctor, Monsieur. I have come late indeed, but not, I hope, too late to be of service to your poor friends."

"A mistake," said Webster.

"But, indeed," said Peter, "you telephoned to my house, did you not? There had been an accident. You had gathered them up from the wayside. They were awaiting me here. I was, if possible, to transport them to my well-appointed clinic in my fine new ambulance that is the pride of the valley."

"A mistake," repeated Webster. "No one has telephoned for a doctor from here."

I felt it was time to intervene. Webster must not be wrangled with too openly or he would have to burn his boats, defy publicity, and drive us violently forth and damn the consequences.

“Excuse me,” I said. “But it was I that telephoned.”

“You?” said Webster. “Who are you?”

“Mr. Ponsonby, at your service. You were kind enough to bring here my two English friends, Mr. Davis and Mr. Hardcastle. We naturally have no wish to abuse your hospitality, and I thought it well to summon a doctor and to arrange for their removal.”

Webster looked at me very squarely for a moment. It was clear from his face that his mind, like that of Ulysses, was revolving many things.

“And I,” broke in Peter “have done all that is necessary. Am I not prepared to view these unfortunate men? Have I not commanded the ambulance? Will it not arrive as soon as they can fill the tank with petrol? Will it not be here at any moment? Is it not expedient that, meanwhile, I should satisfy myself whether my patients are fit to be moved? Is it not possible that their injuries may be of too serious a nature? Are there not, perhaps, such eventualities as cerebral concussion and a displacement of internal parts?”

“Nothing of the kind,” said Webster.

He looked round upon us. To his right was the red-haired girl and Celia. Beyond them stood Polycarp, displaying his red shirt. Bending over Mr. Pilgrim, who was lying upon the sofa, was the girl in olive green, with the spectacles, while the President, with his shining face, twinkling all over with bland authority, seemed to be in several places at once. Beside him was the girl with the coils about her ears, and next to her the young man with the yellow hair.

Webster abruptly made up his mind.

“Why telephone?” he demanded, straining fixedly at St. Peter in the tapestry. “No need whatever . . . injuries very slight . . .”

“We will examine them,” said Peter cheerfully.

“One moment,” said Webster. “Why is that gentleman lying on my sofa?”

The President of the *Société gastronomique* promptly took the cue.

“Sir,” he said, “there is providence in the fall of a sparrow. It is indeed fortunate that at the very moment when my friend here fell within a hundred yards of your hospitable mansion—he had broken the rules of the Society,

and was taking it straight—there should also arrive at the gate a doctor announcing, as I understand, that an ambulance is shortly to follow."

"Providence, indeed!" Peter exclaimed. "Was it not requested that I should come hither to render to two men the last services? And here I find a third. Let me assist him also to die."

"You're a doctor not a priest, idiot," I whispered.

"Look to him," said Webster dryly. "Meanwhile I will summon your friends."

"Groan," whispered the President, in an audible aside at the sofa.

Mr. Pilgrim groaned.

Peter, moving towards him, paused and raised a hand.

"Listen," he said, "it is the ambulance. It has arrived."

True enough, the sound of a motor came to our ears.

"Good," said Peter. "There will be room for all three. Perhaps, while I inspect this further casualty, our kind host will instruct his servant to bring to me here my other patients."

Webster looked at me a moment. Then without a word he turned and pressed a bell in the wall behind him.

Peter had meanwhile disappeared into the group collected about the sofa.

"Monsieur has fallen well," he was saying. "Amputation will not, I think, be necessary. But there may, on the other hand, be internal damage not immediately perceptible. Monsieur will permit me to ascertain."

Guttural noises from the sofa indicated that Mr. Pilgrim was being prodded in the interests of medical science.

Meanwhile a man had appeared from a green baize door on the right of the hall.

"Fetch the Englishmen," barked Webster.

He spoke in Russian, and I do not pretend to the language. But the meaning was clear.

The next few minutes were devoted entirely to Mr. Pilgrim, who was now beginning to enjoy himself.

All the ladies surrounded him, cooing like doves. One of them held his left hand, and another his right. A third was stroking his forehead. Perhaps

he thought the situation was too good to last.

He was right, for shortly there came from outside a soft jingle of bells.

Webster started, and my hand went defensively to my pocket. He noticed the gesture, and a sour grin twisted his face.

"Yes, Webster," I said quietly, stepping to within a pace of him as I spoke, "one of your own, as it happens—of the kind that cough."

The noise of bells grew louder. There was a sound of hurried footsteps. The door at the end of the hall was thrown wide open, and upon the threshold stood the Mighty Magistro, his Assyrian beard curling brightly in the last rays of the winter sunshine. Beside him, dressed for the snows, stood Senor Gonzago, while, beyond them both I caught a swift glimpse of the tossing heads and manes of the splendid roans in the sledge.

"What is this, my dear Webster?" He exclaimed, surveying us from the threshold. "I did not know you were giving a party."

At the same time, to my intense relief, I saw Bob and Davis coming through the green baize door, which led presumably to the servants' quarters, while from outside the house a motor horn called impatiently.

"That, again, is the ambulance," said Peter, looking up from the sofa. "All is now well. We will remove the patients."

Bob and Davis had come forward, bewildered, rather white and most unshaven. Bob had his arm in a sling, and the head of Davis was enveloped in a complicated bandage of soiled linen.

"It is here—is it not?—that Dr. Birot and the two wounded ones are to be found?"

Two new figures had appeared on the scene, arrayed in long blue coats with red cross badges on their arms.

"It is here," said Peter.

He moved towards the ambulance men, but was met half way by the Mighty Magistro, who had now taken careful stock of us all. The two of them stood confronted for a moment. Then suddenly the Mighty One caught his opposite number by the beard and fingered it playfully.

"A fine growth," he said softly.

"The beard," he continued, "has always been regarded as in a peculiar sense sacred to the wearer. The Roman senator remained steadfast and

immobile till the wondering Goth presumed to finger casually a growth that to him was strange and unusual, but then he rose and smote the rash barbarian. Personally, as you perceive, I affect the Assyrian type. It was customary to plait them with threads of gold, but, alas! such noble fashions are to-day scarcely to be followed without exciting such comment as might have to be resented."

"I would beg monsieur to be careful," said Peter, steadily, as the Mighty One gave to his appendage a final tweak, "or there may be an accident. I might resent the familiarity of monsieur, and then there might even be a scandal. And scandal, I understand, is to be avoided.

"Pardon me," said the Mighty One, "if for the moment I am a little lost. You are, I believe, the gentleman addressed just now as Dr. Birot."

"That is so," he said. "And I have called for the friends of Mr. Ponsonby here. I thought, perhaps, an ambulance might be necessary, but I am relieved to find that their injuries are less severe than we anticipated.

"This is Mr. Ponsonby, perhaps?" he said, his fine eyes coming to rest on me.

I bowed.

The Mighty Magistro looked slowly about him and laughed.

"I think I am beginning to understand the situation . . . er . . . Mr. Ponsonby. And you have provided yourself with many witnesses. You are richly attended, Mr. Ponsonby."

I wondered what Senor Gonzago was making of all this, and looked swiftly round the room in search of him. Much to my disappointment—for I hoped he was taking careful note of the proceedings—I saw that he had got somehow into a corner with Julia, who appeared to be behaving in what I can only call an extremely forward manner. Naturally enough, when a girl like Julia looks at a man with undisguised admiration he can hardly be expected to take an intelligent interest in common things.

Now Julia has a voice that carries, and in the silence that followed the last remark of the Mighty One, it suddenly commanded attention.

"It's really very simple," she was saying. "You fasten a number of light luges to a large sledge drawn by a pair of horses. The tailing party seats itself on the luges—one person to each of them. The sledge is then driven as rapidly as the horses can run down the frozen road, and the luges, all tied together, wriggle like a serpent, and the person on the end luge usually falls

off and gets lost. Mr. Pilgrim invariably sits on the last luge, but now he is no longer available. It is a disaster—unless, of course, you would like to come yourself. I shall be last but one, and we should probably fall together. There is a nice little valley that runs down from the main road to St. Gervais."

Here she smiled devastatingly upon Gonzago. He looked a little bewildered, but returned her smile.

"Or perhaps," continued Julia, turning boldly to the Mighty Magistro, "you would like to join us yourself. We shall be starting at about ten o'clock from Isba."

The great man smiled benevolently.

"A charming project, my dear lady," he said, "but alas! the years go by. Time passes—it is a way time has, and I am not so young as I would like to be, especially on such occasions as this."

I stared at Julia in amazement. That she should invite Gonzago to a tailing party—of which, incidentally, I had as yet heard nothing—was an intelligent move. But that she should do so in the hearing of Webster and Ruggiero, and even invite Ruggiero himself was something which needed explanation. In any case I was determined to secure immediate speech with Gonzago on my own account. I would make with him a definite appointment at once, and before witnesses.

Meanwhile, however, he was responding to Julia.

"I should be charmed," he said, "to join your party."

"At nine o'clock then," said Julia brightly.

"Senor Gonzago," I intervened, "business before pleasure. My experience of tailing parties hardly leads me to think we should wish to discuss any really serious or urgent matters by the wayside. I would suggest that we meet at seven o'clock—shall we say?—at your hotel."

He looked at me inquiringly; then, a little uncertainly, at Ruggiero. The Mighty One gave no sign of intelligence. Unmoved and smiling he waited, as for two gentlemen to settle a private matter to their satisfaction.

Senor Gonzago looked at his watch.

"I will be at your disposal then as from seven o'clock," he said. "I will wait for you in the lounge."

“Should you be late for the appointment, Senor,” I continued smoothly, “I shall realise that you have been detained.”

“You may rely upon me not to be late, Colonel,” he replied.

Meanwhile Peter had not been idle. Mr. Pilgrim, lifted from the couch, now lay upon a stretcher which had been produced from the ambulance. Bob and Davis were following the bier and the members of the *Société gastronomique* were falling in behind.

The retreat, with full honours, was in progress.

Webster and Ruggiero stood apart.

“Gentlemen,” I said, “I hope that before long I may be able to make you some return for all your kindness.”

The Mighty Magistro bowed.

“It is nothing,” he said, with one of his ample gestures. “I can only assure you that my small services will continue to be at your disposal. Till we meet again . . . Mr. Ponsonby.”

A moment later I stood on the steps of the château. Dr. Birot, his charges safely bestowed in the ambulance, was driving down the snowy road into the setting sun.

# XV I ARRANGE TO LOSE MY WIFE

"Tell me quickly," I urged, turning to Julia.

"Well?" she said, looking up from the business of adjusting her skis.

"About this tailing party," I began.

"It is my great idea," she continued. "So please be helpful, and persuade our friends of the Chaumière to join us."

"But why?"

"Well, we can't have a tailing party without a tail. Talk to the President, Toby. Invite him to take food with us at Isba."

"Is one supposed to hear this?"

I turned round and perceived the President kneeling beside me in the snow. He also was busy with his skis.

"Yes," said Julia. "We want you to persuade all your nice friends to dine with us this evening, and be a tailing party afterwards."

"Alas," responded the President. "We are but slaves. We live and work in Geneva. We keep the peace of the world; we reconstruct the nations."

"But you don't begin work at six o'clock on Sunday evening?" objected Julia.

The President considered the point.

"No," he said, "but we sign on or clock in or stroll casually to the office, according to rank, from 9 a.m. onwards in the morning. I am usually a little 'onwards' myself. Monday, hopeless, sodden and unkind, awaits us all. And between our Sunday pleasures and our Monday tasks there stretch some eighty kilometres as crows, commonly supposed to take it straight, are said to fly. Such ancient collections of nuts, bolts and screws as served to carry us here await us at Sallanches. Therefore, we must depart. There will be time, however, for a parting glass."

"Toby," Julia assured him, "will arrange all that. He organises beautifully, and loves it, too."

I looked at her uncertainly.

“You insist then on this tailing party?”

“Absolutely. And, as you know, I am an obstinate woman, and can be very nasty when crossed. And I would point out that the essence of a tailing party is a tail. Julia at the end of a long line of empty luges would be a poor sight.”

“I don’t agree,” gallantly responded the President. “On the other hand I am more than willing to be a tail and wag.”

“Very well, then,” I said. “It shall be organised. You will dine with us—a full house; and to-morrow morning you shall be delivered at the Chaumière before six o’clock. I will charter the necessary transport. If you leave Sallanches at 6-30 a.m. prompt you will all be in Geneva well before nine. Beds, if I know anything of tailing parties, will not be required.”

“I will call for volunteers,” said the President.

“Refreshments at Isba 9 p.m.,” I suggested.

“Champagne,” said Julia, “oysters . . . caviare . . . pander to them . . . appeal to their baser passions. Toby will pay the bill.”

“Rule 97,” said the President. “It is recommended to resist everything except temptation. I will spread the news.”

He rose to his feet.

“One moment,” I ventured. “I forgot to ask whether and to what extent Mr. Pilgrim was hurt this afternoon.”

“Hurt?” said the President. “He likes being hurt. He is hurt regularly once a week. Isba is his nursing home. And the lucky fellow is being carried there in ease and comfort while we must foot it over the flat fields.”

Thereupon the President, leaving us with a wave of the hand, started off at a fine pace after his company. Julia and I followed, keeping them well in view over the half mile walk across the open, till the lights of Mégève began to gleam ahead of us.

“About this tailing party,” I began again.

She hesitated a moment.

“Let’s talk about it when we join the others,” she said at last.

I looked at her severely.

“You are funking it,” I said. “Your scheme is mad and bad; you are afraid to tell me about it, and are relying for moral support on Peter.”

“I don’t think you are going to like it,” she confessed.

The rest of the journey was an interval for silent thought. I had a pretty shrewd notion of what was in Julia’s mind. The same idea had, in fact, occurred to me. But the complications were numerous, and I did not yet see how to deal with them.

At Isba, which we reached at about six o’clock, we found Bob, Davis and the *Société gastronomique* in full force. Bob and Davis, I was glad to find, were little the worse for their entertainment at the château. We arranged—or rather Julia and the President arranged—the details of our banquet at 9 p.m., which appeared to be assuming the dimensions of a Neronic orgy.

For half an hour it was impossible to discuss anything seriously, and I was about to suggest withdrawing to a quieter place, when the President marshalled his company and led it off to play a round of golf on the miniature links hard by. Peace descended upon us—we might almost hear the flutter of her wings; and at long last we assembled in council round the log fire.

“Listen,” said I, “Julia has a scheme, and I think I know what it is.”

“In that case I’ll leave it to you, Toby,” she retorted.

“Ages ago—this morning in fact—I was careless enough to let fall that it would be well if I could prove to Senor Gonzago that the Mighty Magistro was a bad man. It is my firm belief that Julia is planning to make it easy for him. She has invited Gonzago to a tailing party, and she was careful to let the Mighty One know about it. Presumably she is hoping to provoke him to some wicked deed.”

“The bleating of the kid excites the tiger,”—Julia was speaking.

“I feel sure that, given the opportunity, our encyclopædic friend or his taciturn companion will lay violent hands on somebody, and it may, of course, be me. All you have to do in that case is to arrange for Gonzago to be a witness of my undoing, and then, when he is thoroughly alive to the iniquity of these evil men, rescue me—or whomsoever it may be—from their clutches. That is my idea, and I think it is a very good one.”

“Good in principle,” I handsomely conceded, “but it simply bristles with snags. First, we have to know exactly when and how this hypothetical attempt will be made. Secondly, we have to be sure that Gonzago will be on

the spot at exactly the right moment. Thirdly, we have to arrange for the victim to be promptly recovered. Lastly . . .”

I paused.

“Go on,” said Julia brightly.

“Well,” I said, “if you imagine I intend to be a party to any madcap scheme that means your falling again into the clutches of Michael Webster—I think you said his name was Michael—you are greatly mistaken.”

I looked round upon them all as they sat there in the bright bar, with the laughing couples dancing a few feet away—Bob, with his thin face thrust forward; Peter, still wearing his preposterous beard, and leaning across the painted iron table; stocky little Davis and Julia, whom I will not again describe.

“What I mean is,” I concluded firmly, “here we all are, and for heaven’s sake let us keep together.”

Julia lit a cigarette and crossed her trousered legs.

“You said, did you not,” she observed, “that Gonzago was likely to be difficult?”

“Very difficult. He will close with these people unless we can discredit them. Also we must make him a better offer, and persuade him it is genuine.”

“Very well, then. What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to . . . talk to him.”

“My dear Toby, if it comes to talking, I put my shirt waist on the Mighty One.”

“ ’E do talk and no mistake,” put in Davis gruffly, “and the poor young Spanish gentleman is fair eatin’ out of his ’and.”

“So you see,” said Julia.

“The Mighty One,” I observed, “is unlikely to oblige us by falling into an obvious trap.”

“But Michael may. Michael is playing second fiddle. Michael is vain, jealous, headstrong and a bit of a fool—especially where I am concerned. At the château when he tried to become friendly with me . . .”

“Hell,” I said.

Julia looked at me with compassion.

"Well," she said; "men do, you know. And if you are going to swear every time it happens, you'll have very little time to spare for other things."

"Children," said Peter, "I strongly deprecate this bickering between married couples, and I'm yearning to know all about Webster when he tries to be friendly."

"He throws a fine chest, and hints at wonderful things he might do if only *he* were running the show. As a matter of fact, neither he nor even the Mighty One is running it."

"You mean, lady, they are acting for someone else?"

Davis leaned across the table, sucking noisily and with significance at his empty glass. Desiring to hear ourselves speak, I had it replenished by one of the barmen.

Julia nodded.

"Webster made that very clear to me in the little talk we had."

"This little talk with Webster," said Bob, "is like the widow's cruse."

"He told me the story of his life," said Julia. "There were probably omissions, but he made it plain that he was a very fine fellow indeed."

"Did he tell for whom they were acting?" I asked.

"No, Alistair. He was not quite so easy as that."

"Well, go on," I said.

"The point I am trying to make," continued Julia, "is that Michael has reached the stage where he will jump at a chance of doing something on his own account, such as bearing me off shrieking from a tailing party. Then there will be a Davis to the rescue, and a Peter and a Bob, won't there?"

She looked at them with a smile in her eyes.

"Breathless and triumphant they will return with a dishevelled Julia, whose tale of woe will melt the heart of a stone."

"I have admitted," I said, "that the idea is good in principle. But how are we to know when and where Webster will make the attempt?"

"A map," suggested Bob.

Dutifully I turned to a waiter, and asked him for a map of the district. He crossed the room and borrowed one from a guide, who, bronzed and

magnificent in a leather coat was sitting, the admired of all beholders, in a far corner.

We spread it between us. It was a large scale map of Mégève and district.

"St Gervais," said Julia, "I mentioned St. Gervais. It's the classic run. And I'll be bound that Michael is studying just such a map as this—with or without the assistance of his colleague."

"What have we here?" said Peter.

He pointed to a spot on the map about three kilometres down the valley where, in pleasant isolation, we deciphered the words "*Café Robinson*."

"Sounds 'omelike," commented Davis.

"Very well known in these parts," said Bob. "It's where one stops for a drink on the way down. It is used a lot in the day time."

"We will telephone," said Peter, "bidding them to expect us towards eleven p.m."

"Of course," said Julia. "And Michael will also telephone. He is clever enough for that. He will then know when and where to expect us."

"In vain," I said, "is the net spread in sight of the fowl."

"Killjoy," said Julia.

Bob had meanwhile assumed a thoughtful expression. His lean face seemed even leaner than usual.

"I'll tell you what," he said suddenly.

"What's what?" Peter asked.

"I'm going back to the château," he announced.

"Going back to the château!"

We all said it simultaneously, but Bob was quite unmoved.

"Once inside the château," he continued, "I am bound to pick up some useful information, and if they are planning an attack on the party, I may hear when and how it will be delivered. The servants all talk Russian, which I can follow pretty easily."

"How will you enter the place?" I asked.

"Davis," said Bob. "Have you still got that friendly little bit of crust?"

Davis fumbled in his pocket, and produced a morsel of bread. It looked particularly uninviting, and I wondered what was coming next.

"There you are, sir," said Davis, placing his treasure on the table between them.

Bob took the bread, and presently drew from the crumb centre of the slice a little coiled spring, scarcely larger than the hair spring of a watch, which indeed it was, and passed it round the table. I handed it to Julia.

"Careful, my dear," I said, "don't cut yourself. That spring is the finest saw in the world."

"For its size," added Davis. "I keep it about me in case, and when I goes into action, I slips it under my tongue, so that if I do get shut up, well, there it is. I had it from Jules Lamarthe, and he had it from One-eyed William, a Villette burglar. Give it time, and it will cut through an iron bar as easy as kiss your hand."

"They put us in the cellar," Bob continued. "There was only one window with two bars. We made a good job of it between us. In fact we had almost finished it—another five minutes would have seen us through—when you turned up with the ambulance. There lies my way. I suggest that we charter a taxi in the village. Peter can drive me as near as possible and wait."

"So now," said Julia brightly, "there is work for us till the *Société gastronomique* returns in force. We can play draughts, can't we, Mr. Davis?"

The red face of Davis glowed with delight.

"Chess, if you like," he said. "It is a bit more classy."

I looked at my watch. It was now twenty minutes to seven.

I rose from my chair.

"Well," I said. "You remember the man who was caught at the tail end of a crowd."

"No," said Julia.

"Somebody asked him why he was following all those people, and he answered: 'But naturally. It is my job. I am their leader'."

Julia put her arms round my neck.

"Never mind, Toby," she said. "Give the poor brain a rest. Don't forget that this is your honeymoon. We will do your thinking for you. And don't forget to give my love to Gonzago."

Five minutes later I climbed into the "Blue Train" which was leaving for the Hotel d'Arbois, and ten minutes after that I entered the lounge. It is a charming hotel, modern in its style and furnishings. The lounge was full. Some of the inhabitants were trying to make up their minds to go and change for dinner; some had already changed.

I looked round for Gonzago and, most unpleasantly, saw Webster instead. He was shaking hands, apparently in farewell, with a short bearded man in a dinner jacket, wearing some sort of ribbon in his buttonhole. The man had a fine jowl and a high fleshy nose, well veined. He sported a pair of thick rimless glasses.

I had seen that man before, but I could not definitely remember him. I wondered bitterly whether my memory was beginning to grow soft. This was the second time in this adventure that I had been vaguely baffled . . . the Bramber Bequest . . . and now this bearded stranger, who was not really a stranger at all.

I was standing a little to the left of the door of the lounge. I slipped still further along so that Webster should not see me. He had finished saying good-bye to his companion; he had now crossed the hall and was putting on a thick fur coat.

The stranger in the dinner jacket, who was not a stranger, was already reading an illustrated paper.

Where had I seen him before?

I sat down in a wide armchair, took up a paper and began covertly to examine him.

Then suddenly a voice broke in upon me.

"There you are, Colonel. I'm sorry if I've kept you waiting."

The Senor Gonzago was beside me.

# XVI I FAIL TO DO BUSINESS

I ROSE to greet him, and we shook hands Latin fashion. His manner had changed perceptibly. He had evidently decided for the moment to bury his suspicion of me as a potential poisoner of good wine.

I was about to enquire invitingly whether there was a bar to his hotel when I saw a slight flush creep beneath his olive cheeks, and following his look saw with some dismay that the girl Jeanne had somehow appeared on the scene. She was standing at about twenty paces distant from us, leaning a little backwards, and it struck me that she might have been at some time a mannequin, so exact and studied was the pose, body flung a little backwards from the hips, chin tilted, her head beautifully poised to show off the sleek, well-dressed hair. Though she was wearing ski-ing clothes her carriage would have done justice to the latest creation of Worth or Paquin.

She smiled and raised her hand, as though to beckon Gonzago, who, still flushing, looked what he was—an awkward boy. He took a step forward to meet her.

This would never do.

“Senor Gonzago,” I said, “I will not keep you more than a few minutes, but we must have our talk now, if you don’t mind. I understand you are anxious to take a rather important decision.”

He turned to me then, shaking his head smilingly at Jeanne.

“I am always ready to discuss serious business, Colonel Granby,” he replied.

“He wants money, this young man,” I thought.

Jeanne, seeing by his gesture that Gonzago was, for the moment, disinclined or prevented from joining her, shrugged in comical despair and moved, swaying gently, across the lounge. She paused a moment as though uncertain where to go, and then, suddenly, her face lighted. I followed the direction of her gaze. She was looking at the bearded stranger—who should not have been a stranger—and the stranger was looking at her. A smile of mutual recognition was upon the two faces. The stranger rose with a bow which, despite his corpulence, contrived to be elegant and finished.

“Mlle. Jeanne,” I heard him say, and she stepped towards him, holding out both her hands—Io going to meet Silenus.

I turned away and took Gonzago by the arm.

“Lead me, my dear fellow,” I said, “to where the cocktails are shaken.”

“Not far to go, Colonel,” he answered, responding boyishly to the pressure on his arm.

He led the way across the lounge, through an archway into a small room—little more than an alcove. One corner of it was cut off by a bar, green enamelled with a shining top of glass. Behind it a white clad barman ministered.

I ordered two champagne cocktails, and we sat ourselves upon high stools of steel tubing, upholstered in green plush, very modern but not uncomfortable. For the moment we had the place to ourselves. People were changing their clothes for dinner, but would soon be trooping down for their appetisers.

We sipped our cocktails in silence.

“Now, Colonel,” said Gonzago, “you have hinted that the gentlemen with whom I am doing business are not to be relied upon. But I must take people in business as I find them. Signor Ruggiero, so far as I am concerned, is what you English call a good egg.”

“Do we?” I murmured.

“Right out of the top drawer,” insisted Gonzago.

“And I gather that he wants what you have to sell,” I said coolly.

Gonzago nodded.

“Well,” I continued, “I want it too.”

“Of course,” said Gonzago, “he is your rival. But what reason have you to think that he does not play the game?”

“He abducted my wife the day after we were married,” I said mildly. “He has forcibly detained two of my friends. He has on more than one occasion tried to kill me, and I have no doubt whatever that he will try again. Otherwise, on merely personal grounds, I have nothing against him.”

“This, perhaps, is what you call pulling my legs, Colonel, is it not?”

I looked at him without rancour. I still thought he was fundamentally a nice lad, but he would obviously have been much nicer if he had been thoroughly well licked, swished, spatted, or whatever the local South American term may be in the Argentine equivalent, if such exists, of one of the less refined of our English public schools.

"I don't think I quite follow you, Senor Gonzago," I said blandly.

"In any case," I continued, "we are not here to discuss the Mighty Magistro, as I believe he likes to call himself, but to discuss terms. Perhaps you would therefore be quite frank with me. What are these gentlemen ready to do for you, and what exactly do they hope to gain by it? Remember that you are dealing with a representative, though at present in an unofficial capacity, of the British Government."

"But surely," he said, "it is for you to make an offer. Should it be sufficiently liberal . . ." He hesitated a moment.

"You see, Colonel," he explained, "I owe it to myself and—er—to my family to get the best contract I can, and I was assured by my father before he died that, so far as money went, the value of the deposits was incalculable. For him, of course, money was only a very minor consideration, and I agree, of course, that in such a case as this it is only secondary; but . . . well, I need money, and I need it quickly."

He paused.

"Yes," I said encouragingly. "Please go on."

Out of the corner of my eye, as I hoped that Gonzago would soon be dropping clues to left and right, I saw Jeanne and the bearded stranger coming towards the bar. They entered it, and sat down in a small alcove some distance away. The man ordered drinks.

Where in heaven's name had I seen him before?

"My motives," Gonzago was saying, "are not entirely mercenary. I should hesitate to hand over this trust—for a trust, in a sense it is—to anyone who was not prepared to make good use of it. I have no reason, however, to doubt the good faith of Senor Ruggiero or those for whom he is acting."

"May I ask," I said, hoping for further light, "how and when you met the Senor Ruggiero?"

"I first met him in South America, when my father was still alive. My father trusted him with the secret of the deposits, and when father died he

wrote to me offering to buy them on behalf of a private organisation. There is no reason why a private organisation should not be just as disinterested and philanthropic as a public one."

"Provided the philanthropy pays," I said, "and professional philanthropy usually does."

"This business," said Gonzago, "will pay—the richest deposits in the world. Transport, moreover, would be simple—a matter of 50 miles from the coast, fifty easy miles for a light railway."

There was a pause, Gonzago did not mean to speak again of his own motive, and I saw that he would soon cease to react to my gentle probing.

"I gather then," I said, "that it would be against your feelings to turn down the offer you have received from this private syndicate for one made by the British Government, unless it were clearly more advantageous from a strictly financial point of view?"

"Naturally," he said, "I prefer the better bargain—always provided I am convinced of the good faith of the opposite party. That also counts for something. You see, Colonel, my father died in the conviction that this discovery would ultimately save thousands of souls from suffering as he had suffered. I saw my father die. So you can give me credit for some feeling in the matter."

Was it something in the formula he had used—*suffering as he had suffered*? Was it some trick of the head or physical trick of the bearded stranger drinking in the alcove with Jeanne? Was it perhaps the clock that just at that moment struck half past seven reminding me of Thwaites' message and the Bramber Bequest? I do not know, but suddenly my heart leaped and my brain was flooded with light. I must suppose that the mind, unconsciously trying to remember relevant facts, will all at once succeed till there, abruptly, clear as day, stands the result.

For now I recognised the bearded stranger. I knew the purpose and meaning of the Bramber Bequest. I knew what it was Gonzago had to sell, and could hazard a guess at the reason why certain persons were anxious to buy it. Gonzago's cryptic reference to deposits of value to healing and science had jogged the pieces of the puzzle suddenly into place. I had not longer to feel blindly after clues, but to bring my young gentleman as smartly as possible to heel.

I set about it at once.

"You have heard, I take it, of the Bramber Bequest?" I said.

"No."

"That is curious," I continued, "for it would seem to be very much in your interest to know of it. The late Lord Bramber, some years ago, left a very large sum of money for the purchase of radium to be used in the treatment of cancer. Lord Bramber died of that terrible disease, and he wished, like your father, that a remedy might be found for those who came after him. The bequest was to be administered by the British Government."

The eyes of Senor Gonzago brightened warily. He was a boy, perhaps; but came of a race whose mothers were married at fourteen, and the innocence of youth was not in them. I had at last said something that implied business, and he was as excited at the prospect as a young gamester at the tables.

"Ruggiero," I said, "is acting for a non-British syndicate, and I perceive that it is fully alive to the importance of the deal, since no less a person than its President is preparing to take a hand."

"Indeed," said Gonzago, "why do you say that?"

"You have not met him?" I asked.

"No!"

"He is sitting over there, talking to someone whom I think you know."

Gonzago turned and saw the bearded stranger with Jeanne. Jeanne was doing her best to be affable, and I could see that Gonzago did not like it.

"So that," he said, "is the President."

"He was the President six years ago, and almost certainly he still has a sleeping interest in the business."

"You know him?"

"Not personally. It is M. Léoval, a former Financial Minister in a European Government. He has ceased to be a public figure, but he is not less important for that. He retired from the Cabinet as the result of certain allegations. It was a famous case. He apparently used his influence with the Government for some very private purposes. Incidentally he was chief concessionaire of the big pitchblende deposits in the Congo. It appeared that his syndicate in actual fact controlled them all, and that he was suspected of using his monopoly to withhold supplies and send up the price—the price of radium. That is your philanthropist. M. Léoval has many friends, and the

allegations by the public remained unproven. But I belong to a service, Senor Gonzago, whose business in such matters is to know better."

"But all this," he protested uncomfortably, "is conjecture. I do not even know that M. Léoval is interested."

"Doubtless," I said, "it is a simple coincidence that, at a moment when you are trying to sell large deposits potentially rich in radium, the one man in Europe with a life-long interest in that commodity should happen to be here and talking, as you perceive, on what appear to be terms of intimacy, with a member of Ruggiero's house party."

Gonzago looked unhappy.

"I wonder," he said, "if you realise the gravity of the inferences I must draw from your suspicions. You are asking me to believe that this gentleman—an ex-minister of Belgium, acting on behalf of a big international syndicate—is employing criminal agents."

I put a hand on his arm. The time had come to be very kind and firm.

"I quite understand your position, my dear boy. You have had an excellent offer from these men. You are anxious to believe in their good faith, and naturally you need some sort of evidence that my word is better than theirs. Meanwhile there is the Bramber Bequest. It amounts, I believe, to well over half a million sterling."

Gonzago was impressed.

"That," he said, "is a fine sum. Have you explicit authority from the British Government to make me an offer?"

"I am an agent of the British Government and have no doubt, whatever . . ."

Gonzago shook his head.

"No," he said vivaciously. "That, Colonel, as you must admit, is not enough. You are, or claim to be, an agent of the British Crown which has at its disposal a large bequest for the purchase of radium. That is not a definite proposal."

"I cannot show you my authority this evening. But I have only to communicate with London. Unfortunately the wires were down this morning. As soon as communications are restored I will make the offer you require. You have only to wait a few days."

"And lose, perhaps, my chance of doing business elsewhere."

"With M. Léoval and his gang."

The eyes of Senor Gonzago narrowed, and his lips came obstinately together.

"I cannot allow you to question the good faith of Senor Ruggiero. For the moment I must regard any such suggestion as made by you in the way of business."

"Thank you," I said dryly. "One of the older dodges, in fact."

He flushed uneasily.

"It is very difficult," he sighed.

With an effort I suppressed my resentment. It was childish to be moved as easily as I must admit to have been at that moment. But my patience suddenly gave out. I wanted to show this insolent lad, quickly and effectively, that he was making the mistake of his life.

"Yes," I answered quickly, "you have said that before. To-night, however, I may perhaps be able to simplify matters. You have not, I hope, forgotten your invitation to join us in a tailing party?"

"The Senora Granby was very kind!"

His eye turned uncertainly towards Jeanne, still in happy converse with her bearded friend. He looked towards her resentfully a moment.

"I shall of course be delighted," he said.

"Capital. I suggest that you join us at dinner. We are meeting at Isba, down below."

"I am not dressed for dinner," protested Gonzago.

"One does not wear a dinner jacket on a tailing party," I answered dryly.

"I suppose not," he laughed. "Then suppose we run down on skis. I can find you a pair if necessary."

"Well," I said, "ski-ing in the dark, on cocktails consumed at 1,500 metres up, will at any rate be better fun than . . ."

"Dining at the Perigordine," he said, with a twinkle.

"Or suspecting your host of being an artful dodger," I added.

We climbed down from our stools.

“Young fellow,” I said solemnly, as I beckoned to the barman and paid my reckoning, “you are going to suffer a change of heart this evening. I feel it in my bones.”

“One never knows,” he responded wisely.

## XVII I ENCOUNTER THE SNOWMEN

THE moon had not yet risen. Swiftly we descended from the square hotel, past Stations of the Cross that climb the steep hillside to a tiny chapel, and so to the glitter of the town. There are two long slopes and a short one, ending in a square platform covered with thin snow and ice, and well lit with the electric lamps bordering the narrow road upon which Isba is built. Gonzago was the better man on skis, and he had already arrived at the platform when I was still at the top of the slope. Thence, I saw in the road a straggling party, among whom I recognised Celia, the President and his wife, the red-haired girl and Polycarp with the shirt of flame. They were moving towards Isba and, as they reached the door, Celia caught sight of me.

"Rule 17," she shouted, "always 'Christy' at Isba."

I waved my hand at her and shot down the beaten slope. The wind whistled past my ears. Ten yards from the platform I flattened to the slope, thrusting the right foot out a little and skidded sharp round. My enormous speed was checked on an instant. I swung perilously for a moment beneath the flaring lights, then slowed to a standstill. There was applause from the road, in which the President was good enough to join.

I turned to thank him when I felt a hand on my arm. Peter was beside me.

"Be slow in taking off your skis," he whispered.

The merry troop passed me by. I stood upon the edge of it, a little sick at heart. Why could not Julia and I step forth as one of them, leap as carelessly upon a luge, drive under the moon and the crisp stars, with no thought but of laughter and sweet fellowship?

This merriment, alas! was for us to be no more than a mask. Somewhere in the background would lurk the Mighty One and the dim shadows of evil be gathered.

I had left the hotel, like poor Othello, perplexed in the extreme. I had found out what these men were after, and realised what a fine service to mankind might be spoiled. Nor was it difficult to guess the motive of the spoiler. The price of radium is determined by its scarcity, and sudden new sources of supply would break the market. Possibly the syndicate did not

even intend to work the deposits. To let them lie idle would suffice to secure for years to come the profits of their monopoly. And here was a slightly foolish young man, not ill-disposed, but obviously in need of money for his pleasures, impatient to sell as soon as he could pocket the price with a good, but not too exacting, a conscience. The whole thing was too exasperating—the more so as my nerves were very much on edge. The young fool doubted my authority, and governments are slow to move. I might even have to go to London before I could get the necessary powers to treat with him. Meanwhile, in a fit of temper, I had renewed his invitation to the tailing party. I had never liked the scheme, but could we afford to delay a moment in exposing Ruggiero?

In any case I would show that young jackanapes a thing or two—give him a lesson. It was childish, perhaps, but I was becoming impatient to receive his apologies.

I was thus in two minds—half-converted to Julia's plan, but wholly unconverted to exposing her to any risk. In other words my wits were hopelessly muddled—my normal state as a newly married-man.

"Well," said I to Peter as I kicked off my skis, "did Bob discover anything?"

Peter nodded doubtfully.

"Not as much as he hoped. He got into the castle all right. Then he hid in the pantry and listened while the servants were having a meal. They were grumbling because the sledge had been ordered out again and they had been warned to stand by for another raid."

"Good God, Peter," I said, "this is perfectly fantastic. Here we are in the middle of France . . ."

"Hardly the middle," murmured Peter in parenthesis. "The Italian frontier is just the other side of yonder hill."

"In the middle of France," I repeated, "and here is a fellow actually instructing his servants to organise assault and battery on the public highway. It's perfectly outrageous. Did Bob hear anything more specific?"

"The Café Robinson was mentioned. It seems that Webster had rung up the livery stables! So he knows our route—every inch of it."

"But Bob didn't hear where the attack would be made?"

"No. But we've worked it out on the map and I've been down the road to view the position."

By this time we were in the little vestibule of Isba. We had hung up our hats and washed our hands. Peter spread the map on the radiator.

"From here to the crossroads," he said, "where we turn off to St. Gervais, the way is quite bare—not a tree within a couple of hundred yards or so."

I nodded.

"They can't ambuscade us there. Besides we are thus far on a high road and there may be traffic even late at night. After we turn off, however, the road gets narrower and we soon come to a well-wooded part of it—thick fir trees on either side for about a kilometre, till we get to Robinson's."

I nodded again. One usually nods when Peter has a map in his hand. Peter on topography is like Whitaker on almanacs.

"Well," he continued, "all that last kilometre is ideal for an ambuscade except for one fact. They ran a snow plough down it this afternoon. The road is fairly clear in the middle but still very narrow, and there is a gang of men still digging it out. They will have to work all night, so the foreman told me. I had a talk with the fellow and distributed a few litres of wine which went down very well, let me tell you. The job will take them most of the night and I reckon that at about eleven o'clock they will reach a point about here."

He jabbed the map with a pencil.

"Now, you can't attack a tailing party before several dozen workmen. Therefore the attack is bound to come between this point and the Café Robinson. That makes things considerably easier for Bob, Davis and myself."

"You mean that the danger zone is only about three hundred or four hundred yards long," I said looking at the scale of the map.

"And I think we can safely narrow it still further," said Peter. "There is a little path here that descends fairly steeply to Le Fayet. I have looked it up on the guide which says that skiers should take great care in running down it because it is nearly always frozen, but that it is just wide enough for stemming."

"That means about five feet," I said.

Perhaps I should explain that stemming is the attitude adopted by the skier in checking his speed on a frozen slope. He stands with the points of his skis just touching but not crossing, for that spells disaster, his legs held wide apart and the skis forming the two sides of an arrow-head. The skier is

thus enabled to check his pace by turning himself into a human snow-plough.

"It is pretty obvious to me what they will do," continued Peter. "They will have the sledge waiting somewhere along this path and they will attack the tailing party on the main road as near to it as possible. The moment they have seized Julia they will slip down the path, put her on the sledge and make off as fast as they can go."

I looked again at the map and then at Peter. Then I nodded again. I was beginning to feel like one of those china figures with loose heads so popular with our grandmothers.

"Well," I said, "what do you propose?"

"Davis and Bob and I," replied Peter, "will lie in wait for the kidnappers just off the path, fifty yards from where it joins the road. I look to you to see that Gonzago is a witness and to come down after them with as many of the party as you can collect. We shall then effect the rescue and all will be well."

"You may be outnumbered," I said.

"We shall surprise them out of their wits," said Peter, "and they will be carrying Julia. Besides, once you come up with the party they won't dare to shoot. Also the most dangerous of the lot will not be there."

"The Mighty One?"

"He has gone off to Sallanches. Bob heard the servants talking about it. They were rather peeved at having to drive him down. In any case, the Mighty One would not be a party to the abduction. Remember that he is still avoiding scandal."

"Did Bob get away all right from the château?"

"No one saw him there so far as he knows."

Peter was folding up the map. I looked at him uncertainly.

"Peter," I said, "I don't like it."

"Of course you don't, old boy," he responded, laying a hand on my arm. "But don't you worry. Either the attempt will not be made—in which case we shall simply look foolish; or it must be made as we have worked it out. They can't attack in the open; they can't attack in full view of the gang working on the road; they can't attack at the café. We've narrowed it down to almost a certainty."

“Almost.”

“Good enough,” said Peter. “No harm shall come to Julia. Not a hair of her head, old boy. Now you’d better join the others while I go off to organise the rescue party. I left Bob and Davis fixing things up at the stables.”

He took me by the shoulders and pushed me towards the inner door. A moment later I stood blinking in the noise and glare of Isba.

The next hour was devoted to what seemed like a conspiracy on the part of Julia and the members of the *Société gastronomique* to make it quite impossible for me to think any too precisely on the event. I will not describe the party. Suffice it that very efficient arrangements had been made to pander to the baser appetites of the guests. These arrangements included some excellent caviare—at least the President proclaimed it to be excellent—and a *confit d’oie* which, to judge from the quantities consumed, must have been not so bad. No limit appeared to have been set to the promised champagne wine or, if limit there was, it had presumably been fixed by the President himself, who, you will have gathered, was apt to be broad-minded in these matters. I did, however, contrive to have a few words with Gonzago—in the course of which I notified him of what was likely to happen later. He was politely incredulous. Had he been less exasperatingly bland in his unbelief I might even then have called off the whole expedition. I do not know. I was in a strange mood. A straw might lead me—especially as, in this case, the straw was Julia.

It was a quarter past nine when the party, more or less sober, assembled to survey the string of luges in the road outside. There was much discussion as to the allocation of places in the tail and the President cast his vote recklessly about him.

The last luge—a perilous honour—fell to Polycarp. The prime cut, so to speak, was given to Celia, the President’s wife and the President. Julia, Gonzago and I sat upon the neck; the girl with red hair and Mr. Pilgrim—sufficiently recovered to sit towards the end of the tail—straddled the hinder part. Immediately in front of us was the low line of the sledge in which lay a heap of fur rugs—though otherwise it was empty. The fur rugs, as the driver explained, were to cover those members of the party who might grow weary of falling off the luges and elect to be carried in the sledge. One and all, however, the members swore to stick to their luges as cobblers to their lasts. To abandon them was dishonour and defeat.

Polycarp was the first to suffer. The sledge started with a jerk. His luge slipped between his long legs and left him face downwards in the snow. He came running after us, puffing mightily, leaped for his luge and landed upon his chest. There he lay spreadeagled, being held in position by the red-haired girl. He travelled thus, as far as I could judge, about a mile with his face in alternate snow-drifts as the serpent lashed its tail first to one side of the road and then to the other.

Our progress through Mégève was unpopular. The tail twisted to such good effect that an old woman carrying a basket, three smart young things in evening dress going to the *Mauvais Pas* for a late dinner or an early dance, a man who might have been a policeman or a chocolate soldier, and a hotel porter carrying a large basket of dirty linen were all in turn laid low.

Soon, however, we were clear of the village and under the quiet sky, to the rhythm of jingling bells, the President lifted up his voice and started a song in the French tongue.

Pour dresser un jeune courrier
Et l'affermir sur l'étrier
Il lui fallait une routière
Laire lan laire.

Battons le fer quand il est chaud
Dit-elle en faisant sonner haut
Le nom de sultane première
Laire lan laire.

So they proceeded, squirming and twisting under the keen stars. It was bitter cold but they did not feel it, being flown with wine, and youth and laughter and the love of men. From where I sat on my comparatively stable luge I could feel Julia's hand on my shoulder and once her lips touched my ear and once a stray lock of her hair brushed my eyes, and the sweet scent of her came back to me through the night. Yet this was no masquerade, no frieze of joyous folk come to life, but a stern and bitter business for more than one of the players.

Je veux en dépit des jaloux
Qu'on fasse duc mon époux,
Lasse de le voir secrétaire
Laire lan laire.

The President was still singing and the chorus of the last line swelled merrily.

When would it come? Where would the blow fall? As we sped along the road with the great white fields of snow on either side I felt an almost overpowering impulse to stop the sledge, to turn it about, to tell these folk of the risk they ran, of the adventure lying in wait for them among the pines.

We had reached the crossroads now and Polycarp, seemingly little the worse for his fantastic journey, had contrived to assume a more seemly posture. Here for one brief moment we halted to get our breath more or less, and then, with a jingle of bells and the crack of the whip, turned down the small track to the right, leaving behind us the high road, with its lights and its traffic and its safety, to take the narrow mountain path, on which, if all went well, the attack would be made. For the first part all was fair and clear enough. The road crossed a small bridge spanning a torrent. To the right of it rose a steep slope of snow, a mile or a mile and a half perhaps in length, dotted with twinkling farms.

"A very good descent," so the President informed me, "in the springtime. For it is a south slope."

To the left was a deep ravine and on the further lip of it ran the high road we had quitted. Beyond, the darkness was lit with a blaze of light coming from the Grand Hotel at Combloux, and beyond that still, in the darkness, lay the château of the Mighty Magistro.

Par l'épée ou par le fourreau
Devenir duc est toujours beau,
Il n'importe la manière.
Laire lan laire.

"Take your boot out of the small of my back, you nasty commoner," said the girl with red hair to Polycarp.

The wood closed in upon us and the road twisted still more to the right. Gone were the great slopes of snow and in their place were dark pines and firs heavily laden, looking like fantastic candelabra whose candles had melted into cones or pyramids of wax through the long debauch of the night. The road was in darkness—so dark that one could see nothing beyond the feeble lights of the sledge.

"Concerning this change of heart, Colonel?"

Gonzago was speaking in my ear, a little flushed with wine and inclined to insolence.

“Wait,” I said.

We swept round a corner. Here there were lights enough and to spare—bobbing lanterns all down the road, a clinking of pick and shovel and the breath of men going up in thin smoke. This was the gang of which Peter had told and I realised that only about three hundred yards separated us now from the Café Robinson.

It took us time to pass them, for we had to slow to a walk and the road was very narrow. We cracked a joke or two in what we fondly hoped was the language of the country, and they responded gravely. One of them raised a bottle to his lips and drank our health.

The strategic point was near. We swerved first right and then left and once again the road was very dark. I peered out into the thick gloom, every nerve drawn tight against surprise. The road dropped and we went a little faster. Then, abruptly, there came into view the side-turning which Peter had mentioned—not more than six or seven feet wide at the most. Somewhere down below Peter and Bob and Davis were waiting. My hand was on Gonzago’s shoulder.

Then suddenly we swept into a small clearing and, before I knew what had happened, we had come to rest in front of a little wayside inn.

We had reached the Café Robinson.

The members of the *Société gastronomique* were getting to their feet and calling for hot rum.

Suddenly Julia, close beside me, gave a cry.

“What is it?” I asked, gripping her arm.

She stopped and, with a laugh that quavered a little, pointed to where on each side of the wood stood four squat figures, muffled in white and gleaming vaguely in the light from the inn.

Then I too laughed, for I saw that they were four snowmen, a little over lifesize, very realistically done, uncouth and sinister, with their flat cheeks, round bellies and arms held close to their sides.

The president saluted them gravely and Celia made them a curtsey, but they maintained an air of frozen dignity.

We entered the inn and the company was soon loud in appreciation and reminiscence.

"But shall we make the welkin dance indeed? Shall we rouse the night owl in a catch that will draw three souls out of one weaver? Shall we do that?" suggested the President.

I listened to them, smiling automatically at the better jests of the company. Gonzago looked at me with a commiseration that was even less tamely to be borne than his rather jaunty manner of a moment ago.

"There is still the return journey," I said.

I meant to be dignified, but sounded only peevish.

"I am very patient, you must admit," he responded.

Whereafter we drank hot rum and danced to an elderly gramophone till close on midnight.

It was a quarter past twelve when we finally sought our luges in the road outside. There was some delay while we unearthed the driver of the sledge who had joined a rum party of his own in the back quarters of the café. The horses, warmly muffled in rugs, looked rather forlorn, with no company but the four men of snow standing solemn and silent a few yards down the road.

"All aboard," sang out the President.

Shouts greeted him as the members of the *Société gastronomique* came thronging from the open door. The driver appeared round the corner of the house cracking his whip. We took up our old positions in the tail. The driver climbed to his seat and the luges started forward with a jerk. One of the horses shied at the snow man on his left, and indeed they were not nice to look at in the glimmering light. It seemed to me that they had been moved a little down the road. But that must have been the rum or my imagination.

Then, all at once, I heard a gasp from Julia, and Gonzago beside me shrieked aloud. I looked round. The four snow men, two on each side of us, were moving. They had come monstrously to life and, even as I looked over my shoulder, eight cold white arms were thrust out and the four men toppled towards Gonzago and Julia who had half risen from their luges.

There came a roar of panic, astonishment—I do not know what—from the company, and then from the back of the sledge in front of me rose a tall, dark figure with rugs falling to right and left of it. In the pale light I saw a pair of gleaming eyes and a magnificent curly beard.

"All square, I think, Colonel," said the Mighty Magistro.

At that instant something soft but heavy struck me on the back of the head and I knew no more.

# XVIII I COME TO THE DARK TOWER

I WAS in a dark forest.

The roof of heaven had descended upon the earth and was crushing all beneath it. I held it off with weak hands till the iron pressure was relaxed and a voice spoke sharply somewhere.

“Smelling salts, please. And give me some of that ice.”

I became aware of a pricking in my nostrils and sharp cold, like the blow of a sword, on the nape of my neck.

I was lying on my back on a settee in a large hall, upon whose walls hung the heads of stags and other beasts of the chase. This, I remembered, was the seat of the Mighty One. To remain in that place would be foolish. I was in the pinchbeck castle in which his pinchbeck majesty was king.

So I tried to sit up, but felt sick and the room began to spin and waver. My teeth came against the edge of a glass.

“Drink,” said a voice.

The brandy was hot and fiery. It cleared the senses and stung the wits. I half rose from the settee and looked about me.

The hall was lit by clusters of electric lights, its sham Gothic windows being covered by thick curtains of black velvet. To the right of me and some distance off was a large heavily carved oak table; beyond it a tall, high-backed chair. Three men were about me—one a manservant in indoor livery and two others who had just put aside their heavy coats on which the snow still glistened.

I got unsteadily to my feet and, as I did so, the door at the farther end of the hall opened. On the threshold stood the Mighty Magistro. He was in full evening dress with a velvet collar to his coat, over which he wore a fantastic dressing-gown of Chinese silk. He looked at me a moment and then turned to the door by which he had entered.

“This way, Mrs. Granby,” he said.

Julia came quickly into the room and almost ran to where I stood swaying and blinking. I felt like one of those resolutely funny men one used to see on the screen hit hard and often on the head with a mallet.

Julia had me by the arm.

"Sit down, Colonel," said the Mighty One kindly. "I have already assured your good lady that you are not seriously hurt, but a slight giddiness is in such cases inevitable. The precise functions of the cerebellum, the region invariably affected by a blow on the back of the neck, are much disputed; but it has been shown conclusively that they include the regulation of muscular movement and the maintenance of equilibrium. The experiments of Fritsch, Ferrier and Sherington . . ."

"Ruggiero, control yourself."

The voice of Webster cut unpleasantly into the smooth periods.

"It's all right, Julia," I said a little weakly.

"Not feeling too funny?"

"Better every minute," I said.

Webster had come forward. Beside him was Gonzago, dishevelled and obviously waiting for an opportunity to express himself freely. Gonzago's first act, which in the circumstances did him credit, was to come at me with his hand outstretched.

"Colonel Granby," he said, "I owe you an apology. I feel in fact, that it is largely due to my presuming to doubt your word that we are put to this temporary inconvenience. Let me assure you here and now, however, that henceforth you will have no cause to complain of me. I intend to have no further dealings with these bandits."

He glared angrily at Ruggiero, who shook back the sleeves of his gown and looked with tolerance upon us all.

"Shall we sit down?" he suggested. "The time for negotiation, as our young friend seems to have realised, has passed. But we have some rather urgent matters to discuss."

So saying, he enthroned himself in the tall-backed chair. Julia had already sat down beside me on the settee. Her hand was gripping my own. Webster drew an oaken stool to the table, while Gonzago remained defiantly erect. The four servants ranged themselves stolidly by the wall.

Meanwhile the Mighty Magistro had drawn from his pocket a document that crackled impressively as he smoothed it out.

"Lest we forget," he said. "This is the contract which Senor Gonzago is shortly to honour with his signature."

He threw it on to the table.

Quick as thought Gonzago darted forward, seized the document, tore it dramatically across and flung the pieces on to the floor.

The hand of the Mighty One went again to his pocket.

"As I anticipated," he said.

Whereupon he produced an exact duplicate of the ruined sheet, laid it before him and continued smoothly.

"The contract is drawn as between Senor Manuel Gonzago y Sanchez and M. Léon Léoval, who is acting on behalf of the International Radium Syndicate. My own interest in the matter is merely that of an intermediary."

Senor Gonzago, blazing with an indignation that was good to look upon, shook a quivering forefinger.

"I will sign no contract in which you have any act or part," he said.

"Sign?" Webster barked. "Of course you will sign."

"The police," continued Gonzago.

The Mighty One held up a restraining hand.

"We will reserve that point for the moment. I do not expect them to arrive just yet and this document is of more importance."

I felt it was time to say something.

"What price publicity now?" I asked. "By this time the little town of Sallanches must be all agog and humming."

Ruggiero smiled.

"A certain amount of local excitement will doubtless be created," he responded. "Your friends from the Chaumière have admittedly a tale to unfold. There was a blonde man, for example, with curly hair. They call him the President. He did not seem to understand at first what was happening, and it became necessary to overcome his rather noisy objections to our proceedings. By the time he has led his party home, however—on foot, for we thought it better to remove the sledge—he will perhaps be taking a calmer view of the situation, though I do not think he is likely to pass things over as quietly as I would wish—a loud man, immoderate and hearty. Then, of course, there are the faithful musketeers. By now they will have grown tired of waiting for their cue on the road to Le Fayet."

“In other words, dear bandit, the hunt is up,” I said.

“True, Colonel. But this fox has been hunted before. He is old and cunning. I have not hitherto courted publicity, but this evening the situation became suddenly rather more difficult. I want you all to understand, in fact, that the contract—if you will return to that matter for a moment—must be signed within the next few hours. I am at present the agent of the Syndicate to which Senor Gonzago is about to surrender his deposits. Unfortunately, however, my exclusive right to negotiate on its behalf is for one week only, and it expires to-morrow. The Syndicate is impatient and has sent down its representative to look into the position.”

“Léoval?” I interjected.

“Léoval refuses to renew his arrangement with me—which means that I must either hand him the contract some time to-morrow or lose my commission. It is a handsome commission, and I intend to be paid. I must apologise for fatiguing you with these details, but it is important for you to realise how extremely urgent the matter has become.”

“Horses,” interjected Webster.

The Mighty One looked calmly at his confederate.

“I beg your pardon,” he said.

“Cut cackle,” Webster explained.

“I am coming to the horses, Webster. I am merely explaining to our friends the reason why we have had to resort to extreme measures. There was no alternative.”

“So here we all are,” said Julia.

He turned to her slowly. The fine, arrogant eyes hitherto smiling, went hard and blank.

“Yes, madam,” he said. “But not, I trust, for long. I am going to release you all as soon as the contract is signed, and I am anxious to do so as soon as possible. I somehow think that your continued presence in my house, though it may add to our pleasure, will not be good for your peace of mind.”

I felt Julia’s hand tighten in mine. She went a little pale.

“This is a Grimm fairy tale,” she said. “But the ogre always makes me laugh.”

Gonzago took a step forward.

“I know you in good time for what you are,” he said. “Wild horses would not induce me to put my name to that contract.”

“Horses again,” said the Mighty One gently.

Meanwhile; I was thinking as hard as my aching head would permit. Surely the police—or at least our friends of the Chaumière, with Peter, Bob and Davis—must before long come to our help. Yet here was Ruggiero, hinting foul threats and flaunting his security. True, we were in his power, but his own case, for all that, seemed just about as bad as it could be. The whole countryside must soon be raised against him.

There was another point.

I hastened to bring it up.

“Senor Gonzago,” I said. “I suppose you realise that it is impossible to claim execution of a contract obtained by illegal means. It seems to me that the document you are being asked to sign would be worthless.”

Gonzago looked at me eagerly.

“You mean that it could be declared invalid.”

“Of course.”

The Mighty One smiled.

“I’m glad you take that view, Colonel. It may simplify matters.”

“May I see the document?”

He took it from the table and handed it to me with a bow.

I looked it over rapidly and found it quite in order. An estate, the property of Senor Manuel Gonzago y Sanchez in the country of Uruguay, was briefly described and declared to be transferred to the full ownership of the *Syndicat Léoval, Fils et Compagnie*.

I looked with interest at the sum named—two million Swiss francs, of which a hundred thousand was to be paid to the account of the vendor on the day of signature. The agreement was dated for the day that would expire within twenty-four hours.

I found the gaze of the Mighty One fixed upon me with his usual smiling indulgence.

“I should, perhaps, mention,” he said, “that a cheque for a hundred thousand Swiss francs has already been forwarded to the Crédit Lyonnais in

Paris. I ventured to take that small risk on my own account. My commission will more than cover the amount, and I am sure the money will be very welcome to Senor Gonzago. I am not at all sure, in fact, that at noon to-morrow that hundred thousand will still be intact."

I looked inquiringly at Gonzago and saw with misgiving that he was flushing, but Gonzago, as you may have noted, flushes easily.

"I don't follow this," he stammered.

"I think you do, Senor Gonzago."

"You know nothing of my affairs."

"You are too generous, Senor Gonzago. Jeanne is convinced that the pearls were real and she is equally sure that you were unable to afford them. You may even remember that she chided you severely for making her so handsome a present. I cannot help thinking that the money which I have had the foresight to put to your account will save you a rather disagreeable communication from your banker."

Gonzago was now scarlet.

"If you are referring to the fact that I recently signed a cheque upon the legitimate expectation . . ."

"I'm glad that you recognise that the expectation"—here Ruggiero waved the contract gently in the air—"was legitimate."

I thought it was time to save Gonzago's blushes.

"I really fail to see the implication of all this," I said. "The fact that Senor Gonzago may have miscalculated his balance at the bank does not increase the validity of the contract."

The Mighty Magistro shrugged his shoulders.

"M. Léoval, to whom I shall hand it over in the morning, is of opinion that Senor Gonzago will be less likely to question the validity of his agreement if it can be shown that he has not only received certain monies on account of it, but actually spent part of them. Perhaps M. Léoval is right. In any case, it will be for him and for the Syndicate to maintain, if necessary, that the contract is genuine."

"They are more likely to be arrested for abduction, murder and conspiracy."

“You have no evidence against the company. They instructed me to obtain a contract; the ways and means were left entirely to me. I alone am responsible and my interest in the matter ceases as soon as I have handed over the agreement and received my commission. I shall then remember that I was once a prince of magicians, and magicians, as we know, have always known how to make themselves invisible.”

“To obtain execution . . .” I persisted.

The Mighty Magistro made an imperious gesture.

“M. Léoval will meet these little difficulties in his own time and way. He is an ingenious person and I have no doubt whatever that he will deal successfully with the situation. He has powerful friends in high places who would always do their utmost to discourage any rumours to his discredit. He has rendered delicate and private service to many public persons in his time, and it will always be their firm belief that he can do no wrong. This particular contract, moreover, is of a peculiar character.”

“Indeed?”

“I mean that execution will not be claimed. The Syndicate is merely concerned to ensure that the deposits shall not be worked. Senor Gonzago may, of course, bring an action to declare the concession invalid, but I think that in the circumstances he will avoid provoking an inquiry.”

There was a slight pause, and then Julia rose from beside me, bright with an indignation that drove out all sense of our predicament.

“Do you imagine,” she exclaimed, “that while one single man or woman knows of this precious stuff, it can go unused?”

The Mighty Magistro openly admired her with his fine arrogant eyes as she stood there, breathing quickly and flushed with her theme.

“M. Léoval must ride any whirlwind he may unexpectedly raise. That is his affair. It is my conviction that he will be more than equal to the occasion and that to challenge this contract, once it is signed, would be foolish. No one in authority will want to believe in the bad faith of M. Léoval and no one will be in a position to prove it. On the other hand, it can be proved immediately that Senor Gonzago sold his deposits and accepted payment for them and even spent part of the purchase money before the ink was dry upon his agreement.”

The Mighty One sighed.

“Too much of this,” said Webster.

“Mr. Webster is right as usual,” he said. “Suppose, then, we now conclude our business. If the contract be as valueless as Colonel Granby seems to think, Senor Gonzago may append his signature with the better conscience.”

“I will see you in hell first,” said Gonzago.

“A quill pen, Senor Gonzago?”

The Mighty One stirred in his chair. His right arm sketched one of his ample gestures and a large green quill appeared as from the air.

I looked at Gonzago. He stood for a moment rigid and then stepped quickly forward to within striking distance of Ruggiero in his tall chair.

“If you imagine,” he exclaimed, “that I will ever be a party to this monstrous plot, you are mistaken. I shall not sign the agreement.”

“And the post-dated cheque?”

“Will be referred to drawer,” I put in promptly. “Drawer will express his regret and I think he can safely promise to put his account in credit within the next few days.”

Ruggiero laid the pen on the table. He sighed gently.

“I was afraid this might happen,” he said.

Abruptly he rose. His eyes rested a moment on Webster, who was gripping the edge of the table, and passed thence to Julia. She shrank back, and, putting my arm about her, I rose from the settee. She leaned, but not heavily, upon me.

Ruggiero flung back his shoulders and confronted Gonzago.

“You have quite made up your mind?” he said.

“Quite.”

“Then I play the queen, Colonel Granby.” I felt a movement beside me. Julia had stepped forward. She turned to us swiftly—first to Gonzago and then to me.

“My dears,” she said, “whatever happens—no matter what they may say to you—you are not to give way.”

The Mighty One admired her, evilly and to her face, and the forehead of Webster gleamed with sweat.

“Colonel Granby . . . Senor Gonzago”—Ruggiero was addressing us both—“I am forced to repeat myself in a game that is growing tedious. The wheel has come full circle and we are back where we stood in Paris three days ago. I play the queen and I think it wins the last trick.”

I heard him as at a great distance declaiming softly:

“Why should the worm intrude the maiden bud?
Or hateful cuckoos hatch in sparrows’ nests?
Or toads infect fair founts with venom mud?”

Shall I ever forget that hateful room—the tall murmuring figure, Webster hunched over the table, Gonzago now as white as death, the impassive brutes by the wall, and Julia facing them all. Ruggiero, in his broad way, was a master of effect. He gave that strange moment just time enough to make its impression; then, very firm and dry, addressed Julia directly:

“Let there be no polite misunderstandings, Mrs. Granby. You see those four men standing by the wall. They are my servants and take from their master, thankfully and without misgiving, anything he may choose to give. I have only to say: Take that woman, she is for your pleasure. They will not question my right to dispose of you.”

He said something in Russian to the men by the wall. None of us knew what it was; but with a horror such as I shall never feel again, I saw their stolid faces suddenly enlivened; four pairs of eyes came to rest on Julia; one of them grinned and said something in his incomprehensible tongue, whether to his master or his companions I could not tell.

I sprang forward to defend her from their looks, to strike wildly about me—I do not know what was in my mind. Julia swayed, and I thought she would fall. This diverted my intention, whatever it was, and I put out my hand to support her. The arm I grasped was rigid. But almost at once that moment of shrinking horror was thrust away. I could feel physically the effort she made. Then she waved me back and stepped almost into the middle of the room, erect and solitary.

“You would do that?” she said.

“I shall give the order. Mr. Webster will see that it is carried out.”

She turned involuntarily to Webster. The man’s face was pale, his eyes drowsy with anticipation.

“You cannot touch *me* with your filth,” she cried. “I may pass into brutal hands, but that will be death, and it is better that I should die than that we should be all defeated.”

“Julia, think!”

She turned to me swiftly.

“It is no time for thinking. I *know* that it is impossible to give way. Have I not always said, dear love, that in all our dealings honour is first and last? And here is not only honour but a service which may be done to thousands of men and women who lie in agony as we stand here to-night. It is we now who hold the trust. Therefore, you cannot yield. I will not be saved in betraying it. I cannot consent to be redeemed at such a cost. That would put a blot upon me and spoil everything between us. That contract shall not be signed. My will shall be bright and firm whatever they may do.”

Silence fell for an instant, for we were under a spell. Gonzago’s face was glowing. My own feelings I cannot describe, but I remember the thought flashing into my brain: “This then is our marriage.”

“A pretty speech and well delivered.”

It was Ruggiero speaking, and she turned on him swiftly.

“The sneer becomes you,” she said.

I never expected to see that strange flamboyant creature out of countenance; but, for a moment, he looked like an actor who at a supreme crisis has missed his cue. His arrogant eyes evaded her; he made a broad gesture which had no meaning; for once in his life I believe he really did feel that he had missed his effect. The pause that followed lasted for only a moment, but I knew that, come what may, it was a moment he would not forget. The prince of magicians was honestly ashamed of himself.

But the Mighty Magistro was a man of quick perception; he saw at once that this would never do. Julia was impressing Gonzago in a way that might mean the ruin of his plans.

Rather finely he rose from the tall chair.

“Madam,” he said, “the sneer was unworthy. You have lifted these proceedings to a higher plane than I anticipated, and let me say that the effect upon me—and I trust that Senor Gonzago feels the same as I do—is to make it very clear that no man in his senses would allow you to make this sacrifice.”

Julia turned to Gonzago.

"You must not see it like that, my friend," she protested. "My honour is equally engaged with yours in this affair. You would destroy us both by yielding to his threats. I beg you. . . ."

"Madam," interrupted Ruggiero, "this extremely painful scene has lasted long enough. I must ask you to withdraw. Let it suffice that you have put yourself—I say it with respect—in the front rank of those classic heroines who have faced this painful dilemma from time to time in the violent courses of history. I am not proposing to take an active part in the tragedy myself. The rôle of Holofernes is not, I think, in my character. I realise, moreover, that playing to your Judith, it would be difficult for anyone to keep his head."

He beckoned to the servants and said something in Russian. He then turned back to Julia and bowed.

"Madam, I would ask you to withdraw. One of my servants will accompany you, and you will be informed of the result of my further conversations with these gentlemen."

I sprang forward, but Julia waved me back.

"No," she said. "Let me go quietly."

And without another look at any of us—I do not think she could trust herself to take it—she followed from the room the man who waited beside her.

Ruggiero stood a moment looking after her. Again I heard his murmuring declamation:

"O! that the gods
Would set me free from this unhallowed place,
Though they did change me to the meanest bird
That flies i' the purer air."

He pulled from his waistcoat pocket a slim silver watch.

"It is past midnight," he continued. "I still have much to do before daybreak. You will now, both of you, accompany my servants to your quarters. Take your time to think over the position. I can give you, as it happens, till the morning. M. Léoval has gone up to the hut below the Mont d'Arbois, and will not be back till well after sunrise. A little quiet reflection will do neither of you any harm. . . ."

“The police,” began Gonzago.

The Mighty One smiled.

“The greater includes the less,” he said gently. “Colonel Granby, who for certain reasons will in a little time from now be hoping that you will sign the contract, will for the same reasons help me to deal with the police if they should arrive untimely.”

Gonzago looked bewildered.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“Colonel Granby understands. He has not forgotten that I hold the queen. He will, if necessary inform the police or whomsoever it may concern that you are staying here as my guests, and he will beg them to withdraw.”

He paused, and added softly:

“Well, gentlemen. I think that is all for the moment.”

# XIX I CALL FOR PEPPER AND SALT

I DISLIKE people—and not least people in books—who dwell upon their sufferings. Either one feels for them or one does not—and that is as true of Hamlet as of Mrs. Gummidge. You, at any rate, will have had enough of my stanzas written in dejection, and will certainly be able to imagine better than I can hope to describe the state of mind in which I passed the slow hours of that awful night. By accident—or was it the refinement of an artist?—I was shut up in the turret room from which Julia had herself escaped a little more than twenty-four hours before. The room had not been thoroughly put to rights and on the bed, still unmade, lay the rope which she had improvised. I sat for a long while motionless regarding it. I could see her moving about the room preparing her "puppet-show." I could hear her telling me the story of her escape in that beleaguered room at the Chaumière. More than once I felt as one of those poor wretches who lose control in the prison cell, beat and drum upon the door, or utter screamingly their misery and rage.

I was thrust into that room at about half past one in the morning, and I left it at between five and six. To keep myself sane and ready I went over the position from time to time, weighing each point of the intricate scheme of that damn'd magician. Zealously I looked for a flaw, for, if only I could find one, it might be possible even now to persuade or bribe him to the delivery of Julia. But the scheme, for all its complication, was good. Once that contract was signed and delivered the game was up. Léoval, ex-minister, a man of the antechamber and the corridor, with personal friends in more than one European Cabinet, was known to half the chanceries of Europe for a smiling and unscrupulous villain; but too many interests were involved in maintaining the legend of his public worth to make it possible to attack him openly unless proof, immediate and overwhelming, could be produced of his misdemeanours. And proof there was none. Once Ruggiero had fulfilled his bargain and disappeared, Léoval would be able to protest, no doubt successfully, blank ignorance of the Mighty One, and to affirm, without hope of effective contradiction, the rectitude of his intentions. I doubted, indeed, whether I should even be allowed to put him on his defence. Such men as he are kept above suspicion.

Would Gonzago sign the contract? Presumably they would not be leaving him in peace. For him, it would be the *peine forte et dure* the livelong night. Could he possibly hold out? I saw him yielded up and beaten.

Then I saw Julia again—as I can see her to this day—facing us all in the room downstairs, begging us not to put that blot upon her story. How could he be deaf to that appeal?

Or would he sign the more inevitably for that high glimpse of her—esteeming her as one to be saved at any cost? My thoughts ran in a circle and every argument had a double edge.

Gonzago, if he signed the contract, would thereafter be helpless. Payment had been thrust upon him; he would even have spent part of the money before he could challenge the deal. That was a clever move. Léoval would send us both to the devil with our stories of menace and blackmail. We were taken verily in the net.

But perhaps my friends would come and the police with *tambour et trompette*. My spirits leaped and fell headlong. For I should then be called down to give them all the lie. I must urge them to withdraw unless. . . . The sweat started from my shrinking flesh—for in that case it would be for me to take that terrible decision—the decision with which Gonzago was all that night confronted. Should I deliver up my enemy? Or should I lie to my friends so that Julia might be spared?

I strode to the window and threw it wide to a sheer drop of forty feet. With a fine genius for detail, the enemy had considerately swept the snow away from the foot of the wall. The land lay wan in the light of the moon. The air was biting cold.

There was no escape that way save with wings, and what, in any event, was the use of escape—if I must leave Julia on the slender chance of getting help and assistance in time to save her.

At seven o'clock someone beat upon the door and, not waiting for my response, flung it open with a great jingling of keys. A man stood on the threshold, bearing a pot of steaming coffee in his hand and a plate of bread.

"Your breakfast," he said, setting it down warily by the side of the bed and keeping a vigilant eye upon me as he did so.

At sight of the man I thought of an old dodge and, as I was not likely to think of anything better, I decided to try it. Perhaps it would not be too old for him.

I looked upon the tray with distaste.

"Your breakfast," repeated the man.

"So I see," I answered. "Is that all you have got to give me?"

“Is it not enough?”

“I am an Englishman,” I said. “In England one eats at breakfast.”

“The English,” he genially observed, “are hogs.”

“Have you,” I coldly inquired, “had orders to starve me?”

The man looked at me doubtfully.

“The bacon and the egg is not eaten here at breakfast,” he replied in English.

“I am sorry to hear it,” I replied. “Does that apply, perhaps, also to the omelette?”

“Is it the omelette that you wish with your breakfast?” said the man.

“It is the omelette,” I answered.

He stood irresolute by the door.

Then his face brightened.

“In your English papers,” he said, “I read sometimes that they give the condemned man what he likes for breakfast before the end.”

“Hannibal,” I replied, “they do.”

“And so, perhaps, the omelette,” he made answer, and roared with laughter at his own joke.

“The English,” he continued, “are heartless, and of course they are mad, and their god is the belly. I will see it is done.”

“Thank you,” I answered, and, as he turned to leave the room, I shouted after him, “and don’t forget the pepper and the salt.”

Whereat he left the room, carefully locking the door behind him.

I again examined my surroundings. It was still dark and the man had switched on the electric light. I wondered whether I should remove the globe, but thought better of it. To find the room in darkness when he returned would put him promptly on his guard. So I left the light and marked down a three-legged wooden chair of Savoyard pattern that might come in handy.

The man returned in about a quarter of an hour, still grinning at the exquisite humour of feeding to his fancy a man with presumably only a few hours to live, and bearing upon a plate the omelette that I had demanded. He found me seated behind a small table of very solid oak. He put the omelette

down on the tray beside the bed and then carried the tray towards me, being careful to keep the table between us.

"There's your omelette," he said, setting it down.

"Thank you," I answered. "Will you pour me out some coffee, please."

"Do they wait upon them, too?" he asked, and again he roared with laughter as he laid hold of the coffee pot and began to pour.

The pepper and salt, I perceived, were in two little glass dishes joined by a slender bridge—the common form of cruet on the continent. I picked this up and began sprinkling a little salt over the omelette, as he poured out the coffee. Then, watching my opportunity, I suddenly flung the entire contents of the cruet up into his face. He staggered back choking. One hand went to the pistol in his right hand pocket, and the other was clapped to his eyes. The pepper had got him well over the nose and mouth.

Quick as thought I snatched up the three legged chair and struck him on the side of the head. He collapsed across the table, knocking over the coffee pot whence a stream of steaming liquid ran into the nape of his neck. He did not move. From which I gathered that he was past feeling for the moment. I dived into his right pocket for the pistol, slipped round the table and passed through the door. From the keyhole dangled a bunch of keys. I locked the door and looked quickly about me. In front was the turret stair, twisting downwards towards a faint glow coming from the landing beneath. I ran below as lightly as my heavy ski boots would permit, and pushed through a pair of heavy curtains screening the corridor. The corridor was dimly lighted with a frosted electric globe. There was a carpet upon the floor and the walls were decorated with trophies of medieval weapons. I passed down the corridor, pistol in one hand, keys in the other. Which door should I try? There were four doors upon the left side and upon the right a series of narrow windows, piercing the outer wall. Doggedly I set my mind to trying each of the doors. Somewhere Julia must lie. I found at last a key to fit the first of them and flung it wide. The room was dark. I heard a faint rustle, and just distinguished a slim form. The blood drummed in my ears. I was dizzy with joy. I ran forward. Vaguely the form stirred in the shadow, and in another moment was in my arms.

"Julia . . . Julia," I cried.

"What the devil is this?" came a voice from the dark.

It was the voice of Gonzago.

I released him abruptly and he staggered back.

"What the devil?" he began again.

"Quiet," I said. "It's Granby here."

I dragged him into the corridor.

"Now," said I, "where is my wife?"

He stood blinking in the dim light.

"Pull yourself together, man," I urged.

"I don't know," he said. "We must try the other doors."

I looked rapidly to right and left, and, as I did so, a sudden thunder broke upon us from above. My late warder had awakened to active life and was beating upon the door. The sound, reverberating doom, echoed through the silent château, and there were still three doors left to be tried.

I seized Gonzago and pushed him along the corridor.

"Listen," I said. "You must hold the stairs, do you understand?"

"All very well," said Gonzago, "but how?"

I pushed the pistol into his hand and walked with him to the end of the corridor. Beside us, near the head of the turret stair was a thick oak chest. We pulled it across the top of the stairs between us.

"Kneel behind that," I said. "And don't be afraid to shoot."

"I shan't be afraid, Colonel," he said sharply, and I saw suddenly by the look in his eyes that he could be trusted.

Meanwhile, in the hall below I could hear footsteps.

There came a shout and someone called for Stephan and another for Boris.

I ran back to the first of the three unopened doors and flung it wide. It gave upon a room full of lumber. I tried the next, but, even as I turned the key in the lock, I heard a slight sound in the corridor behind me and turned my head. A man was advancing towards me.

"Hands up," said William the Silent.

I had got the door open, however, even as he spoke, and I flung it wide at the same time falling flat on the threshold. His pistol spoke as I fell and something struck the woodwork above my head, sending a splinter of wood into my neck. I twisted round on my knees. William the Silent was taking more careful aim. He looked like a figure in a slow motion picture—very

smooth, deliberate and sure. His finger hooked round the trigger pulled at last, and I had time to know that I should be shot infallibly through the head. And then, nothing happened. There came only a light metallic click. It was my starting signal and I sprang for him as he hurled his useless pistol at my head. It cleared my shoulder and struck the door. My right hand, outstretched against the wall, met the handle of one of the trophies and an instant later, rapier in hand, I rushed upon my adversary. He, too, had seized a weapon from the wall—a nasty-looking weapon with a curved blade. He made at me as though it were a pleasure, his eyes shining in the gloom.

So for a moment we stood ere the blades crossed. Anyone looking upon us then would have imagined us to be rehearsing amateur theatricals—*When Knights Were Bold* or some such pleasant mummery. I hoped that William the Silent knew less about the handling of such tools than I did. Fortunately, it proved to be the case. In other words, he knew nothing whatsoever.

He had the advantage of me in his weapon, however, which was short, thick and very strong, whereas mine was long, thin and tapering. With that nasty-looking sword of his, even a butcher might have cut a dash, whereas I must insinuate the point of my more delicate instrument somewhere between his ribs. He came at me in fine style, slashing at my vile body, so that I felt like a piece of ham on the shelf of one of those cutting machines with circular saws one sees on the counter of a grocer's shop. Somehow I must prevent him from coming close enough to carve at me effectively and get him properly at the sword point. He closed with me at once, however. I parried his blows as best I could. Our weapons rang; the sparks flew; and, all the while, above our heads my warder thundered upon the attic door.

Then came a cry from Gonzago behind me. I turned my head for the fraction of a second. That was almost my undoing, for Webster dropped on one knee and struck up viciously at my throat. I parried the cut. The shock of his blade meeting mine jarred my whole arm and suddenly my weapon seemed light. For a moment we stared at it together. He had broken off my rapier short about a foot from the hilt.

"Got you," he said, and leaped forward to finish me.

I stepped back, thrusting out my useless weapon in a last desperate effort to stay him. Then surprisingly, as he lifted his weapon for the blow, from over his shoulder a pillow came swinging round from the open door. It caught him on the side of the head and knocked him against the wall. Instantly I leaped forward, knocking up his arm and thrust what remained of my weapon into his side. He gave a choking cry and collapsed. The pillow

lay on his neck. Above the pillow I saw a naked arm and above the arm was the face of Julia.

We stood a moment gazing at each other, while the prone figure between us stirred and choked.

"Is he . . . is he badly hurt?" asked Julia.

I bent down. The man on the floor was now quite still, a dark patch spreading from his side.

There came next a metallic cough from the end of the corridor. Something hit the roof of the corridor and the plaster came spattering down. There followed another cough—nearer at hand. That must be Gonzago and his shooting was received with cries coming from the hall beneath.

I ran to the end of the corridor, where Gonzago was crouching behind the chest. He dragged me down.

"Take cover, Colonel," he said, "they are shooting."

He peered cautiously round the end of our barricade, then suddenly leaped to his feet. I plucked at him to come down, but he turned on me with shining eyes.

"The police," he said.

He vaulted over the chest and stood upon the stairs. I got up and looked down into the hall below—a fine confusion now of blue-clad forms with flat caps. Then, near the door, I saw Bob, Peter and Davis in the company of a gigantic figure, tied up in a tricolour sash. Gonzago was already among them.

"The assassins," the big one was crying. "Seek them instantly, my children. . . . Emile . . . Jules . . . Bertrand."

I climbed over the chest and began to go down the stairs, where I was met by a gendarme who caught me by the wrist.

"In the name of the law," he began.

"Wrong man, Jules," called Peter from the back of the hall. "Are you all right, Toby? Where is Julia?"

"Here," came a voice at my elbow.

"And where," I said, "is the Mighty One?"

"Gone away," responded Peter.

“What is that?” said Julia, coming downstairs.

“ ’Is nibs ’as gone away, milady.”

It was Davis speaking now—his face shining with sweat and standing out like a full moon a little below us.

“This,” declared the big man in the tricolour, “is much to be regretted. Emile . . . Jules . . . Bertrand . . . we will now search the premises, my children.”

I was beginning to feel it now. This was the end of the story. The evil night was past. This was success . . . victory . . . Julia.

And for a dazzling instant, as I turned to her, all this was shining in her eyes.

And here, too, was Gonzago coming towards me to share our joy of this great relief.

I grasped him warmly by the hand.

“Young fellow, my lad,” I began, but stopped, for I saw, with abrupt misgiving, that his mien was not that of a happy warrior.

“What is it, man?” I asked.

“Colonel,” he said. “It is not yet the end.”

“What do you mean?”

“I signed the contract under pressure at three o’clock this morning.”

# XX I ENTER INTO LYONESSE

A LIGHT draught came through the open door. The faked tapestries on the wall stirred and rippled, so that the painted saints appeared to be jostling each other as though to escape our presence.

Odd how rapidly the mind fits itself to a new scale of sensations. An hour ago I should have felt that with Julia safe, my friends about me, and the Mighty One in flight, the prospect was bright enough. But now I was greedy for complete success and, with small gratitude to spare for past mercies, I was at once spelling disaster for the work to which we had put our hand.

I could not blame Gonzago. To save Julia he had signed away his birthright. Was it for me to say that he had done amiss?

A light sound came from the corridor above—the eerie sound of a man's breath whistling uneasily from an injured lung.

The big *commissaire* jerked his head.

"It is the wounded one?" he suggested.

"*Monsieur le Commissaire*," I said, "the wounded one is second in command. If he can still speak . . ."

"He will speak," said the *commissaire*.

Meanwhile, three or four tousled men, one in a soiled undershirt, were being hustled through the baize door into the hall.

"Keep them safe," said the *commissaire*, and then he turned to me.

"It is from Annecy that I come," he announced. "I have had the order direct from Paris. Did not the Colonel Rhémy himself speak to me over the telephone? Would it not be a misfortune if I should be deprived of effecting the arrest of this Mighty One?"

"It would," I answered.

I turned on Gonzago.

"You signed the contract at three o'clock?"

"Or a little later. It was Webster's doing. He gave me ten minutes. Then he would have called the servants. I . . ."

I put my hand on his shoulder.

"That's all right, my boy. I'm not asking you to explain."

A little man in plain clothes came hurrying through the door.

"There is a man wounded—so they tell me."

The *commissaire* pointed to the stairs.

"Up there," he said.

"It is the police surgeon," he added, turning back to me.

The doctor climbed the stairs, and I followed him. I could not trust myself to speak to Gonzago at that moment.

Here was Julia, safe and happy, beyond the reach now of the Mighty Magistro and his dolorous ways. But the price had been paid. Ruggiero had the contract in his pocket. Even now he might be handing it to Léoval, and thereafter our chances of setting it aside would be small enough.

Webster lay propped against the wall as I had left him. He had pulled from his side the remains of the broken rapier and was holding a handkerchief to the wound. His face was ghastly in the pale light of the morning and his eyes forespent.

"The bleeding, doctor," he whispered as the police surgeon bent over him.

The handkerchief, soaked and crimson, fell from his hand.

The doctor bent down and busied himself with the wound.

"Webster," I said urgently, "come clean, man. Tell us what you know. Where is Ruggiero?"

There flashed a gleam into his fading eyes.

"Gone," he said with a little smile. "Damn you . . . not a word . . . from me."

The last words were spoken in a low whisper. His eyes went thick suddenly and turned upwards in their sockets. His head fell forward.

"Fainted," said the doctor. "The wound, however, is not dangerous. Meat for the guillotine."

I turned away and descended the stairs. Save for a gendarme at both doors, and my friends gathered about the great hearth in which a fire had

been hastily lit, the hall was empty. A torrent of explanation and appeal was pouring into an unseen telephone.

“That is the *commissaire*,” said Peter. “He is calling for reinforcements.”

“Reinforcements?”

“He means to get the Mighty One,” said Peter. “He doesn’t often receive orders direct from Paris and a very tenacious man is the *commissaire*.”

“Webster has thrown a faint,” I said. “It may be hours before they pull him round, and even then we shan’t get anything out of him. Fortunately, however, the next step or two is pretty clearly indicated.”

Thereupon I told them how in our interview with Ruggiero the night before he had told us that Léoval had gone up to the hut below Mont d’Arbois, to greet the dawn on skis. Then, of course, I had to explain to Peter and Bob the whole position as we had come to know it since our last encounter.

“Very rich,” said Peter when I had finished. “The ice is pretty thin, but it looks as though the Mighty One might get safely across the pond even yet.”

I looked at my watch.

“Six o’clock,” I said. “He has had three hours in which to deliver the contract. If Léoval is sleeping at the hut as arranged, the Magistro will probably be awaiting his return at the hotel below—cheque book in hand and a certain green quill we know of tucked away somewhere in the pocket of a false waistcoat.”

“Telephone,” said Peter.

I moved across the hall, meeting Julia halfway. She was coming downstairs. I had scarcely seen her yet since our escape, and, as though by a secret understanding, we almost avoided each other. My heart was too full for me to trust myself to speak or even to look too closely at her in that company.

I caught her hand in passing.

“What mischief is this, darling?”

“I have been tucking up William the Silent,” she said. “He is in a pretty bad way and there don’t seem to be any ministering angels about in this ill-appointed house. What about you, Toby?”

“Just a moment,” I answered, “I must telephone.”

I got through at last to the Hotel Mont d'Arbois. The information we needed took some time to collect, but was reassuring. Léoval had not gone up to the hut the evening before according to plan, but had departed at daybreak. I asked whether anyone had called to see him. The reply came cheerily over the wire. A tall gentleman, described under prompting as a man with a curly beard, had arrived in great haste about two hours ago.

"Where is the gentleman now?" I asked.

"He is waiting to see M. Léoval when he returns. M. Léoval is expected back shortly after luncheon and will be leaving Mégève later in the afternoon. Do you wish to speak to the gentleman?"

"No, thank you," I said hastily, and rang off.

I sped across the floor of the hall.

"It looks as if we shall catch him," I announced. "He is waiting up at the hotel for Léoval who will not be back for another three or four hours at least."

"Then it is a pity we telephoned," said Peter. "They will probably tell him that inquiries have been made."

"But he has no reason to conclude that the call was from us. Anyhow the contract is not delivered."

"And never the twain shall meet," said Bob.

I went to the door and called for the *commissaire*. Outside were a couple of police cars. The sun had just topped the outer rim of the mountain. It was bitterly cold. The sky was keen and clear, promising another perfect day.

I explained the situation to the *commissaire*, who immediately placed the two cars and three of his men with a sergeant at our disposal. In five minutes we were climbing the white road towards Mégève and the Mont d'Arbois. I sat next to Julia, who insisted on coming, and would not be denied. They were all, in fact, except Davis, who remained at the château, determined to be in at the death. Bob and Peter were with us, while Gonzago was in the car that followed.

"The end deferred," I began shortly, "maketh . . ."

". . . glad the heart of man," she concluded, unexpectedly. "I wouldn't miss it for worlds, Toby. Will he still be there, do you think? Or shall we find only a smell of sulphur and a pentacle on the floor?"

Then suddenly she turned grave.

"The luck was with us, Toby, but I am sorry the boy gave way."

"But, my dear," I protested, "how could you expect him to hold out? I can only thank God that the choice was not with me."

"*You* would never have signed it, Toby."

"I wonder."

I fell silent and continued for a while to wonder as I have often wondered since. At that moment, in that clean air, with the eyes of Julia steadfastly bent upon me and her hand in mine, I dared to think that I might have risen to her mood. But I shall never really know how my answer would have fallen. She always insists that I should have held out against them. But I have my doubts on that subject, and have never allowed Gonzago to be blamed.

Meanwhile Bob and Peter, on the way up, recounted their experiences of the night before.

They had waited for hours on the road down to St. Gervais, for, having heard us pass on the outward journey, they had settled down to watch for our return. From where they had lain in hiding it had just been possible to hear the merry noise we made at the Café Robinson. Then had come down upon the wind sounds of another quality, and they had climbed to the road. There they had found the President and his company all in a fine frenzy and preparing to set off on foot towards Mégève.

"They told us in divers tones of what had happened," continued Peter, "and valiantly we tramped it under the stars. I will not describe my feelings."

"Thank you," said Julia.

"It was two o'clock in the morning when we reached the town. I went straight to the *gendarmerie*, and there, to my surprise, found the place all alert and buzzing. Orders had come through at last from Paris."

"But Paris," I objected, "was not informed."

"My doing," said Peter. "Communication was restored at about ten o'clock last night, and I telephoned to the Sûreté while you were all feasting at Isba. Rhémy was not on the spot, but they promised to find him as soon as possible."

"Continue," I urged.

"There were only two ancient Dogberries at Mégève—the buzzing came from them; but I was told that Annecy had been warned and that reinforcements were on the way. The President undertook to stand over the Dogberries while Bob and I and Davis went to ground in Isba—still going strong at two a.m. There we planned an attack on the château, deciding that to wait for the police would be tedious.

"But it was three a.m. by the time we had commandeered the necessary transport, and by that time the police had arrived. Annecy had done us well. There were hordes of them—all very cold and suspicious. That meant more delay—for we had to explain to the *commissaire* all that had happened or might be happening down at Combloux, and I had to assure them repeatedly that everything we said might be used in evidence against us. Finally we set out and arrived in time to see young Horatius holding the stairs and blazing away at the menials below."

Peter broke off and waved his hand at a building on the right.

"Isba," he said. "I'm beginning to know the place; and there, if I'm not mistaken, is an equipage which seems somehow to be vaguely familiar."

We had run once more down the village street, very bare and deserted in the early morning. Drawn up outside the door of Isba stood a fine sledge shining in the morning sunlight, drawn by two splendid roans.

I bade the driver stop the car. Peter and I tumbled out and we thrust our way into the bar. A sleepy waiter was flicking the tables in his shirt sleeves. No one else was visible and the great room was black and rather desolate in the morning, for the fire was out.

Suddenly there shot out of the telephone box on the further side of the bar a little man with a high fur cap containing an aigret. He gave us a startled look and dived promptly beneath the counter. Even more promptly I caught him by the leg and pulled him from behind the cover he had chosen.

His explanations were voluble, but unconvincing.

His master had ordered him to await him there, and there he had stayed for the better part of an hour.

"What were you doing in the telephone box?" I asked.

"I was telephoning to the château," said the man. "But all does not seem to be well down there. I could not speak, as I hoped, with Monsieur Webster."

I turned to Peter.

“I suspect that he has warned his master up at the Mont d’Arbois,” I said.

“All the more reason for pushing on,” responded Peter.

We left Isba, climbed once more into the car and started up the road. At this time in the morning there was no traffic, and we soon reached the hotel. We stopped the cars a hundred yards short of the place, and, under the direction of the sergeant, we approached it from different points. Two of the gendarmes went to the back entrance, while the sergeant, myself and Peter entered the front door. Julia and Bob were left with the cars.

Our precautions, however, were wasted. In the deserted lounge we were met by a smiling day-porter, who, in response to our urgent inquiries, spread wide his hands.

The gentleman who had been awaiting M. Léoval had decided to wait no longer. He had received a message on the telephone and, after seeing the secretary of M. Léoval, had at once decided to leave.

“How did he leave?” I asked.

“*Plaît-il?*”

“Did he go by car or on foot?”

“He went, I must suppose, to seek M. Léoval. He left the hotel on skis.”

At that moment I chanced to look out of the great glass window. On the white expanse of snow, tilted gently to the abrupt horizon fringed with peaks, I perceived a tiny figure far away, moving with the unhurried pertinacity of an ant. I borrowed a pair of glasses from the hall-porter, and focussed them.

Quite clearly, but very lonely and remote, I identified the dark form of the Mighty One. Slowly but with regular, unwearied tread, he was moving steadily up the mountain.

I turned to Julia and handed her the glasses.

“Well, Toby,” she said, laying them down. “We are going to catch him, I suppose. Do we start at once?”

I looked at the sergeant.

“Monsieur,” I said grimly, “the man whom you are ordered to arrest—and the order is from Paris, I understand—is evading us,” and I pointed to the little speck high upon the mountain side.

The sergeant pushed his cap to the back of his head and scratched his forehead thoughtfully.

"What would you do?" he said. "There is no road upon the mountain."

He appealed to the concierge, who was standing beside us.

"That is so, is it not?"

"There is a road in summer," he replied, "but in winter it is five foot deep in snow."

"Then we must wait until he returns," said the sergeant.

"That," I said, "is impossible. It will then be too late. He will meet M. Léoval upon the mountain. They will do business together. It is unlawful business, but, once it is done, it cannot be undone unless, perhaps, you are prepared also to arrest M. Léoval."

The sergeant looked at me in shocked astonishment.

"But Monsieur Léoval," he objected, "is the ex-minister of a friendly State. He is a director of many companies. Did I not invest the fortune of my sacred aunt in his famous Syndicate of Inland Navigation. And did I not lose every penny of my small estate? All the world knows that he is more cunning than the law."

"Enough," I said. "In that case we must pursue the lesser bandit."

"For me," said the sergeant, "that is impossible. I am new to this accursed region of snows, being of the South. I have no acquaintances with such aids to locomotion as appear to be necessary in this affair. For Gaston here it is, perhaps, another matter."

I looked at the gendarme who was standing respectfully beside us.

Gaston was tall and rubicund.

"I am at the disposition of Monsieur," he said. "I ask nothing better."

I turned to the hotel porter and asked him whether we could beg, borrow or buy skis and skins for the party. He led us at once to a small shop or office in the basement of the hotel, where a large assortment of these necessary articles were kept for hire. Here we had a stroke of luck, for the man in charge of the shop was no less than Pierre Chupin, a famous local guide—as I gathered from the friendly porter. The situation was explained to him, not very coherently, by the sergeant, and he consented, for the sum of two hundred francs, to assist us.

It was decided that Bob, much to his disgust, should remain at the hotel to deal with any situation that might unexpectedly arise. Peter, Gaston, Gonzago and I then selected our skis, bound on the skins and in ten minutes were ready to start. I felt a light hand on my shoulder as we left the hotel. Julia was beside me. She, too, was wearing skis.

"Now, look here, my lass," I said with authority, "you are going to order breakfast for one and then . . ."

"Prepare the Benger's Food against your return, Toby? Thank you for your kind thought."

"Julia, I protest. . . ."

"Sweet protestant to be," she replied, "I am coming to see the fun and to help you up when you fall. You know perfectly well that on skis I am much the better man."

"That," I said, "is hardly a fair way of putting it."

"Who expects me to be fair? And is it fair in any case to put me to bed on so heavenly a day? It's no use, Toby. I am coming. I have a weakness for your Mighty One, and I can't just let him pass out of my life in this casual fashion. Look where he goes."

She pointed in the direction of the mountain. Very far away, scarcely to be discerned against the blinding whiteness of the snow upon which the newly-risen sun was beginning to shine, the tiny figure was climbing without pause.

Needless to say, I yielded.

Before leaving the hotel, it occurred to me to have a word with the secretary of M. Léoval, to whom the hotel porter had referred. I accordingly rang him up from the lounge. The man was peevish, but quite ready to answer my questions. Monsieur Léoval had intended to sleep at the hut; but, changing his mind, had decided to start from the hotel in the early morning instead. Monsieur Ruggiero had only missed him by an hour. Monsieur Ruggiero had awakened him (the secretary) at about six o'clock. Monsieur Ruggiero had been hasty and imperious. He had, among other things, insisted upon the urgency of his business with M. Léoval, for which M. Léoval would need his cheque book.

"Did you give it to him?" I asked.

"Monsieur Ruggiero was most insistent. I felt it better to yield to his caprice, though why M. Léoval should wish to sign a cheque upon a

mountain top I do not easily understand."

We left the hotel in single file, following Pierre Chupin, who as guide took charge of the proceedings. Soon we were crossing the practice slopes, very quiet and deserted at this early hour of the morning. Peter was inclined to chafe at the slow pace set by his French namesake, but Chupin turned a wise and grizzled head in his direction.

"It is mountain speed," he said. "If you would climb for half a day, monsieur, you should climb like this. To go faster would prove slower in the end."

Over the shoulder of the hill we plodded—then down into the gorge and across the frozen stream that Julia and I had traversed only the day before, till, again, we set our faces to the steep slope and so to the chalet where we had rested for a moment and met the bearded stranger and wondered if this might indeed be Lyonesse.

But we did not pause that morning, and in an hour and a half we reached the hut on the shoulder where the merry folk of the *Société gastronomique* had lately gathered and where we had hatched the plot that we had hoped would lead to the final defeat of the Mighty One.

We paused at the hut a moment to drink coffee and to talk with the keeper. The news that he gave us was both good and bad. Of the Mighty One he spoke at length. So large a man with so fine a beard was not often seen, or a man, as he assured us, so full of knowledge. He had drunk coffee in the same room as ourselves three-quarters of an hour ago, and, we gathered, had discoursed of the coffee berry, its harvesting, treatment, introduction into Europe and general properties.

"But whither did he go?" asked Gaston.

The proprietor of the hut eyed this person in the uniform of a gendarme with curiosity.

"Over the Mont Joux," he said, "and so to the Mont Joli, I think. He enquired after a fat gentleman with a red nose, whose name I forget, but who was with Jaspar and Guillaume."

Pierre Chupin nodded.

"That is M. Léoval," he said, turning to us. "He hired my friends, Jaspar and Guillaume, last night. They, too, were bound for the Mont Joli."

"How long would it take him to get there?" I asked impatiently.

Pierre, for answer, moved to the window of the hut and set down his cup.

"It is an hour to the summit, but there is no need for us to make it. We can wait below at a spot where the ridge joins the last shoulder of the mountain. No man can climb that shoulder on skis. It is too steep and the snow does not stay upon it. He who would reach the top must take off his skis."

"Will Monsieur Léoval do that?"

Pierre shrugged his shoulders.

"That remains to be seen," he replied.

Over the coffee Peter said suddenly:

"This is a rum show. It is the rummiest show I was ever in."

"It is rum," I agreed.

"We are to believe," said Peter, "that the Mighty One is about to hand this contract to Léoval on the mountain side. Léoval will sign a cheque. But the Mighty One knows it is only a matter of hours for the police to intervene. How on earth does he ever expect to cash his draft?"

"The Mighty One," I pointed out, "does not know we are on his tracks. He is playing his last and only card. If he can get that cheque drawn, say on a local bank in St. Gervais or Chamonix and present it for payment before we can find out where and when it will be presented, he has won the trick. And how pray would it be possible for us to find out in a hurry where the bank might be? Léoval wouldn't be likely to give him away."

Peter chuckled.

"He is a bold, bad man, is the Mighty One," he said. "I should rather like him if he hadn't been so unkind to Julia."

"Don't mind me," said Julia. "Haven't I said that I have a weakness for the man myself?"

Within a quarter of an hour of our arrival at the hut we started forth again.

Here I must describe—so that you may understand what follows—the exact topography of our further course.

The hut, as I think I have said before, is more or less upon the middle of the neck which joins the Mont Joux with the Mont d'Arbois. Fifty yards from the hut is the edge of the neck, which there runs roughly north and

south. The southern slopes lead gently down to Mégève, and the valley, but the northern slope is steep and precipitous—not too steep, however, to be taken on skis if the runner takes it crooked. Beyond the Mont Joli is another neck connecting it to the Mont Joux. Higher than both, in the middle of the second neck is a hut, used to shelter beasts in the summer time.

The Mont Joli itself springs from the junction of two crests, on one of which is the hut I have just mentioned. The other runs straight down to St. Gervais and is called the *Arrête St. Nicholas*. It is a true hog's back; on both sides it is steep and precipitous, but it is about a hundred yards broad. The snow upon it is usually good and you can run fast and well till you get into the clefts and hollows at the further end, where it is well to go carefully. On one side of the crest is the village of St. Nicolas, and on the other the village of Contamines, the last village in France. From there winds up in summer the mule track that has led immemorially to the Lombard plains and Italy.

Our order of going was as follows: first Pierre Chupin, next Gaston, then myself, Julia, Peter and Gonzago. We climbed the long slope to the summit of the Mont Joux. At the top Pierre Chupin paused, and in that curious way of the mountaineer seemed to sniff the air. I saw a shadow cross his face. We were still in brilliant sunshine, but the sky, I noted, was crossed with little plumes of cloud. From where we stood at the top of the mountain, some 7,000 feet above sea level, the view was magnificent. Across the valley uprose in fretful grandeur the sharp peaks of the Chamonix *aiguilles*, contrasting with the placid majesty of the Mont Blanc, from whose great head streamed what looked like a white cloud, but was in reality driven snow.

Pierre Chupin shook his head.

"Mont Blanc is smoking his pipe," he said. "It is a bad sign."

"Where next?" I answered.

Pierre pointed forward and downwards with his ski-stick.

"Follow me," he said, "but not too close to the left. There is a corniche and it is not well to go too near the edge."

"Are we to take off our skis?" asked Julia.

Chupin shook his head.

"It is not worth it," he said. "It is but a short way down and then we must climb again."

"One moment," said Gaston, the gendarme.

He pulled the glasses which we had borrowed from the hotel porter from the case slung across him and looked fixedly towards the hut on the second neck to which I have referred.

"There is the man we seek," he said, handing the glasses to me.

I took the glasses and looked in my turn.

The Mighty One indeed was standing by the hut a mile or so away. He was in profile and I could see distinctly the tilt of his head backwards, and his beard thrust up from the chin. He was looking towards the summit of the Mont Joli, and, sweeping the mountain with the glasses, I soon saw what was holding his attention. Three small figures were at the foot of the last steep rocky slope and they appeared to be removing their skis. Léoval would reach the top of the mountain and it was now obvious what the Mighty One would do. He would wait at the foot of the slope for Léoval to descend.

It was now a straight issue between us—a question of who would reach the Mighty One first, ourselves or Léoval. Léoval had first to climb the shoulder, to stand upon the summit, admire the view, feel what a fine fellow he was, and descend again to the hut. We on the other hand must go down the slope in front of us and then cross to the hut over the long shoulder.

"Forward," I said. "Now it is neck or nothing."

We went down the shoulder, no longer in single file, but each at his own will and pleasure—Peter beside me; Julia, slim and speedy, immediately in front of us. At the foot of the Mont Joux, however, we went again in single file and then began our difficulties. A wind had sprung up—a keen, cold wind blowing from the south-east. The snow was soon rising in little whorls and spirals. A bank of cloud, climbing the sky, was hanging like a sombre curtain across half the horizon. And I saw that Pierre Chupin did not like the look of any of these things.

A quarter of an hour brought us to the hut. It was empty, but there were traces of the party immediately in front, a deep rut in the snow showing that three or four men had passed that way. Of the Mighty One there was no sign.

"He is waiting at the foot of the summit," said Pierre.

We pushed forward but, with every step we took, the weather grew worse. The bright morning was obliterated with cloud and moaning wind, and presently snow began to fall in thin flakes which were scarcely larger than a pin's head, but which chilled us to the bone.

“It is often the way at this time of year,” said Pierre. “The wise ones wait for their pleasure in the mountains till January is well advanced. At the turn of the year one can never be sure.”

It seemed to me at first that the weather must hamper him whom we pursued as much as us who followed after. But I soon perceived my error. For we had not gone four hundred yards from the hut when it became difficult to see our nearest companions. I tried to persuade Julia to go back to the hut, but she bade me not to waste my sweetness on the desert air. For half an hour we struggled forward. At last, out of the murk and the driving snow, we saw rising sharp and jagged a great shoulder of rock lightly powdered with white.

Pierre raised a hand and we clustered about him, turning our backs to the blizzard.

“This is where they would climb to the summit,” he said, “but the wind has covered their tracks.”

“Is there no other way down?” I asked.

Pierre Chupin nodded.

“About fifty metres farther on,” he said, “but I fear that they have already descended.”

In sad silence we pushed forward and then, the fifty metres traversed, we turned the corner and saw suddenly a little group of figures, wraiths in the driving snow. My heart gave a great leap for I could see, dim though the figures were, that one of them wore a beard.

Then, before I could get really moving, a slim figure shot past me towards the group. I cried out in dismay, for it was Julia laughing and waving her sticks.

The Mighty One saw her coming. By his side stood another man, his red face framed in a grey Balaclava helmet. A pen was in his hand, and he was restoring a cheque book to his pocket.

Another figure swept past me as I struggled forward. It was Gonzago and he tied with Julia at the post.

The man in the Balaclava helmet, M. Léoval, ex-minister and man of destiny, looked without enthusiasm on the intruders.

Julia was speaking.

“M. Léoval, I believe.”

“Madame,” he said, “I do not think I have the honour . . .”

“Nevertheless,” said Julia, “allow me to present this gentleman, the Senor Manuel Gonzago y Sanchez.”

M. Léoval bowed.

“To what am I indebted,” he began.

Gonzago faced him gravely. The whole party was by now assembled in a half circle about them.

“M. Léoval,” said Gonzago quietly, “I have arrived in time to prevent your taking a rather unfortunate step. The contract which you are about to receive from your agent, Senor Ruggiero, is worthless. I signed it last night under pressure and, as the deal is fortunately not yet concluded, I must ask that it be returned to me here and now.”

Léoval looked round swiftly upon us, his eye resting a moment on the figure of Gaston in his uniform.

“I know nothing of this,” he said. “If you are able to prove that Senor Ruggiero has in any way exceeded his instructions it goes without saying that I should not consent to be a party to anything in the least improper or unusual.”

I looked aside at the Mighty Magistro. He had not moved since our arrival upon the scene, but stood motionless, his great beard, flecked with snow, blowing in the wind. Over his impassive face there passed a gleam, veiled as quickly as it came, of contempt for the man who thus denied him. Then abruptly he smiled and, as though sweeping us all aside, addressed himself directly to Julia.

“To you, madam,” he said, and with one of his ample gestures he bent forward and passed to her the envelope he was holding in his hand.

“If I must be beaten,” he continued. “I would have it thus. I yield to your courage by night, to the youth that brings you into these high places, to the beauty that in all the fireside stories of men must prevail over the cunning of the Adversary.”

With an eloquent—almost a pitiful gesture—he bowed again and held out his hand, to Julia as though in surrender and she, playing to the mood he had set, bowed gravely back and turning placed the envelope in the hands of M. Léoval. For a moment Ruggiero had almost ceased to be the flashy tall man of his hands and wits whom we had at last brought to ignoble judgment, but seemed as he stood, strong in the midst of the hurricane, a

man born out of his time—an Homeric figure, a Mighty One of the mountains, a veritable magistro.

It was Gaston, the gendarme, who brought us to earth. He moved forward as though to lay hands on his prey.

"I arrest you," he began, but got no further.

From the wrists of the Mighty Magistro hung from thongs the two ski-sticks used by the skier to aid him in climbing hills. They were according to the latest pattern, of hollow aluminium some five feet long and their ends were of wicker so that they should not sink too deeply into the snow. He had, as I have said, stretched out his hands, but instantly, as Gaston spoke, in a great gesture he flung wide his long arms. The ski-sticks swung in the air; one of them struck the gendarme on the chest. Both came to earth as their bearer thrust them into the snow. With a violent movement—which showed the enormous strength of that heavy man—he heaved himself into the air and swung round in a half circle. Then, in a flash, he was gone—shooting, swift and sure, over the edge of the mountain.

"*Mon Dieu*," Chupin exclaimed, "he has killed himself."

At that instant, so strange are the vicissitudes of nature in the mountains, there came a sudden clear gap in the murk. It lasted perhaps thirty seconds, as though the wind had driven a path through the driving snow across which the sun might pour its rays. It laid bare in that brief moment the side of the mountain, the stark side of the *Arrête St. Nicolas*, where it is steepest and at the end of which lies the village of St. Gervais.

Through that bright funnel of light passed the Mighty Magistro, crouching low upon his skis, bending against the wind, his sticks swung out, his body trembling in tune with the quivering slats of wood beneath him.

"Oh, the brave one!" said Chupin involuntarily to himself.

And then the curtain of driven snow fell again and blotted out his passing.

I turned to find Léoval motionless in the murk. The envelope was in his hands. He had opened it and was gazing stupidly inside.

"The cheque," he murmured. "He has taken it. . . . It is on the Crédit Agricole of St. Gervais."

I laughed aloud and clapped him on the shoulder.

"In half an hour from now he will be either in St. Gervais or . . ."

“Rule 57,” said Julia. “Bodies are brought down in the spring.”

# EPILOGUE

"Take it crooked."

It was the third time the President had given us the toast that evening; but I think he had forgotten the other two. And, solemnly for the third time, we lifted our glasses.

Night had fallen, but there were now no minions of the moon prowling about that delectable house. True, there were drifts of snow that whined and rustled past the windows and the proud heads of the mountains were veiled. But inside the Chaumière we were warm with good wine and jocund meats.

I will not dwell on our descent that morning from the mountain, following blindly in the tracks of Pierre Chupin, Guillaume and Jaspar. Luckily we had had with us the three best guides of the region, for the blizzard had been thick and fierce—of a temper rarely met with at that time of year. Léoval, indeed, when we had reached the hut under the Mont d'Arbois, had been unable to go farther, and truly, for a man of his habit, it was surprising that he had come so far. But the rest of us had bound on our skis anew and had struggled on through the storm, collecting Bob at the hotel on our way down and coming safely to port in Isba late in the afternoon.

At Isba, to our surprise, we had been hailed by the President of the *Société gastronomique et des sports d'hiver*. He had been engaged, with Mr. Pilgrim, in some very private and particular conversation with the barman. For Mr. Pilgrim had sought to observe the Rule: Always Christy at Isba, with the result that he had declared himself to be in need of comfort.

"Mr. President," Julia had said. "I thought you were keeping the peace of nations."

And the President, bowing over a brimming glass, had made answer:

"To-day the nations must rage. For behold! the heavens have opened and poured forth their treasures on earth. The way to Geneva is closed. We sleep to-night at Sallanches."

Thus it was that at seven o'clock that evening we were seated once more about the spread table of the Chaumière. By that time the police had done their work. Webster had been conveyed to hospital. Whether he would live

or die was then doubtful. (But live he did and lay in wait for me ever after as for a prey. But that is another story.) The servants of the Mighty One had been apprehended and most of them recognised; for they turned out to be members of a gang which, with their headquarters in the Villette district of Paris, had for a time ruled the underworld of that surprising city. The Mighty Magistro himself, as we afterwards ascertained, had been of their number, but, putting his brains to better account than most, had moved in higher circles. We subsequently gathered that Léoval had employed him on previous errands though there would never, of course, be any proof of that.

"Take it crooked."

Beside the President, was Julia, and beside Julia, by special dispensation, myself. Opposite us was Celia, who, as she kept reminding Peter, was also a doctor, and Bob, on whom she was casting the eyes of approval. Scattered in between were the President's wife in her suit of olive-green, the red girl and the girl with the coils of yellow hair and the lad with the curls and the dark youth from foreign parts and Polycarp, in his red shirt, and Davis with a large bottle of Burgundy all to himself, placed at his disposal by the express orders of the President.

We sang the songs of the *Société* and drank its toasts. We escaped from the wheel of things in foolish chatter and the poorer the jests the more we laughed at them, till *madame*, appearing with the coffee, set it down and waved in her hand a slip of paper.

"A telegram," she said. "It is for Colonel Granby. But we do not know here of such a one."

Silence fell, and suddenly I saw the bright eye of the President fixed upon me in unwinking accusation and then the eyes of the rest of the company bended their looks on me till I felt that I was, for the first time in my life, very near to blushing.

"Well," I said defensively. "What of it?"

"Mr. Ponsonby," said the President. "You have deceived us. We have cherished in our bosoms . . ."

"Shame," said one of the ladies.

"A viper in sheep's clothing," continued the President, "a peacock in wren's feathers. But you may read the message," he concluded indulgently.

I took the slip of paper.

“It came an hour ago,” said *madame*. “But there are so many things to remember.”

I opened it and read:

> “To Colonel Granby. Lately at the Chaumière, Sallanches. From the Mighty Magistro, greetings. I have put money in my purse and I wear the cap of invisibility. Beauty wins, but I do not lose. It is a pleasant end.
>
> So call the field to rest; and let’s away. To part the glories of this happy day. (See *Julius Caesar*, Act V, Scene v, lines 81 and 82).”

A solemn pause ensued. Then the President rose to his feet.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “I am about to give you a toast. Colonel Granby . . .”

There came an audible whisper from Mr. Pilgrim:

“Who is Colonel Granby?” he was inquiring mildly of his fair neighbour.

The eye of the President fell reprehensively upon him.

“Colonel Granby,” he said again, “whom, in the words of the poet, not to know argues oneself unknown, is amongst us. He will tell us the story of his life.”

“The toast, the toast,” cried Polycarp, whose glass was raised in anticipation.

“Colonel Granby,” repeated the President, “coupled with the name of Mrs. Granby.”

“And of the Mighty One,” concluded Julia.

“The Mighty One,” repeated the President.

And there I will leave my friends of the Chaumière, happy in these swift moments snatched from time, while outside the blizzard roars. I will climb the stairs with Julia, cross the little bridge and enter the room in which two nights ago we had been beleaguered. There spread wide is the great bed and the warm stove. Save for the hiss and murmur of the flames, there is quietness and peace.

I turn and spread wide my arms. Julia stands before me, and holds me off a moment.

“When I came back from Lyonesse, With magic in my eyes,” she said softly.

But I knew that now there would be no return from Lyonesse.

# THE END

# TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Take It Crooked* by Francis Beeding]