THEY WOULDN'T BE CHESSMEN

A Hanaud novel

by A.E.W. MASON

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A. E. W. MASON

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THEY WOULDN'T BE CHESSMEN

BY

A. E. W. MASON

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

CHAPTER I
THE GATE CRASHER

A small wizened man stood on the top step of the Prince Town Cinema and watched the raindrops bounce up from the pavement like steel beads. It was an afternoon late in January, and growing dark. The little man wore a suit of threadbare shoddy so much too big for him that it was drapery rather than clothes, and his rusty billycock hat would have hidden the bridge of his nose but for the protuberant flaps of his ears. The rain was tropical, a sheet of glistening filaments with the patter of innumerable small feet, and the cold had the raw creeping chill which eats the hope out of the heart. The little man shivered.

Behind and above him the lights in the Cinema Hall went out, when they should have gone on. Big men, bearded and moustached and clean-shaven, but all of them muscle and bone and trim with the trimness of disciplined officials, slipped on their mackintoshes and tramped off behind the screen of water. Not one of them had a word for the small scarecrow on the top of the steps. But the last of them, a burly giant, stopped to button the collar of his raincoat about his throat. The little man spoke with an insinuating whine.

"Mr. Langridge, sir, I don't know what I'm going to do for to-night."

All the good humour went out of Mr. Langridge's face.

"You, Budden?" he answered grimly. "You do just what you like. You're a gentleman at large. You've the key of the street."

"Without the price of a fag," said Mr. Budden bitterly.

During the last few days the Prince Town Cinema had become a Court of Assize. A savage mutiny had broken out during November of the last year in the great convict prison up the road. The offices had been burned to a shell. An effort had been made to hang the Governor. This afternoon the long trial of the mutineers had come to an end, and of all of them just one had been acquitted—Mike Budden, the pitiable little man in the outsize clothes shivering on the top of the steps.

Nicholas Langridge, the big warder, reluctantly pulled a packet of Woodbines from his pocket.

"Here's one," he said.

"Thank you, Mr. Langridge," declared Budden. "I always said——"

"You're a liar," Langridge interrupted. "Here's a light."

"Thank you, Mr. Langridge."

Mike Budden took off his hat to shield the match from the rain, but he would have done better to have kept it on. Before, he had been little and squalid, a figure of fun for schoolboys and a reproach to men beyond their teens. But with his hat off he became definitely significant, and evil as a toad. He had a broad, flat and furrowed face, the colour of yellowish clay, and his bald head was seamed with red scars and the white lines of a surgeon's stitches. A pair of small, black, quick eyes were sunk deep between reddened eyelids, and he had the strong teeth of a rodent. In olden days he would have been matched against a rat with his hands tied behind his back, and he would have carried the big money.

Nicholas Langridge, however, was now too used to his face to be afflicted by it any more. He looked down at Mike Budden's clothes and laughed.

"They rigged you up proper at Exeter," he said.

Budden's sentence had expired when he was on remand for his share in the mutiny, and he had spent the intervening weeks in the prison at Exeter.

"Yus, they was cruel to me, Mr. Langridge," he whined. "Fairly sniggered at me in these old slops. Not English, you know, Mr. Langridge, no, not English. Now you, Mr. Langridge . . ."

"I'm a foreigner too," said Langridge drily. "Why, you old rascal, you ought to go down on your knees in a puddle and thank 'em all at Exeter for their kindness. You had your head shaved, too, I see, so as you could pretend all those old scars were Christmas presents from us. What with the cheek of that lie and your age and your concertina trousers, you made the jury laugh so that they hadn't got enough breath left to convict you. Fairly put it over them, didn't you?"

Mike Budden grinned for a moment and then thrust out his under-lip.

"I overdone it, Mr. Langridge, sir. That's the truth."

"Overdone it?" the warder cried sharply. "What do you mean by that?"

Mike Budden turned a blank face and a pair of expressionless eyes upon the warder. For half a minute he stood silent. Then he answered in an even,

white voice which matched the vacancy of his face:

"What I mean, Mr. Langridge—look at that there rain. Torrentuous, I call it. It's all very well for you, but I ain't used to it, am I?"

And Mike was right. Nearer to seventy years of age than sixty, he had spent nearer to forty of them than thirty in the dry retirement of his country's prisons. Langridge the warder might tramp backwards and forwards between his cottage and the gaol in weather torrentuous or otherwise. Mike Budden kept his feet dry.

"Well, I can't help you," said Langridge abruptly, and shouldering the curtain of rain aside, he swung off down the steps. The lights in the Hall windows were by now extinguished, the hammering had ceased, the makeshift Court of Assize was dismantled, and finally the one big lamp above the entrance and the steps went out with a startling suddenness. There was now darkness, the unchanging roar of the rain, and one little old shivering scarecrow on the top of a steep flight of steps.

Mike Budden made a small whimpering noise. Within his limits he was a very good actor. He had just twopence in his pocket. He could not make a dash for the inn. No house, however mean, in this small town of the Moor, would offer him a shelter for the night. Very well, then, there was nothing for it but the old home. Mike ran down the steps and sidled along the walls of the cottages up the road. Here and there a lighted window and the leaping glow of a fire spoke of comfort and warmth. Mike's boots let in the water. Mike's clothes became a pudding; the cottages came abruptly to an end. There were big trees now along the left-hand side of the open road, ghostly, whispering, unpleasant things. Budden took to the middle of the road. Beyond a bend on the left-hand side once more lights shone from windows. The Doctor's house. A little farther along, more lights. The Governor's house, and on the far side of the Governor's house towards the stone arch, the iron gates of the old homestead.

Budden rang the great bell and sent the rooks in the high trees opposite scurrying about the sky. A warder came forward and flashed a light upon the bedraggled Peri at the Gates.

"Here, what do you want?" he cried in an outraged voice. "Buzz off!"

As he turned away, Mike clung to the bars and screamed:

"You can't treat me like that, mister. I'm Mike Budden, I am. Number 8-0-3. You remember me. You can't leave me out here all night."

The warder turned again swiftly, and lifted and lowered his lamp until he had taken in every detail of the sopping horror in front of him.

"Mike Budden!" he said at length, with a soft note of satisfaction in his voice. It could be felt that behind the lamp the warder's face was smiling. Undoubtedly Mike was not popular on Dartmoor. "Mike Budden! So it is. But your room's engaged, Mike. You ought to have sent us a wire. Why not try the Ritz? Buzz off!"

Mike couldn't buzz, but his teeth could chatter; and they chattered now like a man with the ague. He was an excellent actor, considering his inexperience.

"I'll die here, mister. I will," he whined. "Right in front of the prison. I'll be found here in the morning—dead. Think of it, mister!" The warder seemed to be thinking of it with equanimity. "It'll be in all the paipers. 'Inumanities at Dartmoor.' Questions too in Parlemink!" And thus Mike Budden hit the right nail truly and well.

If there is one thing which a Government official loathes and dreads more than another, it's a Question in Parlemink. He may be a great man with an Office to himself on St. James's Park, or he may be the porter of a convict prison. Social status makes no difference. To one and all a Question in Parlemink is the world's great abomination. The Porter at the Gate took another look at Mike Budden. He certainly might die in the night if he was left out till morning. An end desirable anywhere else than at the front door of Dartmoor Prison. For Mike was a really bad old lag. Ill-conditioned and sly, with an exact knowledge of his rights and liabilities, he gave just as much trouble as within the regulations he possibly could; and that was a great deal. He was the sea-lawyer of lags. But he must not be allowed to criticise the Institution by finding a watery grave in front of its doors.

"I'll go and see the Chief Warder. You wait here!" said the porter.

Mr. Budden raised his flat face towards the pouring heavens.

"God bless you, mister," he said in fervent tones.

Unfortunately the words carried. The porter could stand much, but his stomach turned at the invocation. He came grimly back to the rails.

"You can take back that patter, Mike! If you don't know me, I know you," he said slowly and unemotionally. "You darned old gorilla-faced hypocrite! If I can't get the blessing of God without your agency, I'm better off in all my sins."

"I'm perishing, mister," said Mike.

"Take it back, Mike. I'm getting wet," said the porter remorselessly.

Mr. Budden realised that the time and the weather were unsuitable for a theological discussion. He capitulated hurriedly.

"I'm not fit to call down a blessing on any man. I knows that, mister. It was a manner of speaking . . ." he whined, and the porter cut him short.

"You make me sick," he said simply, and he went across the outer square, leaving the Governor's house upon his right, to the lodge at the inner gates. The door of the lodge stood open upon a lighted room with a fine coal fire blazing cheerfully upon the hearth. At a desk in that room sat the Chief Warder, and he looked up with surprise.

"Hallo, Williams!"

Williams jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"We've got one of them gate crashers out there," he said.

"Know him?" asked the Chief Warder.

Williams's face registered gloom.

"Mike Budden."

"Well! Of all the infernal cheek! What does he want?"

"A night's lodging, sir."

Words failed the Chief Warder. There was no doubt that Mike was unpopular. Nobody liked him, not even his fellow-convicts. He would never get into P.O.P., however long he served.

"Tell him to buzz off," said the Chief Warder.

"I used them very words, sir," said Williams.

"And there wasn't a buzz, eh?"

Williams shook his head.

"I think he'll die if we leave him out there."

"He might, just to make things uncomfortable for us," the Chief Warder agreed.

He tilted his cap on one side and scratched his head. That would not do. There was the credit of the establishment to be considered, the good name of the school.

"The Doctor's in the surgery. I'll go along and see him."

The Chief Warder tightened his belt and went off upon his errand. And that night Mike Budden slept in the prison infirmary.

The rain had cleared off by the morning and the sky was blue. The prison provided Mike Budden with a less unseemly suit of clothes and a breakfast; which he took by himself in the little mess-room which would be used later in the day by the good-conduct prisoners with the stripes down their trousers, for smoking and conversation. There Dr. Holt found him. Mike tried an ingratiating smile on the Doctor, but it had no success. Dr. Holt stroked his brown beard, eyed him coldly, and asked:

"Where are you going to from here, Budden?"

"Tavistock, sir. I've got friends there who'll be glad to see me," said Budden.

"They must be an odd lot," the Doctor remarked offensively. "How do you mean to go? You've only got tuppence."

"I'll walk a bit, sir, and then like as not I'll get a lift."

Dr. Holt counted out six half-crowns from his pocket.

"Here are two from the Governor, two from the Chaplain, and two from myself, and we can ill afford them. We don't give them to you because you're old, or because a harsh first sentence poisoned your early youth, or because we like you. We don't like you, Budden, we never have liked you, and we never shall like you. We know you to be a treacherous, cunning little malingering liar, and we make you this present in the hope that the next time you're jugged it'll be in Scotland and you'll be sent to Peterhead. We don't want you on Dartmoor any more."

Mike Budden grabbed up the six half-crowns and touched his forehead.

"You won't see me any more, Doctor," he said humbly. "I've made my mistakes, I know. But I've had my lesson and I'm going straight from now on."

The Doctor grunted.

"Just as straight as a jack-snipe flies," he said unpleasantly.

But field sports and the ways of wild birds had played no substantial part in the education of Mike Budden; though they had in another member of the Dartmoor fellowship with whom this history is connected.

"You will catch the omnibus to Tavistock which passes our gates at eight o'clock this morning," the Doctor continued.

"I will, sir," said Mike.

"You certainly will," said the Doctor; and carefully shepherded by a warder, so that not by any chance could he exchange a word with a prisoner, Mike Budden certainly did.

II

But Dr. Holt had not seen the last of Mike Budden that day. He drove to Plymouth in his small car during the afternoon to meet a young cousin, Oliver Ransom, who was returning from India. Ransom, an officer of promise in the Bengal Police, had been dangerously wounded in a riot at Chandernagore, and at the age of twenty-eight had been invalided out of his service. Holt saw a tall young man with fair hair and a face still thin from a long illness, in the Customs House, under the letter R, and went up to him.

"Oliver Ransom?"

"Yes."

"You'll stay with me for a little while, won't you?"

"Thank you! I shall be glad. I'm at a loose end for the moment."

The two men shook hands. Ransom's heavy luggage was going forward by sea to London. There were only the cabin trunks to be passed and strapped on to the car. On the way up from the quay Dr. Holt stopped the car at the North Road Station.

"You sit here," he said to Ransom. "I shan't be a moment."

The advice was undoubtedly sound from the Doctor's professional view, but it none the less was the most terrible catastrophe for Oliver Ransom. For he followed the advice and continued to sit in the car whilst Holt went on to the departure platform.

The prison Doctor, though of a bluff and stolid appearance, was very secretly and rather ashamedly a romantic. A solitary person, with his lot cast in a disheartening place, he would people his quarters on gloomy evenings with gay and charming visions of fine adventure. He climbed Everests, he sailed single-handed through tropical archipelagos, he flew high over infinite deserts, he dined with exquisite women in the restaurants of Monte Carlo. But since he had actually seen nothing of any one of these Elysia, he had to get the picture papers to help him out. He made straight for the bookstall and

bought a bundle of them; and whilst he was waiting for them to be tied up in a roll, he saw out of the tail of his eye Mike Budden slip furtively out of the refreshment-room, in a good suit of clothes, with a suit-case in his hand and a cigar, a big fat cigar, stuck in the corner of his mouth. The London train had just drawn up in the station. Mike nipped into an empty third-class compartment, settled himself in a corner, and lit his cigar. Holt, with his picture papers under his arm, strolled across to the compartment, very much to Mike's annoyance. Dr. Holt had really no wish to bait the little man. He was only anxious to assure himself that he was going as far away as the remainder of his fifteen shillings, plus the contributions of the odd friends at Tavistock, would carry him. But his manner of address was unfortunate.

"Quite the little gentleman, Mike, I see."

And anything less gentlemanly than Mike's reception of his remark even Dartmoor could hardly have supplied. Budden for a second lost his poise. The one expressive short word which he used was the least offensive part of his behaviour. His head darted forwards as if he was about to strike with it, the tip of his tongue shot out beyond his lips and curled upwards and about them, as though it had an independent life of its own, a prolonged low hiss escaped between his bared, strong teeth. He was in a second no longer the old humble, whining lag, but a small brute, malignant as an adder and as dangerous. The change was so startling, the look of the little man so beyond Nature and horrible, that the Doctor stepped back with an unpleasant queasiness in the pit of his stomach. Men couldn't be like that, he felt, couldn't so spread about them an aura of abomination. Mike Budden became important through the very excess of his ferocity. But the revelation was gone the next moment, the face wiped clean of cruelty, the shoulders cringing.

"You can't grudge me a smoke, Doctor," he whined reproachfully. "All these weeks in Exeter Gaol, an innocent man, sir, proved innocent by word of jury, and not one pull at a fag. Disgraceful, I call it. What I says is, what's Parlemink doing? Here, Doctor," and as the bright idea occurred to Mike he gazed upon Holt with admiration, "you're wasting your time, dosin' a measly lot of convicts at Dartmoor. You're the man to go into Parlemink and see that innocent old boys like me aren't grudged a tuppeny smoke."

"Before I called that a tuppeny smoke, Budden, I should take the nice gold band off its middle," said Holt drily; and an inspector with his clip came up to the door.

"Tickets, please!"

Mr. Budden fumbled in his pocket.

"Good-bye, Doctor," he said, "and thank you very much"; and the Doctor didn't move.

"Tickets, please," the Inspector repeated, and very reluctantly Budden produced his ticket.

"London," said the Inspector, as he clipped it and passed on.

"Ah! London's a good way, Mike," said Dr. Holt. "Got anything to read?"

"I've got me thoughts," said Mike Budden darkly, and the train slid quietly out of the station.

III

Holt's satisfaction that Mike Budden was travelling a very long way did not last. He found himself suddenly very hot under the collar. The price of a third-class ticket to London was twenty-eight shillings and twopence. He knew it, and so did the Chaplain, and so did the Governor; for that was the only class which they could afford. And he had squeezed five shillings out of each of them with the idea of setting on his feet a dangerous little viper who could buy himself a suit-case, and a ticket to London, to say nothing of a Havana cigar. Dr. Holt was justifiably angry, but he was uneasy too; and as he drove Ransom up on to the Moor he became more uneasy than angry. So uneasy, indeed, that as he opened his house door he said to Ransom:

"Will you tell the servant to carry your traps up to your room? You might take in that bundle of papers, too. I think I ought to say a word or two to the Governor."

He ran across to the house at the corner of the outer courtyard and found the Governor, in knickerbockers, taking his tea with his family. He was offered a cup, and excused himself on the grounds of his guest.

"But I did want to see you, Major, if I could, for a minute."

Major Burrows, the Governor, rose at once. He was a broad-shouldered, practical soldier, without theories or illusions, but he was just and prompt, and under him quiet now reigned over the prison. He took Dr. Holt into his study, looking out upon the road.

"I've got to apologise to you and to the Chaplain, sir," said Holt. "That little rascal Budden fairly put it over me last night, just as he put it over that pie-faced jury. He had money to burn waiting for him at Tavistock."

Major Burrows silently offered Holt a box of cigarettes.

"I'm a little uneasy myself," he confessed. "He had only tuppence in his pocket and a slop suit last night, and now he's off to London, you say, all dressed up, with a Havana cigar. I don't like it."

The Doctor nodded his head. He had an unpleasantly vivid recollection of that venomous old face striking at him from the window of the railway carriage.

"I ought to have left the little rascal out in the rain," he said remorsefully. But Major Burrows pushed the apology away with a sweep of the hand.

"You couldn't have done it, Holt. No one could have done anything but what you did. But I'm a bit worried, all the same. Langridge was chaffing him after the trial was over on his get-up and his defence. And what do you think he said? 'I overdone it, Mr. Langridge, and that's the truth.' It struck Langridge as a queer sort of remark, and he reported it to me. . . . And I, too, think it queer. I think Budden expected a light sentence. He couldn't have got a heavy one, for he didn't do much more than encourage the others. But he might have got a light one, and I shouldn't wonder if he was prepared to take a light one."

"You mean that he wanted to get back into the prison?"

"I shouldn't wonder," said the Governor. "My belief is that he had got something rather special to say to one of the convicts who's coming out pretty soon."

Dr. Holt sat down in a chair.

"Oh, I see! Yes, he did get in, and he was in funds this afternoon."

The Governor leaned his elbows on his writing-table.

"Let's see now! Budden spoke to Langridge, to the porter at the gate, to the Chief Warder, to you, and to the hospital orderly. Where did he sleep?"

"In A Ward, the big one. None of the hospital cells were available. I put him next to the door."

"Who was on the other side of him?" asked Burrows.

"Garrow, the forger. He has got six years of his sentence still to run."

"Well, he's not the man, then, but he'd pass on a message, of course."

"I gave orders that Budden shouldn't be allowed to talk," said Holt rather miserably, "and the orderly tells me that he didn't."

The Governor grunted and shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes, but—any old lag can put it over us at that game. You wouldn't hear a whisper, but he'd have said his piece all the same."

Major Burrows thumped gently on his blotting-pad with his ruler.

"I got on to Exeter," he continued, "after Langridge had reported, to find out who visited Mike Budden whilst he was on remand there. Only his brother, and his brother only once. But once was enough, no doubt. We might try and find out, perhaps, if they could discover in Tavistock whom Budden went to see."

Major Burrows rang up the Police Headquarters at Tavistock on the telephone and asked for a report. But Tavistock had no message of consolation. A police constable had seen someone fitting the description of Mike Budden descend from the motor omnibus in the Market Square. But Mike had disappeared thereafter. Discreet enquiries were made in London of the brother who had visited Mike in Exeter Gaol. He was a cobbler on Hornsey Rise, and had never himself been in the hands of the Police at all. He frankly and entirely disapproved of his brother, and lamented his wasted life. Why, then, had he travelled such a long way to Exeter to see him?

"'Umanity," said Arthur Budden, the cobbler. "'Umanity, sir, makes even brothers kin."

"'Umanity," was clearly the king word of the Budden family. Major Burrows, in a phrase, had reached two dead ends; and gradually the exacting duties of his post washed the whole affair out of his mind.

IV

Dr. Holt crossed the road again to his house at the edge of the wood, to find that Oliver Ransom had driven the car into the garage and was now changing his clothes for dinner. Holt knocked upon his door, and having been told to come in, looked round the room.

"There's no woman to superintend this house, Oliver, so if you miss anything you must shout for it. Meanwhile, I'd like to have a look at that wound of yours."

It was a clean enough shot, but it had grazed the left lung and drilled a hole through the shoulder.

"Lucky for you it wasn't an explosive bullet. You'll be all right in a month or two," Dr. Holt decided. "But once your lung has been touched up, even when it's healed, I should think you are better out of that climate. You must tell me after dinner what you think of doing."

After dinner the two men sat one on each side of a blazing fire in the Doctor's comfortable book-lined library, and over their cigars, Dr. Holt's one great luxury, Oliver Ransom spoke quietly of his plans.

"I shall read for the Bar. Of course I am old for it. Twenty-eight. But others have passed as late, I think, and succeeded."

The Doctor looked at his cousin, and was doubtful about that plan. Others at his age—yes. But Oliver Ransom—that was another matter. Push would be wanted, not reserve. More of the buffalo, a delicacy less fastidious than this young man with the face of a scholar looked like possessing. He would have to trample. Could he?

"And meanwhile?" Holt asked. "You can wait till you are called?"

Oliver shook his head.

"Not altogether. I have a gratuity and a pittance. But I thought that I might get perhaps some private enquiry work to help me through."

For a moment Dr. Holt was astonished. Then he realised that his astonishment was due to the grace of Ransom's appearance. But a slim figure and a thoughtful face were not trustworthy standards. These were to be found behind the big gates across the road. One instance in particular rose very vividly at that moment before the Doctor's eyes—George Brymer, serving now his second sentence for blackmail.

"An enquiry agent! I hadn't thought of that!"

Oliver Ransom laughed.

"I don't mean, of course, to follow adulterous couples on a bicycle, but there are other cases, aren't there? I managed, you know, to bring off one or two jobs that weren't perhaps so very easy whilst I was in India."

Dr. Holt felt inclined to stamp with annoyance. "One or two jobs that weren't so very easy." That wouldn't do. That wasn't the modern way. You must cry your wares now and be sure to buy a megaphone to do it with. A job or two not so easy! Who would pay any attention to that? Why, it was a disclaimer, or next door to it. Something quite different was needed. "I solved the appalling mystery of Chandernagore, and don't you forget it!" Or: "They worked at it for a year before I was called in. Then, old man, the

murderer was inside next day." Diffidence and modesty had no share values and the sooner Oliver Ransom learned it the better.

"We'll talk it over again," said the Doctor.

"Right," said Oliver Ransom, and he opened one of the picture papers on his knees.

But Holt had a worrying mind. Of course if Oliver found an incentive, a big special whale of an incentive! If he fell head over heels irrecoverably in love, for instance! The grand passion they write about! That might turn him into the buccaneer he had somehow got to be. If he had a touch of George Brymer, for instance, the look of him, the easy way and cheek of him, the odd attraction he, a cold devil himself, had for women and animals and even birds.

"I'll tell you about Brymer," Dr. Holt said. "He's hopeless, no doubt. He'll come back here again and again. There's nothing really to like in him. He wouldn't, I believe, hesitate before the most heartless murder you can imagine. Yet there are women, who ought to know better, always wanting to see him, and he has only got to go out on to one of the fields of our farm here and stretch out his arms, and every bird in the neighbourhood will fly down and settle on his shoulders and hands and strut about all over him as if he was St. Francis of Assisi. A touch of the buccaneer! Not enough to plant you down in Dartmoor, but just a touch of it, what? Not you nor I could get a single bird to come and say how do you do to us! Yet Brymer—odd, eh? And girls, too! Brymer."

It was the only time Dr. Holt ever mentioned Brymer to his cousin, and he certainly never showed that convict to him. But a touch of Brymer, eh? The bird side, the woman side. It probably went with brutality, however. Dr. Holt ran over the names of the damsels in the neighbourhood who might be suitable, and bring suitable patrimonies to Oliver Ransom, but he could not select one. However, there was time.

"You'll stay for a week or so, won't you?" said Holt.

"Thank you," Oliver Ransom answered, a little absently. He had been gazing at the same page in the *Tatler* all through the Doctor's reflections. Now he handed the paper across to his companion.

"Rather lovely, eh?" he said with a smile.

Dr. Holt looked at a photograph of a moonlit water between tropical islands. A slim, tall and beautiful girl was aquaplaning behind a motor launch, her face radiant with pleasure, her hair streaming back from her face

in the wind of her going. She was wearing a white satin evening dancing-frock, which just fell to her feet, and the water frothed and glistened about her white satin shoes, and tumbled away in the wake like snow. Underneath the photo group ran the legend:

> Lydia Flight, the young mezzo-soprano of the Metropolitan Opera House, aquaplaning at Nassau after a ball at the Porcupine Club.

Dr. Holt laughed aloud. Here was the very text which he wanted.

"Yes, she's lovely, and a lesson to you, Oliver. No hiding her light under a bushel, eh? That's real publicity. Worth a thousand interviews. I give her top marks. That girl must have brains as well as looks."

The photograph showed her brimful of youth. She balanced herself upon her board, her lithe body leaning back, and her lovely face turned upwards to the moonlit skies, as though she meant to take all the warm-scented breath of that night into her lungs. She was not wearing the customary mirthless, suitable smile with which the ladies of screen or stage consciously face a camera. She had been caught in such an abandonment of pleasure that some of her delight must pass on even to those who only shared it through the medium of a photograph.

"Yes," said Dr. Holt the romantic, "we owe her something for existing."

He was contrasting her with his loathsome little gate crasher of this morning, Mike Budden. She was tall as Rosalind, supple and sweet as Nausicaa upon her beach of the Aegean. Oliver Ransom had the same thought, but he expressed it with a greater moderation.

Neither of them looked for news of her in the letterpress. Neither of them, in consequence, understood why, with the opera season hardly yet at its height, she had turned her back on New York.

CHAPTER II
BRASS RAGS

Spring came early to Europe that year, and to Paris a little earlier than to most cities. On an evening of March a window in an apartment of the Avenue Matignon stood wide open on the gardens of the Champs-Élysées. A fire burned upon the hearth, more for the intimate look and comfort of it than from any need of its heat. The air was warm outside with a scent of flowers, and the rumble of traffic in the Champs-Élysées and the distant streets had here a pleasant rhythm. But the two young people in this dainty drawing-room with the pale grey panels were insensible to the balm of the night and the murmur of the roads. They sat on high chairs at a round table under the crystal chandelier and with frowning and concentrated faces they put together a jig-saw puzzle of the Battle of Waterloo. It was close upon midnight, and the work was almost done. A few tortured pieces of coloured wood alone refused malignantly to be fitted into their places.

Of the two seated at the table, one was a young Indian of twenty-one years, small and slender and smartly buttoned up in a double-breasted dinner jacket. His colour was a pale brown; he had sleek black hair, and melting eyes; he was very good-looking, and he had the easy carriage of a youth trained in the gymnasium and on the polo ground. He was the eldest son and the heir of the Maharajah of Chitipur, in Northern India, and was on his first visit to Europe.

His companion was a girl older by some six years than he, and pretty with the smoothness of youth. Her hair had the fashionable tint of platinum, she had a wide mouth, a pair of big blue eyes, almost too innocent to be true, cheeks, chubby now but definitely fat in ten years' time, and a stubborn little chin against which all the intelligence in the world would break in vain.

"This is the loveliest evening we have ever had, Elsie," the boy whispered, slipping his arm round her shoulders.

"Yes, darling," she answered inattentively, as she picked up a squiggly fragment of the puzzle from the table and tried to insert it where it wouldn't go. "Damn!" she said. "Do you know, Natty, I think I'd like a brandy and soda."

Nahendra Nao were his names. He rose, and crossing behind her to a small table in the corner, mixed her drink. From where he stood he could see her head bent forward over the table, the platinum tendrils on the nape of her neck, the shoulders snow-white and satin-smooth.

"It's marvellous, Elsie," he cried. "I never get used to it. There you are, with all Paris running after you—Paris, just think of it!" And for a moment he raised his eyes from the girl to look out through the window and the balmy night on the lights of the City of Enchantment. The murmur of the streets was music to this youth from a sleeping palace, where most of every day was Sunday afternoon. He held his breath to listen. Beyond the gardens and the houses the loom of the lamps in the Place de la Concorde made daylight of the upper air. Paris! "Six weeks ago I had never seen it," the boy continued. "I had never lived, and then I cut right through all your beaux and adorers, and carried you off, didn't I?"

"Yes, darling," said Elsie, and she took up another sliver of the puzzle. "I wonder whether this'll go?"

"Young Lochinvar, eh?" the boy asked, with a rather shrill, high laugh.

It was true enough that Elsie Marsh of the Casino de Paris had a large wake of followers. She was pretty, but not outstandingly pretty. She had lovely movements when she danced, and long slim legs free from the hips, but others could match her. She sang, but with a poor little scrannel voice which stopped at the fourth row of the stalls. But these things, qualities and faults, did not matter. She made an appeal to the passions which was indefinable but manifest. She came across the footlights instantly, kindling the blood and waking desire. She had something which other women had not. It was not charm—that is too cold and polite a word. It was a vital, stinging appeal to the animal in men, and it carried somehow an assurance that the response would be fierce too.

"But I think this evening is perfect, don't you, Elsie?" he went on.

The Casino de Paris had been shut for a week whilst a new revue was being staged. For Elsie Marsh and Nahendra Nao it had been a hectic week of expeditions into the country, large meals at crowded tables, and noisy parties ending with the dawn. On this one night at the end of the week they had dined together alone, in the charming apartment he had taken for her—a domesticated couple engrossed in the simple pleasure of a jig-saw puzzle.

"Perfect, dear," said Elsie. "What about my drink?"

The Prince carried it to her, and sitting down, drew her close to him.

"To-night has made such a difference, hasn't it?" he said in a low and pleading voice. "We've been happy, haven't we? Just you and I together. Don't you think"—and his voice now took on a still more urgent note, and Elsie's face looked up warily from the puzzle towards the window—"don't you think that somehow it could all keep going on for good?"

"No!" Elsie spoke just a little sharply.

"I believe it could. I mean—now that I know—to come back often." There was a hardly noticeable intake of his breath as he had a glimpse of his father the Maharajah preparing to say a word or two about that proposition. Not too easy a man, the Maharajah! But he was a long way off just now, and the boy was twenty-one, and proudly in love with his lady of the halls. "Every year, if I can. And perhaps, afterwards . . ."

But Elsie Marsh took a sip at her brandy and soda, and shook her stubborn little chin.

"It'd be marvellous if it were possible, but it isn't, Natty. We must just get what we can out of the present." It was Elsie's creed, and she was certainly putting it into full practice these days. She turned towards him, and rubbed her cheek against his. "It'll have to be for both of us just a lovely dream."

Her voice yearned; she knew her words in this part, and exactly how they should be spoken. But this once she spoke them too well. Nahendra Nao, with his eyes full of tears, bent his head down and kissed her throat—and then did not for a little while lift his head again. He remained in that awkward position, very still. Elsie would have thought that he had fainted but for his arm thrown about her shoulders and the clasp of his hand. That tightened and tightened, and in Elsie's eyes a spark of fear suddenly shone, and she shivered. Some day, of course, he would have to find out, sooner or later, but the later the better—and not on a night like this—when they were alone. . . . Of course, he was only a boy, but boys could be dangerous, and one never knew. There were her maid and dresser at the end of the passage—the cook, too, next door to her. But wouldn't they just put their heads under the bed-clothes—if they heard anything—a scream, for instance?

Elsie swallowed once or twice. How long was he going to stay in this ridiculous attitude? She knew how to deal with men—the ordinary men, stuffed with money and high living, amongst whom she lived—no one better. But this boy from the East? . . . And suddenly Nahendra Nao stood up erect. For a few moments he slipped back through a century or two to an older tradition. Swiftly and deftly, with hands as slender as a woman's, he

lifted from Elsie Marsh's shoulders a long rope of enormous pearls which was coiled three times about her throat and even then swung to below her knees. He ran it across the palm of his hand. He stooped to spread it out upon the table; and the cuff of his coat caught the frame of the jig-saw puzzle and upset it, Wellington and his guns, and Napoleon and the Old Guard, in a rattling heap upon the floor. The accident roused Elsie into a fury.

"How dare you do that?" she screamed suddenly. "I had almost finished it!"

"Look!" he said. "Look!" And he spread out the rope of pearls upon the table.

He was not now so much angry as aghast. The pearls had lost their lustre and purity. They were dull, yellowish beads, and here and there mottled and stained.

"My God!" he said, more to himself than to her. "I'm ruined! I daren't go back!"

His face had taken on a greenish tinge which took all his good looks away. He was face to face with a disaster for which there was no cure. At last he turned to Elsie Marsh.

"Why didn't you tell me that you couldn't wear them? Some people can't—that's known. You must have known it for a long while. There might have been time to save them."

"Of course I can wear them," she cried angrily, and she added with a sneer: "if they're real. But those aren't! They're just beads—lousy beads. You thought you were doing a clever thing when you lent a poor girl a lot of rocks on a string and told her they were the family pearls. But you didn't take me in—not for an instant you didn't!"

She was lying. Nahendra Nao was recollecting.

"You knew very well," he said.

"I didn't. I didn't. I don't," she shouted, her fist beating on the table, her face red. No woman likes to be told that she can't wear pearls without spoiling them. To a woman like Elsie, whose smooth white body was her god and her livelihood, the statement was a taunt and an insult. Besides, he had upset the jig-saw on the floor—hadn't he? just as she was finishing it.

"Yes, you've been covering them up lately with a feather thing on your shoulders," he went on. "I wondered why. You might have told me, Elsie. It

wasn't fair. You know how they came to us. . . ."

"Oh, don't tell me that damned old story again!" she cried. "I'm sick to death of it!" And she stuck her fingers in her ears. "The palace gates and the old faker and the rest of it. I'll tell you there's a faker in this room now, my God, and it's not me!"

"I wasn't going to tell it to you again," said the boy.

But it has got to be told. Five centuries ago, the Maharajah of Chitipur, returning from a ride, found his soldiers driving away from the gates an old man with a begging bowl. The Maharajah was young and gentle, and bade them desist. For years afterwards the old man sat in the dust with his beggar's bowl beside him, absorbed in his contemplations; and the Maharajah as he rode in and out would stop and speak about faith and religion with the old man. At times he dismounted and sat in the dust side by side with him, questioning him about the high mysteries. Then came a morning when the Maharajah found the old man standing and waiting.

"My second summons has come to me," he said. "I have now to go up to the hills, and I shall not come back. But because I have received much kindness at your hands, I give you the only thing I have to give."

As he spoke, he untied the rags of his long coat, and placed in the Maharajah's hands a long rope of unrivalled pearls. The Maharajah, however, drew back, thinking that through all these years he had harboured a thief at his gates. But the old man smiled.

"Have no fear, my son. They are mine to give."

"And who then are you?" asked the Maharajah.

"A nameless one," said the other. "But before the first call came to me, now many years ago, I was Ulla Singh Bahadur, Maharajah of Laipur," and he named thus a great kingdom to the east of Chitipur. Then he took up his bowl, and went up the road towards the hills.

This is the story which Elsie Marsh refused to hear again in her apartment in the Avenue Matignon, and this was the necklace which the young Rajah was now looking at in dismay.

"How can I go back?" he asked pitifully.

He had come to England upon a great occasion, his father's representative. The rope of pearls had been trusted to him and to the Maharajah's secretary, who went with him, that he might pay due honour to

his King and Emperor by wearing it in the ceremonies. And those ceremonies once over, he had lent it to Elsie Marsh.

"I was mad," he said, and his voice broke.

How was he going to face that stern man with this ruined thing in his hands? It was sacred, it was the very luck of his dynasty. His heart stopped beating in his breast as he thought of that meeting and what would come of it.

"He'll disinherit me. . . . He'll keep me in prison. . . . He may—who's to stop him—even have me killed?"

His voice sank to a whisper as he spoke. All the boyish swagger had gone. He was a son facing his father in an extremity of terror.

And suddenly Elsie Marsh laughed; but without amusement, spitefully, jeeringly. Pity was not within her range. Affection, such as she had, was reserved for some worthless little parasite. Men were shadows upon a mirror. They appeared in and passed away from it. What they were before, and what became of them afterwards, didn't matter, didn't exist, for her. In a month she had forgotten their names. They must have money whilst they were passing—money for her to waste—that was all.

"I'm done for," said Nahendra Nao, running the rope of pearls through his fingers. "It's no use laughing, Elsie—we've got to face it."

"We?" she shouted. "What have I got to do with it? Isn't that like a man? I didn't ask you to come running after me, did I?" And Nahendra Nao began really to raise his eyes to her angry face, and to take stock of her—his marvellous girl—for the first time. The knowledge that he was doing it fanned her wrath. It grew with the words she used. She felt wronged.

"I had lots of friends, hadn't I? You were as proud as you could be, weren't you?—to show me off, and yourself off for being with me. You got what you paid for, didn't you?" Her voice had risen to a screech. Nahendra Nao was staring at her, amazed, incredulous, that what he heard, she spoke. The marvellous evening together! The dream of some sort of future when the months of separation would sharpen the ecstasy of the months when they were together. He and this girl, ugly in her rage, with the mud bubbling up in her and out of her mouth.

"And you needn't think it has all been peaches and cream for me—my word, no! Bored?" She reached her arms above her head. "I've been bored as stiff as if I was in a coffin. My God! All that polo talk at Delly or Helly, or wherever you play it. And what about my position, eh? Did you ever think

of that, you and your pearls? What do I care what happens to you? After all ——" and she smiled horridly and licked her lips round with her tongue. These were the words, and she was going to use them, the unforgivable words: "After all, it didn't do Elsie Marsh much good, you know, to be running round with a coloured boy."

Nahendra Nao stood up as if a spring had been released in him, his shoulders back, his head erect; and once more for a second Elsie Marsh was afraid. The lad noticed her fear. A bitter smile twisted his lips.

"You have nothing to fear from me, Elsie," he said, gently and quietly.

He took out his handkerchief, and wrapped the rope of pearls as best he could within it. It was too big a parcel for him to stow away in any pocket.

"I'll send round for my clothes in the morning, Elsie," he said, and he went out of the room. Elsie Marsh sat and listened. She heard the door latch gently.

"That's over, then," she said to herself. Men who slammed doors behind them came back. Men who closed them gently did not. "And he upset that puzzle, too, just as I was finishing it. On purpose. I'll swear he did! That's the sort of boy he is." And Elsie Marsh finished her brandy and soda.

CHAPTER III
MAJOR SCOTT CARRUTHERS IS BOISTEROUS

Nahendra Nao, Prince of Chitipur, walked home no doubt on that early morning, and walked home soberly; and an instinct of common sense made him tuck his pearls into the big pocket of his overcoat. These details are certain. For he found himself standing in his drawing-room at the Ritz Hotel with the dust of the street upon his shoes, and the great rope of disfigured pearls on the table in front of him.

"I wonder," he was saying in a harsh whisper. "I think I left it in London. Carruthers was careful about it. Yes, I left it in London."

He was not very coherent, but it was just as well that Carruthers had made him leave "it" in London. "It" was a small black automatic pistol, and had he brought it, he would surely have blown out his brains that morning in his apartment at the Ritz. And not now in fear of his father, but from the intensity of his humiliation.

"A coloured boy—who had bored her stiff—and disgraced her into the bargain."

The words, even in the memory, seared him like a hot iron. He took off his overcoat and folded it neatly, and laid it upon a chair. Then he sat at the table with his head between his palms. He was very young, and the tears ran out between his fingers and rolled down the backs of his hands.

A long while after—for the daylight was flowing into the room at the edges of the blinds—a door was opened and a man came into the room. He too was wearing a dinner jacket, buttoned across his breast, and he carried an overcoat over his arm. He was a man of forty years, and of the middle height, clean-shaven, not ill-looking, not good-looking. It was easier to remember the clean cavalry man's cut of his figure than to carry in the mind any picture of his face. This was Major Scott Carruthers, a retired officer of Indian horse, secretary to His Highness the Maharajah of Chitipur, and temporary bear-leader to Nahendra Nao on his first visit to Europe. He stared in astonishment at the boy for a few seconds. Then he closed the door, laid down his hat and coat, and moved to the boy's side. He was very neat and quiet in all his actions.

He looked down at Nahendra Nao with a little smile of amusement.

"Well, the affair would have had to end one day," he reflected. "On the whole, it was for the best that it should end in a blazing row."

He raised his hand above Nahendra Nao's shoulder, but he did not let it fall. His eyes had noticed the great chaplet of pearls tossed upon the table. What was it doing there? Why had it been brought out from the strong-room of the hotel? And when? There would have been no one able to open the safes at that hour of the morning. The young fool must have taken it out before, to show it to Elsie Marsh. Then he drew in a breath.

There was something wrong with that great chaplet. The pearls were dead. Their sheen had gone. There were discolorations.

"Natty!" he cried, and now indeed his hand fell heavily upon the boy's shoulder.

The Prince sprang to his feet, startled and ashamed to have been caught in this moment of weakness.

"I was waiting up for you," he stammered. "But I thought that I should hear you come in!" And he turned away while he wiped his eyes and face.

"And that?" asked Carruthers. There was disaster for him too in that irreplaceable wrecked jewel upon the table. His face showed it as clearly as his stifled voice. He had aged by ten years.

"Yes," said the youth, nodding his head. "I was waiting up to tell you at once."

"Wait a moment!" Scott Carruthers went to the windows and drew back the yellow curtains, and raised the blinds. The daylight flooded the room. He sat down again at the table.

"Now!"

Nahendra Nao told him the truth quite simply, and without an excuse for himself.

"I lost my head. I'm not the first man, of course, who has made a fool of himself over a girl, but I don't think many can have behaved so much like a fool as I did. I was complete from A to Z. I was proud, insanely proud. I thought it was me—just me, in capital letters—whereas it was—well—just what I brought."

Nahendra Nao did not have to underline his words for his companion to understand them. It was as well, for he would sooner have died than repeat

to man or woman the sneers he had listened to. That they had been used seemed to contaminate him.

"She was wild to wear them," he continued, pointing at the chaplet on the table. "She was—I mean, she pretended to be thrilled by their history. Oh, I was mad to describe them to her. I was madder still to lend them to her."

"How long has she been wearing them?"

"Let me see! . . . Yes. . . . Six weeks!"

"My God!" Scott Carruthers jumped in his chair.

"She might have been murdered any night," he cried. "You, too, if you were with her. Many a girl has been, for nothing more than a few cheap trinkets."

"I told her so. But she wouldn't listen. She said that none of her friends would believe for a moment that they were real. She was going to say herself that they were false——"

Carruthers interrupted violently.

"She was going to boast to every rotten one of them that she was wearing the Luck of Chitipur. That's what she was going to do."

He broke off abruptly. This line of talk was no good. Recriminations would land them nowhere. The girl wasn't murdered, though if it could have been done without scandal, he would have been quite glad that she should have been. And there was the rope of pearls upon the table, dull and lustreless as the eyes of a dead fish, but there it was. Yet he himself must, even while he deprecated reproaches, try to affix a blame.

"It was a pity they were brought away from London."

"Yes . . . yes," the youth agreed with surprise. He added timidly, for he assuredly had no wish to transfer to other shoulders his own transgressions: "But that was your idea, wasn't it?"

Major Carruthers looked up, finding the statement difficult to believe.

"Mine, Natty! Was it?"

"Yes. You thought they would be safer under our hands in the hotel strong-room."

"Did I? I don't remember it. But if I did, I should be responsible for the whole disaster."

But the lad would not hear of any such argument.

"No," he said stubbornly. "It's my doing. Mine alone."

But that line of talk, again, took them nowhere. Blaming themselves was no more helpful work than blaming each other—all the less helpful, indeed, since the light was broadening through the room, losing its pallor, carrying with it warmth and a promise of gold. The day was here. Something had got to be decided.

"I shall go home," said Nahendra Nao. He stood up straight, rather like an undergraduate confessing to his tutor some inexcusable folly. There was now neither drama nor hysteria in any accent or word. "I shall give that necklace back to my father. I have thought it all out whilst I sat here waiting. I shall tell him how I lent it and to whom I lent it. It will be the end of me, of course——" For a moment his voice broke, and his eyes closed, and his fingers were clenched on his palms, as he imagined his father, girt about with the trappings of his authority, listening to the story of how his son had lent the supreme jewel of the treasury to a little trumpery harlot of the music-halls, so that she might flaunt it on her shoulders before her gaping friends. The Maharajah had never been in Europe. He had never been young and ignorant and flattered, with money to burn; in Paris; and all the pleasures of the world his for less than the asking. His father would never understand, never forgive. But the moment passed.

"I shall tell him every least little thing, and take what comes."

Scott Carruthers said quietly:

"You won't go alone, Natty. I shall lose my job, of course. And I'm sorry. I loved the life in Chitipur." He touched the pearls upon the table. "I have lost it now, in fact. I ought to have exercised more control. But I shan't leave you to go back and face the Maharajah alone."

The boy, generous by nature himself, was quick to appreciate generosity in others. Carruthers's words moved him and lifted him, even if ever so slightly, from the depths of humiliation into which he had fallen. It was certain that Carruthers's occupation would not continue for an hour after the Maharajah had heard their story. He had a friend, too, to keep him in Paris. That he should take the long pilgrimage to the northern edge of Rajputana merely to stand by his side for five minutes and then suffer the ignominy of a brief dismissal—that was a fine thing for a friend to do.

"I oughtn't to allow it," he said, with a little catch in his voice. "But it would mean a great deal to me. All that way alone—into disgrace and

punishment—almost impossible."

"That's all right, Natty."

There was the touch of impatience necessary to check a scene. Nahendra Nao was brought a little sharply to remember that emotion between men was a breach of the code. He said:

"I'll go to bed. I'm tired out. We can look up ships to Bombay later on this morning."

Carruthers did not answer. He sat at the table with his attention arrested as though by some new thought, and as the young Prince crossed behind him to the door, he said very quickly:

"Wait a bit, Natty!" and in his voice there was a little lift of hope. "I'm not quite so sure that the game's up. Pearls go sick. There they are in front of us, sick to death. But I think pearls can heal." He heard a gasp behind him, and Nahendra Nao was back at the table.

"If that were possible!"

"We ought to make sure."

Major Carruthers took a cigarette from his case and lit it deliberately, and smoked a quarter of it in silence.

"Let us see! We are in any case to be back in Chitipur before the end of October. We've retained cabins on the *Naldera*, which leaves London on the twenty-ninth of August. We're now in March. We have heaps of time to give the pearls a chance to get well again. We ought to take that time."

For the first time since the two men had been talking together in the room, the boy sat down. He drew in his chair to the table, all eagerness, perhaps now a trifle hysterical in his eagerness.

"I tell you what we'll do, Major Carruthers. We'll take that rope this morning round to old Tabateau in the Rue de la Paix; and . . ." He saw Carruthers jerk up his head in alarm. "Why? . . . I'm told he's much the best jeweller in Paris. He's supposed to have a wonderful knowledge of precious stones—more knowledge than almost anyone. I believe he has got a daughter, too, who knows as much as he does. Tabateau's our man."

"No!" Nothing could have been more decided than that quiet refusal.

"Tabateau won't do?"

"No."

Nahendra Nao leaned back in his chair, his enthusiasm chilled, his sudden hopes falling.

"Why?"

Carruthers got up and walked over to the window. He played for a moment or two with the tassel of the blind. He flung up the sash. The sun had risen. The piping of birds filled the room with music. When Carruthers came back to the table, it seemed to his companion that his face was white.

"I felt a little cheap," he explained with a laugh. "I'm not so young as you are, you know. It means a lot to me, Natty, to lose my job in Chitipur. I liked the work. I had made my home there. I meant to live and die there—oh, with an occasional holiday in Paris—yes." And he laughed again. "And the fear that I was going to lose it and would have to start looking for another job—and then the reaction when there seemed a possibility—do you see?"

Nahendra Nao saw, or thought that he saw.

"Of course," he said sympathetically.

Carruthers resumed in a voice of indifference.

"If you are set on Tabateau, why, we'll go and see him. It's up to you to decide. But I fancy I've got a better plan. What I'm afraid of here is the gossip. It'll get out. Everything gets out in Paris, and pretty quickly. We shall have it in the newspapers, names and all. 'Why did the famous pearls of Chitipur go sick?' Can't you see the headlines? Pretty fatal, what? How long would it take for the story to reach Chitipur?"

The boy shuddered.

"Yes, that mustn't happen," he whispered.

"We'd do better to rush back and tell the story ourselves first, wouldn't we?"

"Yes." And once more the Maharajah, thousands of miles away, dominated that room in Paris and made of it a place of terror and menace. "Yes, there would be a better chance of forgiveness." The boy looked up at Carruthers. "What do you propose?"

"That we should bolt back to England to-day. Crevette in Bond Street knows just as much about precious stones as your friend Tabateau."

"He's not my friend," Nahendra Nao interposed. "It's only what I've heard. I've never been in his shop."

Carruthers drew a deep breath of relief.

"I'm glad. I thought you were set on him. Crevette, too, knows these particular pearls. He insured them for us when we first came to London; whereas Tabateau, I take it, has never seen them."

It was a question rather than a statement, and Nahendra Nao answered it at once.

"Never."

"Good! Then if we go back to London to-day, whatever talk we leave behind us here, the spoilt pearls won't figure in it. Elsie Marsh isn't going to say anything about them, you may bet your life. She'll have to invent quite a different story."

And for the first time in the course of their relationship, the Prince saw a Major Scott Carruthers who was more than a little boisterous. He was in his habit a quiet, reticent man, with manners which were colourless. Now—well, he had just won the High Jump. Nahendra Nao was amazed, and his face showed his amazement.

"Besides," Carruthers continued in his more usual voice, "you'll be glad for other reasons to get away, I should think, as soon as you can."

"Yes. Very glad."

"What I was thinking was, that with a push we might catch the midday aeroplane. Your valet could bring the luggage along by the boat."

"Too early," replied the Prince. "I have still some things to do. We can go in the afternoon."

He picked up the great chaplet of pearls. He had been wise enough in the midst of his folly not to lend with it its proper case. He locked it away now in his bedroom and returned to the drawing-room.

The things which he had still to do before he could leave Paris were to write a difficult letter and collect his clothes from the apartment in the Avenue Matignon. He sat down at once to write the letter. It contained neither reproaches nor regrets. It stated in the simplest way that he was leaving for London, that the rent was paid to the end of the half-year, and that the furniture was hers. It ended with his good wishes for her future, and he enclosed a cheque. It was still early when he had sealed up his letter. He left it on the table with a note to his servant to take it round to the Avenue Matignon at a reasonable hour, and at the same time, to collect his

belongings. Then he went to bed, and slept from the moment his head touched the pillow.

When Nahendra Nao began to write his letter, Scott Carruthers went quietly away to his own bedroom and locked the door. His windows were on the garden side of the hotel, and there was no one to overlook him. From a locked trunk, he took a locked box. He unlocked it, and lifted from the bed of black velvet on which it lay, a big rope of pearls which for weight and shape and size was the twin of that spoilt chaplet now lying in its own case in the young Rajah's bedroom. He carried it to the window and examined it for the hundredth time. The colour of its stones was perfect, like still water in moonlight, their sheen soft and delicate and lovely. He laid it upon his dressing-table, and filling the box with the velvet lining with letters, he replaced it unlocked in the trunk. It would travel with the rest of the luggage in the charge of the servant, and it would be examined at Victoria Station. He took the big chaplet into his bed with him, and later on that morning, when he rose, he slipped it into a long silk sheath which was made to hold it, coiled it about his waist, and strapped it tight. Wearing a thick overcoat, he crossed that afternoon with Nahendra Nao in the aeroplane to London.

CHAPTER IV
THE HEALER

Monsieur Crevette could have wept. The pollution of the Chitipur pearls was one of the major crimes of the world; and there was no adequate penalty. Judges in the United States did certainly give ninety-nine years of penal servitude to this or that offender. But even a sentence of that severity was inadequate to meet the case of the little piece of mud that was Elsie Marsh. He was so angry that for a time he refused to offer any advice. But the quiet pertinacity of Scott Carruthers and the plight of the young Rajah brought him in the end to a more reasonable mind. He was a small bearded man rich in gesticulations, and he wore a long frock-coat with spreading skirts and a white slip in his waistcoat.

"Yes, it has happened before now," he admitted. "There was the necklace of the Princess Meravinski. After it had gone sick, someone wore it, and in a little time it was healed. But who wore it, and how long it took, I do not know. It was in Russia, before Russia went sick. Then there were the heirlooms which Lord Chasborough gave to his young wife. Wait a little! That was in Italy. I had those pearls in my hands before and after. Yes. I find that out for you!"

In a week's time Monsieur Crevette once more took Nahendra Nao and Major Carruthers into his private office. But he was not hopeful. He spread out his arms.

"I tell your Highness what I have found out." He placed chairs for them, and sat down behind his table. "They were in Rome for the winter at the Excelsior Hotel: Lord Chasborough, his wife, the Count Romola, the Marquesa de Levante—quite a party. Amongst these a young lady, well-born but poor, for whom, since she could sing a little, they were arranging some private concerts amongst their friends and trying to make for her a small career. It was she who brought back to life the pearls of Lady Chasborough. Since then, she has on another occasion been the healer. But—there it is—she helped as a friend."

"You said she was poor," Carruthers interposed.

"And she was amongst her friends when she helped," continued Crevette.

"She would still be amongst her friends if she helped us," Nahendra Nao urged.

"She certainly would be," Carruthers added with a pleasant smile which showed his teeth. "And we should see to it that every precaution was taken for her safety. This matter is almost—I don't wish to exaggerate, but it is—almost life and death for us."

"The fee would be in a proper proportion to the service we should be thanking her for," said the young Indian.

"The fee!" Monsieur Crevette exclaimed. He made a good many gestures which neither of the two men who were consulting him understood at all. "Yes, the fee! I do not know the young lady. How can I ask her to come to see me, and if she comes, how can I propose to her this service and a fee?"

"Why not?" Carruthers asked abruptly. "It is a business proposition."

"For her?" replied Monsieur Crevette.

"You said she was poor."

"She was, and for all I know she still may be. But her condition has changed, my gentlemen. This young lady no longer needs aristocratic patrons to get up little concerts for her at private parties. She made her début in the Costanzi Opera House at Rome, and was—what do you call it?—a riot. She has sung at Monte Carlo, at the Scala—yes, understand that, my gentlemen, at the Scala—with Toscanini to tell her off. She was Octavian in *The Rosenkavalier*, here in London, at Covent Garden. I was there, I see her, I kiss her the hands—a vision with a voice. She cross the ocean to the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. But how shall I say to such an one: 'Will you please for a fee restore the Chitipur pearls'? She will ask why they are spoilt. If I tell her, she will snap me off the nose—one, two, three bites—and where are we, your Highness? Where we were."

"But you, with no nose," said Nahendra Nao with a smile, and little Monsieur Crevette sprang to his feet.

"Aha! You take my foolish words like that, your Highness—so well, with so much spirit. Good! I do what I can for you."

"What is her name?" Carruthers asked.

"Lydia Flight," said the jeweller.

"And where is she?"

"Yes, she is in London. I have found that out."

"Can you find out still more? And quite quietly? Before she is approached, I mean," Carruthers continued.

Monsieur Crevette hunched his shoulders and arched his back.

"I shall try. Lord Chasborough, he was in my shop yesterday. In a few days he will come again. But I must tell you that these fine friends of hers are no longer such fine friends since she does not need their patronage. It was nice when they could say: 'We have a pretty little friend here who sings a pretty little song. Will you get up a pretty little concert for her in your drawing-room, and we all take the seats?' Very pleasant! You do your day's good deed. But when that little amateur bursts out in a theatre, and sets an Italian audience on fire, you are not so pleased, eh? You are grumpy. You talk quickly about your new amateur. However, your Highness, I will try. I will make the discreet enquiries. You shall hear from me. Meanwhile I give you a receipt, and I lock the Chitipur pearls in my strong-room. So!"

"Yes," said Nahendra Nao.

Monsieur Crevette's next message had brighter news for them, at the cost of Lydia Flight. The Chasboroughs and their friends were quite reconciled now to a wider success of their protégée than they had planned for her.

"Perhaps—is it?" said Monsieur Crevette, "because, had she listened to them, a disaster might have been avoided. She sang too soon. Her Maestro was furious with her. She was not ready. In New York, the fine voice, it failed. There were—wait! I wrote the words"—and Monsieur Crevette found in a drawer a sheet of a small writing-pad, and read from it. "There were some small nodes on the vocal cords. She must not sing for a year."

"And she has no money saved?" said Carruthers.

"How could she have saved money?" replied Crevette. "Her friends would gladly have her with them for the year, but according to his Lordship, she is as independent as the devil. A few weeks, yes; a year, never on her life. She will go as a companion to a lady, if she can find a lady who wants one."

"You have her address?" Nahendra Nao cried eagerly.

"Yes, your Highness. His Lordship gave it to me when I said that I might perhaps have a client who would be useful."

They were all three in the big shop on this occasion, and Carruthers leaned over the glass counter.

"Did you give that client's name, Monsieur Crevette?" he asked.

Crevette looked at the Major with asperity, and drew himself up. It was not very high, but it was as high as he could.

"This good Major has spent some time in India—yes? And in the country places—yes? In the tents, I should think—yes? Ah, it is excusable, then. Otherwise the Major would know that jewellers must have both tact and jewels before they can prosper in Bond Street."

Major Carruthers was quite unruffled by the sarcasms of Monsieur Crevette. He had a gift of remaining calm when trumpery insults were offered to him.

"That's all right then, Monsieur Crevette," he drawled.

Monsieur Crevette turned from this insufferable Major—was he really a Major, yes?—to His Highness the young Rajah.

"Shall I write to this young lady and make an arrangement for an interview?"

"Wait a minute, if you please!"

This was an order, curt and peremptory, the order of a master. Crevette jumped in spite of himself into an attitude of attention. The drawling, equivocal Major was suddenly a Major of the guard-room. Carruthers took Nahendra Nao aside. The boy was a little reckless of consequences. He would have said "Yes" on the spot, and no plans had been made.

"You're like Lydia Flight, Natty," said Carruthers with a smile. "You're singing too soon. Let's work a scheme out properly first."

Nahendra Nao saw the wisdom of this proposal. He asked Monsieur Crevette to wait for a day or two. But he walked out of the shop like one walking upon air. Already he saw the great rope of pearls restored to its perfect tenderness of colour and soft lustre. He was impatient of all the plans and details which must lie between that moment and this.

"You see, here's the time coming on when everybody's in London," Carruthers argued. "You can't have that girl, even if she consents to wear your pearls, wearing 'em here through the season all amongst her friends. They'll have to know, of course, in any case. But if she's here and there and everywhere with that rope hung about her, the secrecy won't be kept from

anyone for five minutes—especially if the stones improve. Besides . . .” and the Major’s face had a worried and thoughtful look, “there’s another thing.”

“What?” Nahendra Nao asked impatiently.

“She might get murdered in her bed.”

And now the young Indian’s face grew careworn and troubled.

“This is the second time that you have linked up murder with that jewel,” he said.

Major Carruthers looked at the lad sharply.

“Do you wonder, Natty? Don’t you see what it would mean to anyone who was poor? A free life where one wanted to live—just there and nowhere else, doing the things one wanted to do, and never pinched for want of a five-pound note.” He laughed, and once more ran into his odd boisterous mood, to Nahendra Nao’s surprise. “Why, Natty, it’s lucky that the one place I want to live in is Chitipur, isn’t it? Otherwise who knows what might happen?”

Suddenly the boy laid his hand on Carruthers’s coat sleeve and stopped him in the street. His gesture was impulsive, even imperious. Scott Carruthers was startled by it. So startled that as he swung round he took a short step forward and stood close up against the Indian with precisely the same thought which a boxer has in clinching with his opponent. But the manner of Nahendra Nao was one of appeal rather than of menace.

“You see, Major Carruthers, the only label attached to that chaplet is ‘beautiful.’ It is an emblem of fine thought on the part of both the giver and my old ancestor who received it. I have sullied it myself, God knows! And very shamefully. That crime should follow because of that, become its token and device through my folly—that would be horrible. I hope I haven’t any more queer fancies than other people. But I think that if we stand, say, at a corner like this, and talk of crime, crime may come from any quarter, suddenly, out of the blue, as we say.”

And he looked up and about the sky, nervously, as though he lay sick in a desert and saw suddenly the great vultures gathering from nowhere over his head, darkening the air and making it vibrate with the pulsation of their wings. Scott Carruthers was to remember that strange moment afterwards; this prosaic corner of Grosvenor Square and Brook Street, the sudden vision which the earnestness of the lad raised before his eyes, and the quiver of his face.

"All right, Natty," said Carruthers in a friendly, understanding voice. "I am sorry. We are such a long way from Chitipur that I had lost touch with it, even in thought. You are quite right, of course."

They went on to the great hostelry where they had been staying, and mounting high within those cliff-walls of red brick surmounted by their cupolas, they sat down in their rooms above Hyde Park to elaborate their plans. In fact, however, there was no elaboration whatever. The plan was already cut and dry within the ingenious mind of Major Scott Carruthers. He did not even have to persuade, so aptly did his odd plan fit the odd predicament in which they were entangled. The kernel and heart of the plan was that since Lydia Flight wanted to act as a companion, she should act as a companion, but that she should give her performance abroad.

Consequently four days later Madame Lucrece Bouchette, of an address in the suburb of Neuilly, arrived by the boat-tram at Victoria Station, and was met by Major Scott Carruthers. As he took her hand luggage from her, a middle-aged woman, squat in shape, yellowish in colour and Mongolian in features, came up to them.

"You had better see my registered luggage examined, Marie," said Lucrece Bouchette in French, "and follow with it to——"

She looked at Major Scott Carruthers.

"To the Semiramis Hotel," said he. He had a word for Marie, who smiled at him, and he turned to walk towards the edge of the platform, where the motor-cars were parked.

"Marie is reliable, I suppose?" he said carelessly.

"She would give her life for me," Lucrece answered simply, as though that was nothing to be surprised about; and perhaps it was not. For if Major Scott Carruthers was so indeterminate of feature that his face was impossible to remember, Lucrece Bouchette was of a haunting beauty, whom no one could pass without turning again to take a second look at her. She was tall, long-limbed, and slender, with soft brown hair. She had grey eyes, almond-shaped and long, between thick dark eyelashes, and a rather round, low forehead. The upper part of her face, indeed, was Mongolian, but the delicately chiselled nose, the humorous mouth and the oval chin, were as definitely European. Her skin was white, and she had a natural colour in her cheeks which accompanied her words as music accompanies a voice.

"You left me in Paris in a great hurry," she said, and again she spoke in French.

"Had to," he answered. "When I got back to the hotel that morning, there was Natty in tears. An awful upset." He cast a glance about the spot where they stood. Even chance listeners-in picking up a word or two which they did not understand, might do, and often had done, a deal of mischief. "I'll tell you as we go to the Semiramis."

The Rajah's car pulled up at the kerb, and they got in. As the car drove away again, a transfiguration took place within it. There's a side and facet of him which a man never shows to any but a woman, and to only a few of them. It's very often a surprising unexpected exhibition, and the manner in which it is received marks one woman off from another, better, perhaps, than any other quality. The Elsie Marshes are not interested. They adore their own bodies and men are only valued by the service they give to the keeping of them beautiful. The one test of a man is the depth of his pocket. Otherwise they are much the same, even to their cries of passion when they are favoured and their reproaches when they are ruined.

Lucrece Bouchette, however, was of a kind which is perpetually interested, perpetually curious, and gratefully responsive to any unexpected revelation. The daughter of a Dutch sea-officer and a Javanese lady, she had been born at Surabaya twenty-eight years before; she had been married, when little more than a young, intelligent and beautiful child, to a French merchant a good many years older than herself. He had returned to France, suffered reverses of fortune, and left Lucrece with a small apartment at Neuilly and as small an income. There had been a supper party one night of January at the Café de Paris, and Scott Carruthers had driven her home from it. The undistinguished reticent stranger, starved by years of absence from his kind, had found his tongue upon that journey. An unexpected passion had made its appeal. Now in this darkness of this smoothly rolling car he held her close to him, repeated over and over again her name in an ecstasy, and babbled like a callow boy.

But Lucrece was aware, even whilst she lay in his arms, that the man was behind the boy, that he was at heart desperate in his need of her, and set upon slaking it at every cost.

"You have been away from me a fortnight, Lucrece. Did you know that? Know it, and ache every second of the day? It's got to come to an end, my dear. I'm never going back. I wake up at night with the horror of a thought that I am back, that as soon as the morning breaks, I'll see the flat plains stark and brown and naked, and far away the snow on the hills. I used to have to play chess with the Maharajah by the hour. No, no, no! I've done with it. I am going to play another kind of chess altogether."

In her suite at the hotel he told her of the ruined necklace.

"I could have gone round to the Avenue Matignon and strangled that girl with my own hands," he said, his fingers working as though they clutched a throat, his face convulsed with the passion he had striven to conceal in the sitting-room in the garden court of the Ritz Hotel. "She spoilt everything, damn her!"

"Hush!" said Lucrece, nodding her head towards her bedroom, where her maid was unpacking her clothes. She added in a low voice:

"Not everything. Half of the plan remains."

"Half's not enough. I've seen you, dearest. I want everything."

Lucrece Bouchette smiled. She was taking off her hat in front of the mirror, and she smiled and made a little grimace at his reflection.

"Greedy!"

She saw his eyes burning upon her.

"Yes."

Then with a start he looked at his watch.

"You'll want time for a bath, and to powder your nose. I'll come back for you at nine. We are all three to dine together at our hotel, upstairs, and make our arrangements."

He came up behind her and caught her to him, kissing her hungrily. For a moment or two she yielded, and then she turned and gently held him off. She was suddenly a little frightened. So much violence and haste, and so much patience and discretion needed if they were to tread with safety the winding perilous way which he had laid out across their chart of life.

"We must be careful, dear," she whispered, looking him in the eyes. "There's the pit in front of us, and very near."

"That's all right," he returned confidently.

She still held him at arm's length, looking at him from those long eyes which seemed always to hold a riddle and keep its secret. He could carry her off her feet now. She was moving with her head clear into dangers which she could not define, and at his bidding. Suppose that midway in the journey she had exhausted her interest, the stimulation she got from him, her power to respond? What would he be like then? She smiled suddenly. She was seeing again his hands curving and his fingers twitching, and his face convulsed as

he thought of Elsie Marsh. He was certainly not losing his interest for her yet.

"Run along, Harvey." She dropped her hands from his shoulders. "If I am to be ready by nine, I've got to hurry."

It was nearer ten, however, when she sat down to dinner with Nahendra Nao and Scott Carruthers. Lucrece Bouchette had of course met the young Indian often enough during his stay in Paris, but to-night she might have taken him for a more sedate and elder brother. Over there, he had been boyishly arrogant, a trifle noisy with his shrill laugh, obviously the King of the Castle. This evening he was quiet, with a simple dignity which sat on him well. He had no reproaches for Elsie Marsh, and no hysterical blame for himself.

"We are taking a long chance, Lucrece—may I use that name? A very long chance. But it is the only one we have, and I shall be more grateful than I can say, if you will help."

Indeed Lucrece Bouchette felt more than a twinge of remorse as the dinner progressed, but she was launched. It was agreed that she should make some small purchases at Monsieur Crevette's. She should speak of her need for a companion on a tour she proposed to make in the South of France. Crevette would remember Lydia Flight, and give her the girl's address. So far there was no trouble. The meeting took place and the engagement was made. Then, however, the difficulties began. Monsieur Crevette opened very delicately the proposal that on this tour Lydia Flight should wear the Chitipur pearls. At once, said Monsieur Crevette:

"She dig her toes in. She is poor, yes. She need the money, yes. But the responsibility, no, and again no, and for the third time, no! I show her the pearls. They look no more than pearls of the Arcades, not? But suppose they get better? she ask. I say you send her with a detective, and she give me the bird. Everyone in five minutes would know that she had a private detective, and would wonder why, and would find the answer. She put it all in two words. Im. Possible."

"It's quite true, of course, even to-day," said Carruthers gloomily. "Private enquiry agents would have to be unusual people to hide up their job in the South of France, and they aren't unusual people."

Then when they were on the edge of despair, magic helped them. Scott Carruthers called it magic. He had been brought up in a strictly evangelical school, and he thought "Providence" an ill-omened word to use in connection with his plans. He met in the smoking-room of a club much

frequented by Service officers home from the East an invalided Captain of the Bengal Police—Oliver Ransom. Ransom had by now quite recovered his health, his circumstances were suitable, he had manners and good breeding and a pleasant way with him. Instead of masquerading as a courier or a chauffeur he could be one of the party. He was the ideal of Carruthers's search. The only drawback to the choice of him was that in more than one difficult case in India he had been guilty of an ingenuity and courage which had brought the malefactors to their proper conclusion. However, one can't have everything, and over a dinner-table for two in the club, Carruthers noticed a certain delicacy of mind in Oliver Ransom, a suggestion of an essayist gone astray in Scotland Yard, which he set against the man's prowess as a policeman.

"After all," he said, whilst he looked over the rim of his wine-glass at Oliver, "Indian criminals are fairly simple liars. They get off not because of the cleverness of their crimes, but because the police muddle up the whole case by lying too."

"That is undoubtedly true," Ransom answered, and Carruthers realised with a start that he had been talking aloud, whereas he had thought to be communing with himself. However, the opportunity was a good one, and he took it. He told the story of Nahendra Nao and Elsie Marsh. Oliver Ransom was languidly interested. He had heard of the Chitipur pearls, of course. It was going to be awkward for the young Rajah when he should return home.

"Awkward for me, too," added Carruthers. "We start back at the end of August."

Not so very long a time, to be sure, and the fee would be good and the part of the world in which it was to be earned pleasant. But socially he was not too easy a companion. Those whom he liked, he liked well, but he did not fit comfortably into a general circle.

"As to these two ladies——" he said.

"They are both charming," Carruthers interrupted.

"I don't even know their names," Oliver continued.

"If that's all your trouble, it can be quickly cured. One is Madame Lucrece Bouchette; the other, the companion, is the singer, Lydia Flight."

To Major Scott Carruthers's delight, Oliver Ransom spilled his wine over the table-cloth. Then he blushed like a girl, and was very much annoyed.

"You might just as well meet these two ladies before you make up your mind, mightn't you?" said Carruthers carelessly. He had his fish unexpectedly on his hook now, but not yet in the creel. "You could take your books with you, since you're reading law. What about the four of us dining together?"

Oliver Ransom saw no objection whatever, and Scott Carruthers went back to Nahendra Nao in better spirits than he had known for a week. They dined in the grill-room of the Semiramis, where there is sufficient movement and clatter for two people to talk intimately together even when they are only four at the table. Lucrece and Scott Carruthers, after the first courses had set them all at their ease, left Lydia Flight and Oliver Ransom to work out their problem for themselves. It happened—it is continually happening and no one is going to say why, and anyway no explanation is needed—the pair fell into step at the hors-d'œuvres and were old friends when the coffee was reached. In the interval Lydia had dug Oliver Ransom's history out of him, told him nothing of her own, and had laughed with a lovely ripple of the voice which must not sing, at the idea of this mad pilgrimage along the south coast of France whilst the spring rounded into summer, she with a priceless jewel about her throat and not sixpence in her pocket, he the body-guard and policeman with *Elphinstone on Contracts* in his hand.

"It would be fun," said she with a little smile, and wistfully.

"Wouldn't it!" said he.

"But——" and she stopped, suddenly grown serious.

"What sort of 'but' is that?" Oliver Ransom asked. "When you come to my age, you will recognise that more 'buts' turn into 'ands' than you had any idea of."

Lydia looked at him with admiration. Young people in step discover wit very easily in each other.

"This but. When and where will you study your law?"

"In the morning," he said. "On the terrace."

"What terrace?"

"The terrace where you're doing your knitting."

She laughed, and then looked him over, and said quietly:

"I think I should not mind the responsibility so much if we went together."

She had a tempting picture before her, olive and orange groves and summer seas, and this man beside her, and that young woebegone Indian Prince here in London gradually recovering from his despondency. If only the experiment would prove successful. It had—yes—on other occasions it had.

"We'll give it a chance," she said.

Oliver Ransom took her back to her lodging, with the whole business settled. Nahendra Nao was to keep as far away from his pearls as possible, lest the quality of the big beads which Lydia Flight was wearing should be suspected. Major Scott Carruthers would go to and fro, but as far as possible he would be with the travellers. They were to start for Beauvallon in four days' time.

Later that night in her apartment, Lucrece Bouchette put a question to Carruthers, which she had had on the tip of her tongue ever since they had left her in the hall.

"What's to happen to those two, Harvey?"

Scott Carruthers raised his eyebrows.

"Ah!" he said. "Yes. We shall have to think about that, shan't we?"

Lucrece Bouchette had an odd sensation that the room had suddenly grown cold. She saw Scott Carruthers gently swaying backwards and forwards from his heels to his toes and from his toes to his heels, with a proper perplexity in his face, and his eyes following the pattern of the carpet. But he didn't perplex Lucrece. Oh, he had had the thought a long time since, what must happen to those two when the pearls were healed and the pilgrimage at an end.

"I should be sorry if——" she began, and she broke off with a shiver. Certainly the fire had gone out and the room was very cold. Lucrece Bouchette was sorry for those two—just now. But the spring was to round into summer. There were months to pass before anything could happen to them. It was possible that when the time came she might not be even sorry.

This odd caravan, then, started off at Beauvallon, and sauntered along the Riviera. Undoubtedly the pearls were healing. The discolorations had gone, the yellow sickly look was fading. Lydia Flight wore them night and day, hiding them as best she could under her shirt by day, and under a neck-wrap in the evening. Monsieur Crevette, who was taking a holiday at Monte

Carlo, motored over to Mentone when they were staying there, and was enraptured.

"At the end of July, madame," he said.

"July!" This was early in June; Oliver Ransom and Lydia Flight were so sunk in love that the remotest hotels, the loneliest beaches, filled them with delight. All that they needed was Schubert and moonlight, whilst on the other hand, Lucrece Bouchette could have screamed from sheer boredom.

"At the end of July, madame. I give you my word, the word of Crevette."

Lucrece knew another word of another person which would have aptly expressed her sentiments. But she did not utter it. There were two more months, then, and Monte Carlo was forbidden. She herself might run over for the day, but it was the last place in the world where Lydia Flight could trot about with the old Maharajah's pearls swinging from her neck.

"Major Carruthers," Monsieur Crevette continued. "He comes to-morrow, I think."

Scott Carruthers, in fact, sent a telegram the next day, and arrived upon the day after in time for lunch.

"I have an idea," he said genially, as he sat upon the terrace of the hotel overlooking the sea. He had a cocktail at his elbow, and the little party grouped about him. "The crowds'll be coming with the bathing season. We ought to migrate a bit—what?"

He spread a map out upon the iron table, and ran his eyes up and down it and across it.

"Any fancies?" he asked, looking towards Lydia Flight and Oliver Ransom. They had no suggestions to make. They were in Paradise anywhere. "You, Lucrece?"

He turned his eyes towards her, and saw her grow a little pale under the tan of her cheeks.

Scott Carruthers had another idea. It seemed to leap out of the map at him.

"What about a house-boat on one of the rivers? Isn't that an idea? For the last month, eh? That rope is getting pretty noticeable." He leaned back in his chair and pursed up his lips, and took a pencil from his pocket. "Let me see! We'd want room for the four of us, and for your maid, Lucrece, on the boat. Then there'd have to be a smaller boat with the kitchen and rooms for

the servants—unless, of course, we could get local people who could sleep ashore."

"That would be best, of course," said Lydia Flight; and Lucrece Bouchette shot one sharp glance at her from her sidelong eyes in which horror struggled with contempt. What a fool! she was thinking.

"You'd want a launch, of course, to get you about."

"I could look after that and drive it," cried Lydia Flight. "Lucrece drives a car, too. We could always get somebody to clean it."

Scott Carruthers looked up at Lucrece, and his eyes widened as he looked at her.

"Does that suit you, too, Lucrece?" he asked gently, and she could do no more than nod. "A very great deal depends, of course, upon everything going through during the last month, doesn't it?" he said easily.

Lucrece Bouchette moistened her dry lips with the tip of her tongue. Carruthers had his plan settled to the last detail. She was sure of it. She was equally sure that she was not yet to be told what it was. At that moment she almost hated him. She knew that she was horribly afraid of him, as she watched him looking up and down the map as if in doubt where the house-boat should be moored. She heard him saying again, with his face convulsed and his voice violent: "I'm not going back to Chitipur! I've had eight mortal deadly years of it."

"Well, that's settled, then," he said cheerfully. "A house-boat, a tender, an oil launch and a dinghy." He turned towards Lydia Flight with a laugh. "The day you hand over those pearls to His Highness, Lydia, you can go aquaplaning again in the best evening frock you've got."

Lydia Flight threw back her head and laughed.

"You saw that picture of me at Nassau?"

"Who didn't?" Carruthers asked.

"I was mad at that time. I had come down from New York, knowing that I had played the fool with my voice, and that I mustn't sing for a year. I was desperately unhappy. There wasn't any crazy thing which I wouldn't have done, just to buck myself up for a moment."

But Scott Carruthers was not listening very attentively. He was making notes on the back of the list of cocktails of the requirements of the house-boat. Then he resumed his study of his maps.

"The question is now, where we should moor it," he said. "If we could settle that, we can go to luncheon with an easy conscience."

"One of the mouths of the Rhone," Oliver Ransom suggested.

"Yes, yes," said Carruthers. "But a little uninteresting, all that country. Flat, I think."

Lydia Flight exclaimed:

"I know. The inlaid water at Arcachon. Pine trees all round it. Lovely!"

"Let me see," said Carruthers. "Where is Arcachon, now? Oh, yes! There!" And he stabbed the butt of his pencil down upon the place. He seemed very much inclined to vote for that suggestion.

"But it's a long way from England. I thought that if we could be nearer . . . You see, His Highness will be anxious. We have got to consider him, haven't we?" He was very kind, but he made Lydia Flight imagine herself to be the most selfish little beast on earth. She had a beautiful white skin, and the blood mounted into her neck and face until she was as red as a tulip. "Now, he is invited to Goodwood, and Goodwood takes place in the last week of July. I thought that if we were somewhere near, and he could come over and pick up his chaplet really completely restored as soon as Goodwood was over, it would be a great relief to him."

As he spoke, he lifted his head and looked straight at Lucrece Bouchette. He was announcing to her that the last few days of July would be the days in which his plans would reach their fruition. He put his finger again on the map.

"The Seine's the river we want," he said. "The lower reaches between Rouen and Havre-de-Grace. His Highness can slip over to Havre or Trouville from Southampton after the racing is over. See?"

He ran the butt of his pencil round the bends of the great waterway, and stopped.

"There's the place," he said excitedly. He had obviously just made a discovery. He was surprised to find this particular place in this particular spot. "Caudebec!" he cried, and he bent his head down to the map, the better to read the name. "Caudebec-en-Caux," he read slowly. "I've heard of it." He swung round enthusiastically to Lydia and Oliver Ransom. "You'll love it! It's a beautiful little old dead-alive town where artists go. It has got a tiny perfect cathedral you could almost put on a tray. I want to see it myself.

What do you all say? Caudebec? Then Caudebec it is, and we can go in to luncheon."

Oliver Ransom and Lydia Flight passed out of the sunlight over the sill of the French window. Scott Carruthers stepped close to Lucrece Bouchette. Into his unnoticeable face there came a light which quite transfigured it. He stood with his hands clenched and rocked himself gently from his heels on to his toes, and from his toes back to his heels.

"The end of July, Lucrece," he whispered. "Then—all over!"

Oliver Ransom and Lydia Flight had vanished altogether out of his thoughts. Nahendra Nao? Well, he would still have a place—a sort of a place—in the plans of Scott Carruthers.

"You are frightened, Lucrece," he went on.

Lucrece Bouchette nodded her head slowly.

"I am."

But he did not understand why she was frightened. It was not out of pity for the young couple who had just passed out of the sunlight of the terrace to the cool shadows of the dining-room. Nor was it from any dread of discovery. She was frightened because when this crime—and that there was to be a crime she had no doubt—was completed, she would find herself linked for ever by the bond of that crime, to a man to whom she was beginning to trace her horror of the whole affair. Was she tiring of him? She asked herself that question as she stood opposite to him, her long eyes smiling to cloak her question. Was she even beginning to feel a distaste for him?

However, in the early days of July a house-boat, elaborate with awnings and flowers, the *Marie-Popette*, was moored to the big square wooden piles just above the town of Caudebec, a fast motor launch was tied up on one side, a dinghy on a painter trailed behind; and close behind that, a smaller house-boat was tied, in which were the kitchen and the servants' quarters. All, in a word, was set for the great event upon which Major Scott Carruthers had spent so much forethought.

And then a middle-aged and fastidious little gentleman who had once made a fortune in Mincing Lane, and now considered himself a patron of the artists, Mr. Julius Ricardo, walked quite innocently into the very heart of the affair.

CHAPTER V
JE M'Y OBLIGE

An unusually hot summer had persuaded Mr. Ricardo to break the precisions of a lifetime and leave London before the end of July. But where was he to go? It was too early for his annual visit to Aix-les-Bains. The date of that never varied. An advertisement upon a hoarding in Regent Street and a sudden recollection of Ouida's romances decided him. "I'll go to Trouville," he cried, in the middle of the road, and was almost run over by a Green Line charabanc.

Russian princes with hunting-boxes in Siberia were no doubt difficult to find, but there might still be *déclassée* mothers with daughters fresh as dew, irresistible tenors, gambling Greeks, and a fair sample of that odd section of his fellow-beings which it amused him to watch. But only the ghosts of them sauntered nowadays on the board-walk. The board-walk remained, certainly, a few yachts sat side by side on the tiny basin, and there was an empty casino. The rest was Southend-on-Sea. Mr. Ricardo consulted his Michelin Guide. Some spot close at hand, and still unspoilt—Caudebec! He had some water-colours of Caudebec, and etchings of its old cathedral with its soaring clock-tower, carved like lace.

He drove off the next day in his fine new Rolls-Royce car, crossed the vast forest of Brotonne, and coming to the ferry at St. Nicolas de Bliquetit, passed over the river into a place of summer peace. He was given a charming suite of a sitting-room and bedroom overlooking the Seine. He watched the oil-tankers and the tramps plod deeply-laden up to Rouen, and thrash down again empty to the sea. He made the acquaintance of young friendly and unpretentious people, students of the Slade School, artists beginning to have a name, couples upon their honeymoons. He commissioned a picture here, he bought a sketch there. He wandered among tiny squares and narrow ancient streets where brooks sang over stones. He made excursions into the high woods which embosomed the town. He explored William le Tellier's great church. Mr. Ricardo was perfectly happy. Even the gaudy dragonfly of a house-boat, at the upper end of the town, seemed to him to add a pleasant gaiety to the scene.

It was in William le Tellier's cathedral that Mr. Ricardo first met the party from the house-boat. A girl came noiselessly out of the cool shadows

of that high place to a spot where a shaft of sunlight slanted down from a window. She was dressed in white, from her shoulders to her shoes, and under her linen coat she wore a silk shirt open at the throat which showed a triple row of beads too big and heavy to suit her years or daintiness. One moment she was a blur in the gloom, the next she stood revealed from the small shining golden head and violet eyes to the slender feet. Mr. Ricardo traced his first startled foolish thought to those heavy beads, which seemed a decoration from an image in a niche rather than an ornament for a living girl. But he had this first impression, that he was witnessing the visitation to this old church of some lovely spirit. The next minute, however, he recognised her for the girl she was. But not before she had recognised him.

A young man with fair hair which seemed to have been bleached by the sun, stepped quickly to her side, as though only just that moment he had become aware that there was a stranger close to them.

"Mr. Ricardo," said the girl.

Mr. Ricardo tittered. He could not hope that he had been recognised at the back of the Omnibus Box at Covent Garden by a famous singer on the stage, but he was flattered.

"It is reasonable that I should recognise you, Miss Flight," he said with a prim little bow. "But that you should know me is amazing."

"The Mæcenas of Caudebec! Oh, come now, Mr. Ricardo!" she said mischievously. "Even in our house-boat we hear of your good deeds."

At the sound of her voice, another woman came quickly forward, taller than Lydia Flight, and without doubt more beautiful. But it was beauty with an exotic touch in it, of long sliding eyes and secret smiles. The smiles died quickly away, however, as she saw who it was that was talking to Lydia.

"This is Mr. Ricardo," said Lydia.

"Oh, yes," said Lucrece Bouchette. She bowed indifferently. She looked at the open door across the cathedral, where a great panel of sunlight lay on the stone floor. She looked at the watch upon her wrist. She yawned; and yet another voice broke in:

"Perhaps Mr. Ricardo can tell us."

Mr. Ricardo saw another man join the small party, the sort of man whom he would expect to see on a polo ground rather than in a church.

"This is Major Scott Carruthers," said Lydia. "We want you to tell us where is the Stone of Desolation."

Mr. Ricardo was at once in his element. He was a born guide, and since the party he was leading contained two beautiful women, he started off quickly lest they should slip away from him.

"The Stone of Desolation is in the wall of the apse at the northern end of the cathedral, and can be seen only from the outside. It commemorates, as you doubtless know, the twelfth of May, fifteen hundred and sixty-two, when Gabriel de Montgomery——" The panel of light upon the floor by the door was hidden for a moment, and a step rang upon the stones, but Mr. Ricardo paid no heed to it. He had his audience. He was in full flight.

"—When Gabriel de Montgomery led the Huguenot forces from Rouen and pillaged the cathedral. But here is something which I think will interest you still more."

He led them to a window high up above a closed door, and pointed up to it. The new-comer had joined the group, but Mr. Ricardo had no eyes for him.

"That is the window which Foulkes Eyton, Esquire, Captain of the Archers, gave to the cathedral when he governed the town for King Henry. You see the figures of St. Catherine, Saint Michael, the Holy Virgin, and Saint George transfixing the dragon. On each side of the window is his escutcheon, a shield in the shape of a fawn's head and underneath his motto: 'Je m'y oblige.' How shall we translate it? 'I bend to my work,' I think."

And suddenly, behind him, a voice low but clear said with a passionate violence:

"Yes, that's what we've all got to think of for these next few days, and of nothing else. We bend to our work, eh?"

Mr. Ricardo turned quickly round. It was actually Major Scott Carruthers who had spoken—the most unlikely person of all that group for so noticeable an outburst. And all in one way or another were affected by it. Lydia Flight was merely surprised. The man at her side, whom Mr. Ricardo was to know as Oliver Ransom, was suddenly troubled. He drew a little closer to Lydia Flight. The greatest change, however, was in Lucrece Bouchette. She had started away from Scott Carruthers, but her eyes were on him, and her lips were a little drawn back from her teeth. She put out a hand and touched the arm of the new-comer. Mr. Ricardo seemed to read fear, defiance, almost hatred in her expression. The only one who remained quite calm, except for a first movement, was this stranger. He said with a trace of an American drawl:

"That's O.K. by me, old man. But I hope I've done with bending and with work for the rest of my natural life."

He was unusually tall, he had a look, with his broad shoulders and long limbs, of tremendous strength, but he was built in so perfect a proportion that one felt it rather than observed it. He had a fine aquiline face, and dark wavy hair, and a neat elegance of person, so that Mr. Ricardo, taking him all in all, decided that he was the handsomest man he had ever seen.

"This is Mr. Guy Stallard," said Lydia. It seemed that the duties of introducing her party were thrust upon her. "Mr. Ricardo."

"Pleased to meet you," said Stallard cordially, as he held out his hand. "I believe that I have heard your name."

"Really? Really?" Mr. Ricardo asked, in something of a twitter of delight. He had been associated twice with a great French detective in cases which had rung through the world. He had been trampled upon and ridiculed; he had lived through ecstasies of horror and through nights of strange adventure; and such recognitions were his only and his ample reward.

"Really, really, you have heard of me?"

"Yes, sir," with an emphasis on the "sir," replied Mr. Guy Stallard. "And now I want to know you. I have rented till the end of the month that little château-like place round the bend of the river, on the other side. The Château du Caillou. And I'll hope to see you there, sir, before I go away."

Mr. Stallard once more shook Ricardo warmly by the hand. Lucrece Bouchette and Scott Carruthers had moved away and were now close to the door. Stallard joined them and the three went out into the sunlight together. As their shadows disappeared from the stone floor within the doorway, Ricardo heard a deep sigh of relief behind him, and turned about, to see Lydia Flight with her hand beneath her companion's arm.

"I was wondering whether you and your friend," he said, "would have tea with me at my hotel."

"We should love it," said Lydia Flight, and she presented to him Oliver Ransom.

They crossed the cathedral and came out into the little Market Square. Ahead of them, Lucrece Bouchette in a cool dress of light grey, Scott Carruthers and Guy Stallard in flannels, were still visible as they walked down towards the river.

Mr. Ricardo stopped, and uttered a little finical laugh.

"I'm afraid I'm very curious by nature," he said, as though his curiosity was a virtue, whereas in others it was a fault. "Two things have interested me this afternoon."

"Yes?"

It was Lydia Flight who spoke, and with a note of suspense. It occurred then to Mr. Ricardo for the first time that the whole party, with the exception of Guy Stallard, had even within these few commonplace moments betrayed signs that they were labouring under a rather grievous strain. Mr. Ricardo tried to put this couple at all events at their ease.

"Matters of interest to a student of the world," he explained modestly. "For instance, I am wondering why I have not enjoyed this summer the pleasure of hearing you sing, Miss Flight."

"That question is easily answered," said she. "Give me some tea and you'll be sorry that you asked."

"And what is the second thing which perplexes you?" asked Oliver Ransom.

Mr. Ricardo pointed a finger towards the disappearing form of Guy Stallard.

"There are two heads to that perplexity," he said, making light of it, but rather heavily. "First, where have I seen Mr. Stallard before? Secondly, why do I feel that his American accent is somehow incongruous?"

They turned down to the right and passed through the Place d'Armée towards Ricardo's hotel. At the corner by the salt granary, Oliver Ransom stopped.

"Perhaps, Mr. Ricardo, you will find the answers to those two questions yourself," he said very gravely. "I hope that you will, and that you will tell me what they are."

"Of course, of course," Mr. Ricardo replied.

He was being made uncomfortable, and he disliked discomfort. He looked at Lydia Flight. She was listening to her companion with a look of apprehension on her face. There was something behind this pleasure-party on the house-boat which had nothing to do with pleasure at all. Mr. Ricardo recalled with relief that he had read in that morning's paper that his friend Hanaud—Inspecteur Principal of the Sûreté Générale—was at Havre,

investigating a case of incendiarism in one of the great French liners of that port. And from Caudebec to Havre was a matter of thirty-four miles in a car.

CHAPTER VI
LE BYRON DE NOS JOURS

With her coat buttoned up about her throat Lydia Flight sat in a corner of the verandah, and over her tea told Mr. Ricardo how she had broken into the world of Grand Opera. She lost the air of frightened anticipation which had been evident in her, and she talked with gaiety and a sense of humour. Lord Chasborough and his wife at Rome had taken her to a little Maestro who lived in a tiny apartment at the top of a tall house in the Via Sistine.

"This little girl ought to have some singing lessons," they had said, and the Maestro had looked at her sourly and shaken his head. He had been with difficulty persuaded to hear her, and he had still shaken his head; and the Chasboroughs had left him with indignation.

"On the other hand, I was obstinate," said Lydia, "and I went again to see him and this time alone. He was franker in consequence. He said to me: 'You have a beautiful organ in your voice, Signorina, but it will come to nothing. Keep on with your little concerts in the drawing-rooms.' I asked him why, and plagued him till he answered. At last he threw up his hands in the air and said: 'Very well, I tell you. First of all you are English. No good! Second, you are with lords and ladies. For a serious artist—Pah!'"

Lydia Flight had very little money, but a great deal of courage. She cut herself adrift from her lords and ladies. She left the Excelsior Hotel and moved to the Hotel Quirinale in the Via Nationale, where she was allowed, since she had a back room, to house a piano.

"The Chasboroughs gave me up, but the Maestro gave me lessons, and I learnt in the Via Sistine and practised in my back room for months. The Costanzi Opera House, which was run then by Bonelli, a great singer in her day, was just at the back of my hotel, and my little Maestro was the sostitute there. That's to say, he played the piano at the rehearsals, and took the individual songs and generally bottle-washed for the regular conductor. He used to smuggle me in behind the scenes during the performances."

"You had become friends, then?" said Mr. Ricardo.

"Oh, yes, now that I wasn't with the lords and ladies," continued Lydia, and she laughed. "But we had to be terribly careful. The Maestro said that if

old Bonelli caught me in the scenery he would be fired out, and I should never be allowed in the theatre again. But as it was, I had the most wonderful time. I heard all the operas, I saw all the singers, I was quite close to them. They might have been angels, I thought it so wonderful."

"The Peri at the Gates of Paradise," said Mr. Ricardo, smiling. He had a very complete knowledge of the clichés available to make any conversation commonplace.

"Well, one morning when I was singing away at my piano," Lydia resumed, "up came a message from the manager saying that Bonelli had sent over to ask who was singing the Aria in Carmen. I ran downstairs headlong, I can tell you. Was I to go and see her? I asked. The manager was shocked. He said: 'Of course not. I sent word to the Signora that you were a lady, not an artist.' I could have cried with vexation, if I hadn't felt that it would ruin my voice for the day. I told him to telephone to Bonelli that I wasn't a lady and that I was coming over at once. I ran upstairs, put on my best frock—it wasn't very beautiful—did my hair, powdered my nose, and ran across to the stage door. There was the curtain up, no one on the stage, and old Bonelli seated in the stalls looking like some old burnt-out witch."

Lydia Flight swallowed, and shivered as though the ordeal in that cold dark theatre was once more to be undergone.

"She made me sit by her in the stalls and was as rude as she could be. 'Are you the girl that has been making all this noise all these days in that hotel?' she asked. I said meekly 'Yes.' She went on: 'Of course you can't sing. You're English, aren't you?' I didn't mind that so much, for it showed she had been making enquiries as to who I was. 'I hear you practising the Aria in the first act of Carmen and a coloratura song in the third act. I suppose that's all you know.' I raised my head as haughtily as I could and I said: 'I know the whole rôle, Signora,' which was a very big lie, and to my horror the sostitute rushed on to the stage from the wings. 'She can't sing yet, Signora,' he cried. 'She's not nearly ready.'

"'You hold your tongue,' shouted Bonelli, and she said to me: 'We'll go upstairs to my room.'"

"That sounded hopeful," said Mr. Ricardo.

"So I thought," Lydia resumed. "I went up with my heart in my mouth. She took me into a room with a small piano and then she looked me up and down.

"'Of course you can't sing. You took half an hour to doll yourself up, because you're English and the English can't sing. If you had been an Italian girl, you'd have been over here in your bedroom wrapper and your carpet slippers.'

"I was getting a little fed up now, so I said to the old woman: 'But you didn't send for me just to tell me all these unpleasant things,' and just for a moment the witch smiled good-humouredly, and I saw what a beautiful creature she must have been in her great days. She made me sing to her parts of Carmen, and then she startled me out of my life.

"'Can you sing that part on Sunday night?' she asked. 'Roma Toccini has gone sick, and if you can't, I must close the theatre.'"

"You had four days," cried Mr. Ricardo. "Youth! Youth!"

"Four days," repeated Lydia. "I rehearsed, and rehearsed. I hardly slept. I had my dresses to make—most of them, for I was running out of money, and the Maestro was in tears. However, it got out that I was to make my début—Bonelli saw to that, of course; the Chasboroughs and their friends rallied and took boxes. The fleet was in Naples. They got the Admiral up to Rome. I was so worked up that I didn't know whether I was on my head or my heels."

Lydia Flight was speaking with her eyes sparkling, her face radiant, and her words running one into the other. Ricardo seemed to hear from the auditorium the orchestra tuning up, applause greeting the conductor, the tap of his baton as he took his place.

"But you made a splendid success," he cried. He was the least jealous of men, and adored hearing of great triumphs achieved by young people after many discouragements. "It was telegraphed to London," and his face flushed and he seemed to be sharing that night with her.

"Yes, I did," Lydia cried in return. "But the Maestro was furious. All through the performance he kept coming to me and saying 'Que schiva!' and shook his fists. Bonelli said afterwards: 'You're not an artist, no! You have made things come out of that part which aren't there. An artist would have controlled herself to it. But you shall sing it again.' So I sang it again, flatly and shockingly, and a third time like the first time."

"And then you went on to the Scala."

"Yes, for the end of the season. But before that I got a request from Covent Garden to say what my repertoire was. Well, I didn't know then what a repertoire is. I thought it meant all the parts I wanted to sing. So I put

down all the mezzo-soprano parts I could think of—Carmen, of course, Mignon, Dalila, Clytemnestra, Octavian, Brangane, Kundry, Amneris, Azucema, and a host of others; and they engaged me at sixty pounds a performance, and old Bonelli rolled off her chair with laughter when I told her."

Lydia Flight became serious again.

"But, you see, Mr. Ricardo, the Maestro and Bonelli were right. I wasn't ready. I couldn't control myself to the part I was singing. So at New York I got those little nodes on the vocal cords which meant: 'Stop now or never sing again.' So I went unhappily down to Nassau, and aquaplaned in my best white satin frock, just to keep my spirits up."

"And to depress ours, since we hadn't the privilege of seeing you." Guy Stallard's approach had been quite unnoticed by the little group at the tea-table, so engrossed had Lydia's audience been in listening to her story, so eager and lively was she in the telling. But he was at their elbows now. He was leaning against the corner of the glass screen of the verandah.

"May I take a seat?" he drawled, and he drew up a basket chair to Lydia Flight's side. Was there a tiny movement of repulsion made by Lydia? If she made one, it was so slight that Guy Stallard betrayed no sign of having seen it. He stretched out his long legs under the table and leaned comfortably back, the fine column of his throat rising from the open collar of his white silk shirt, the dark wave of his hair accentuating the grace of his profile. He took his cigarette case from his pocket.

"I have an invitation for you, Mr. Ricardo," he said. "Madame Bouchette will be delighted if you will have tea with her party one afternoon on board the *Marie-Popette*."

It was remarkable how completely the congeniality of that little party had vanished. Lydia had lost all her gaiety, Oliver Ransom his delight in the quick changes of her face and the lilt of her voice. The cloud of inquietude was gathering about that couple again.

Mr. Ricardo, it is true, seemed unaware of it. But something was happening to Mr. Ricardo. He was sitting forward on the edge of his chair, his eyes bright, his head a little on one side like a bird, and he was watching Guy Stallard with an absorbing expectation.

"But she would like you to let her know beforehand the day on which you are coming," Stallard continued. "For otherwise nobody might be at home."

Ricardo had been waiting with impatience for those last words to come to an end. Whatever was happening to him had happened. He thumped his little fist upon the table.

"I've got it," he cried excitedly.

He looked round with a smile of triumph, whilst Stallard struck a match and lit his cigarette.

"Got what, Mr. Ricardo?" Oliver Ransom asked.

"Why I felt sure that I had seen Mr. Stallard before."

Stallard inhaled the smoke of his cigarette, and said lazily:

"But you can't have seen me before, Mr. Ricardo, unless, that's to say, you've visited Arizona within the last ten years. That's where I've been. Ten mortal years in Arizona. Searching for copper, certain it was there within a square mile, and not finding it. They thought me loony in Arizona. 'Shorty Stallard,' they called me. Short of his wits, you know, if long in the leg. But I found the copper at the last, and had the laugh of 'em. By gum I did."

And Stallard laughed heartily as he thought of the revenge he had had in the end. But again Mr. Ricardo was watching a face, and not listening to words.

"And why I felt that your American accent didn't belong to you, Mr. Stallard," he went on.

"Well, it doesn't," Stallard returned. "Any more than measles belong to you if you pick them up. I shall get out of it all right. I'm dropping it fast already. It's only when I'm a trifle excited that you hear very much of it."

"And where I did see you," Mr. Ricardo cried gleefully. "Yes, I've got that too, Mr. Stallard. Where I did see you?"

"And where was that?"

Stallard with one swift movement leaned forward from the hips, his body stiff, his great shoulders drawn back, until his face seemed to be within a foot of Mr. Ricardo's.

A wide smile spread over Ricardo's face. He was holding his audience, he was for continuing to hold it, and savouring its expectations.

"Well?" Oliver Ransom asked slowly; and "Well?" Guy Stallard repeated.

“In the portraits of Byron,” Mr. Ricardo cried, beaming and laughing with good humour. “I was as curious as a magpie about it. I couldn’t tell why I recognised you, and I hate forgetting faces. But that’s it. I’m satisfied now. That’s where I’ve seen you, Mr. Stallard. In the portraits of Byron. You’re Byron without his limp.”

Stallard leaned back again in his chair.

“In that case,” he said, “I think that I’m entitled to a brandy and soda.”

And certainly, at the moment, he looked as if he needed one.

CHAPTER VII
THE NET

At Caudebec it was easier to think of doing something than to do anything. Zeal and impetuosity were affronts to that drowsy, forgotten town. Mr. Ricardo let the time slip by without paying his visit to the *Marie-Popette*, though its gay awnings by day, and its long beams of light quivering on the waters at night upbraided him. Where was his curiosity now? His passion to be on the inside of the subtler little secrets of life? His enthusiasm for Grand Opera? Lapped in summer peace, he waved all such intemperances aside. To pay an afternoon call upon ladies, he must button about his neck the laundress's white band of slavery, and he was not going to do it. Besides, every day the most exciting things happened at Caudebec. A trim yacht one day would pass up the Seine to Rouen, a cargo boat might run on to a mud-bank, or the Paris newspapers might not arrive. Your whole attention was occupied by a diversity of events. Moreover, Mr. Ricardo had a vague recollection that he had heard Guy Stallard suggest that he should send word of his coming the day before he came. At once an absurdity and a presumption. After all, one did not come to Caudebec-en-Caux in order to write letters. Mr. Ricardo preferred to drive up the Calidu Hill in the cool of the evening to the Place du Gibet. On that small high open space on the roadside in the woods there was a bench. It was pleasant to sit there in the cool of the day and watch, far below you across the river, the empty rectangular fields marked off by their fringes of willows and poplars. Voices and the cries of animals and the peal of bells rose very soothingly in the still air, and do what one would, the eyelids closed.

But Mr. Ricardo, returning one evening from some such adventurous expedition, found upon the table of his sitting-room an envelope; and in the envelope a card inviting him to a fancy dress ball which Mr. Stallard was preparing to give at the House of the Pebble on Thursday, the 28th of July. It was to be an informal affair got up in a hurry. In the big dining-room upon the first floor he found out that one way or another Guy Stallard had made the acquaintance of every visitor during the past month, and that the whole colony was looking forward to this amazing way of winding up a summer holiday. Mr. Ricardo accepted the invitation that night.

This was the night of the 24th of July. The next morning Ricardo took himself severely to task. He knew himself to be naturally a busy little man, and sloth was creeping on him like a paralysis. "Really, really," he said to his reflection in the mirror as he tied his cravat, "I shall hardly dare to speak to the lady of the sliding eyes at the House of the Pebble, unless I present myself this afternoon at the *Marie-Popette*."

But he modified the exactions which this expedition demanded in two particulars, of which one, in the retrospect, was of some importance. He put on a white collar, it is true, but with only a semblance of starch in its make-up; and secondly he did not walk. If he walked, he must walk the length of the town along the broad front, past the wharf, if wharf it could be called, past the tiny jetty from which the ferry worked, to the end of the hard. There the road to Rouen curved to the left up the hill, and on the right a little footpath broke off which bent round the end of a villa and broadened out on to an embankment. The embankment ran straight between the shady gardens of summer houses and the river to the brand-new memorial to the crew of the Latham aeroplane who perished amongst Arctic snows in the search for General Nobile. Some half-way along this embankment the *Marie-Popette* was moored. The proper way for Mr. Ricardo was to walk along this embankment until he was opposite to the house-boat, hail it, and descending one of the flights of stone steps which at intervals led down to the water's edge, wait for the arrival of the *Marie-Popette's* dinghy.

But apart from his objection to the walk, Mr. Ricardo was no Alpine climber. Those flights of stone steps were exceedingly steep. The treads were far apart, and there were no handrails. Also the lower treads were always slippery with the tide. Mr. Ricardo saw himself with terrifying clarity being precipitated into the brown stream, and being rescued thence with every circumstance of indignity.

"That would be too much!" said Mr. Ricardo, and he noticed a dead leaf floating past him on the way to Rouen.

The tide was on the flow, then. Here was a better way. A rowing-boat was tied at the side of the river, and a boatman was dozing on the thwart. Mr. Ricardo jumped into the boat. "To the *Marie-Popette*," he cried, flinging out his arm like Napoleon leaving Elba; and he sat down heavily in the stern seat, as the startled boatman dug his sculls into the water.

This was the only rowing which the boatman did. He was Caudebec all through. Why row a boat which went by itself? He let it float upwards with the tide in a leisurely and gentlemanly way. Thus the boat approached the

Marie-Popette. From a long chair upon the roof, Oliver Ransom waved a welcome. Then the boat slid alongside, and the boatman in the bows held it against the house-boat. He was level with the last window of the big saloon at the stern. But Mr. Ricardo was level with the open after-deck behind the saloon. It was shaded with an awning, a Wilton carpet of brown pile covered the floor, and comfortable basket chairs with red cushions made it a place of ease. Yet the first impression which Mr. Ricardo received of it was one of unrest and disturbance. There was nothing in the attitude of the group seated there to which he could attribute his impression, even upon an analysis. But his sensation was vivid and definite. It was that under a smooth calm surface, far down, the sharks were busy.

There were three young women sitting at the three points of a triangle: Lydia Flight with her back to the saloon, the apex of the triangle, and opposite to her, Lucrece Bouchette and another, a stranger to Mr. Ricardo. She was, he thought, older than Lydia and a little younger than Lucrece Bouchette, and pretty with a sort of plump common prettiness. They were engaged in weaving a net of thick string, such as is used for a hammock, but as he watched, Ricardo noticed that the only one of the three who was really netting was Lydia Flight. Lucrece Bouchette was playing with her corner of the net, and the stranger with her corner resting idle upon her knees was watching Lydia; and, it seemed, without any friendliness in her look.

The tinkle and rush of the tide against the house-boat's side had drowned even the slight jar which the dinghy made as it touched. Mr. Ricardo's head was just above the house-boat's bulwark, and not one of the three had noticed his approach or was aware of his presence.

Then Lucrece Bouchette spoke to Lydia Flight, with the irritation of a captious mistress to a servant whom she dislikes.

"That won't do, Lydia. Your meshes are much too big. They'll make the net weak. If we get our fish into it, we don't want it to break through and get away, do we?"

"I'm sorry," said Lydia remorsefully, and with her netting shuttle she undid her last few knots and began again.

Lucrece Bouchette shrugged her shoulders contemptuously.

"Sorry! I seem to be hearing that excuse all day long from you," and the third girl sniggered with derision.

Ricardo was recognising for the hundredth time that the real test of character is applied when one finds oneself in a small position of authority.

The little functionary in an office who is more difficult and occupied than a Cabinet Minister, the Battalion Sergeant-Major who delights to make his recruits squirm upon parade, the advocate bullying and sneering at a witness in a law court, the châtelaine with a governess—they were all of the same ugly mould. Mr. Ricardo's spirit grew hot with indignation. The only one of that trio who had something of true distinction was being treated as if she was a clumsy maid of all work.

"It won't be for long now," said Lydia patiently.

As she bent over her work again, those heavy lustrous beads which she wore slipped out of the front of her shirt and fell upon her knee.

The stranger uttered a sharp little cry of amazement and leaned forward.

"Let me see!" she exclaimed, and she stretched out her hand towards them.

"No," said Lydia, and she drew back swiftly, and tucked the beads again into her bosom. "Don't touch them, please!"

The new girl went scarlet.

"Why shouldn't I touch them?" she asked defiantly.

"Because I'm not going to begin all over again," Lydia Flight said firmly.

Mr. Ricardo was beginning to feel as uncomfortable as if he had been caught spying through a keyhole. Here was a private quarrel going on, with which he had nothing to do, and of which he understood not a word. If he broke in now and announced his presence, Lydia might feel humiliated; if he waited for a better opportunity, he might be held guilty of eavesdropping. He was in a dilemma, and before he could decide how to escape it, the third, unknown, girl began again.

"I don't care!" she cried, throwing her head back. "It hadn't anything to do with me, and I've got a few useful words for anybody who dares to say that it had, Miss Lydia Flight." Mr. Ricardo had seldom heard so much malice and acrimony compressed into so few words. "I'm just as clean as any other girl, even including bust-up prima donnas."

She turned to Lucrece Bouchette with a look of suspicion.

"You telegraphed that Major Carruthers would be here. But he isn't."

"He's had to go to Trouville to arrange for rooms for the young Rajah next week," said Lucrece Bouchette, and Lydia Flight drew a breath of

relief, as though no prospect could be more welcome to her.

"So he's coming to Trouville," cried the stranger. Then she looked at Lydia and sneered. "I believe I could whistle him back if I wanted to," she said disagreeably. "He was crazy about me. Everybody called him the Prince and Son Altesse, but he was just Natty to me. That's why I wanted to see Scott Carruthers."

"He went away yesterday," said Lydia quietly.

"Yesterday?" The girl's voice went up into a scream and she swung round to Lucrece Bouchette, and the corner of the net slipped off her knee on to the carpet. "But I only got your telegram this morning. You only sent it this morning."

"It was I who wanted to see you," Lucrece explained calmly.

"And you used Scott Carruthers's name?"

Lucrece Bouchette smiled, in no wise put out.

"I thought my name would mean nothing to you," she explained sweetly. "Whilst Carruthers's name might seem to offer possibilities"; and before the girl could answer, Lucrece saw Mr. Ricardo's head above the bulwark of the *Marie-Popette*.

Mr. Ricardo had been uncomfortable before. He began now slowly and unaccountably to become terribly frightened. Lucrece Bouchette neither made a gesture nor spoke a word. She stared at him with the steady inscrutable stare of a wild animal. Ricardo had never been in a jungle, but he had read books about jungles, and he saw himself walking round a bunch of scrub in a desert and coming upon a panther six feet away from him. The very shape of her eyes, narrow and long between the heavy lashes, accentuated his fear, and the more they stared, the more dangerously they glittered. He was held by them in a catalepsy.

Then Lucrece Bouchette, with her eyes still upon him, leaned forward and tapped Lydia Flight on the knee.

"Your friend," she said.

Mr. Ricardo recovered himself sufficiently to plunge into apologies. He had shrunk from the walk on that hot afternoon.

"I was to have let you know beforehand," he floundered on. "But I didn't want to keep you at home if you had planned another expedition."

Lucrece Bouchette smiled easily at him now.

"Come on board, and I'll get Marie to make us some tea." She rolled up the unfinished net as she spoke, with her eyes upon Ricardo. "We've got to get this done if we're going to use it before we all separate at the end of the month. We thought of running down on the launch to the mouth of the river and seeing what we could catch."

Mr. Ricardo had now clambered on board and paid off his boatman. He picked up a stretch of the netting.

"But you could hold a shark in this, Madame Bouchette."

The new girl shivered prettily.

"I should die of fright if we caught one," and since Ricardo turned to her, Madame Bouchette was compelled to present her.

"Mr. Ricardo, Miss Elsie Marsh!" she ran on without a break. "Oliver! Tea! I'll put the net away. It's probably labour lost."

She carried the net into the saloon, and came back without it. Marie, the squat yellowish Javanese maid, brought in a table and the tea.

"Will you pour it out, Lydia dear."

The voice came from the saloon, dripping with honey. They sat about the table, and Ricardo was at pains to do his duty and chatter away.

"You are staying here long, Miss Marsh?"

"No. I've got to get back to Paris. I have my car here. It's not more than a hundred miles."

"But you'll be returning perhaps for the fancy dress ball?"

Elsie Marsh shook her head, and Lucrece Bouchette explained.

"We have promised to stay with Mr. Stallard in the Château. The poor man has no one to act as hostess for him. And it would be a bore if we had to motor back here in our boat against the tide. And in what character are you going, Mr. Ricardo?"

Ricardo giggled and blushed.

"I am going as a chef," he said. "I have borrowed a cap and apron. And you, Miss Flight?"

Lydia shook her head at him with an archness which was too exaggerated to belong to her.

"My dress is a secret. I have sent for it. I am going to astonish Caudebec, I assure you."

As she finished speaking a man's voice hailed the house-boat from the embankment, and looking across the little stretch of water, they saw Guy Stallard waving his hat at them.

"My!" said Elsie Marsh.

"That's our millionaire from Arizona," said Lucrece. She called out to the tender behind the *Marie-Popette*. A colour had come into her face, and her eyes were smiling. "We can have our talk after he has gone," she said to Elsie Marsh. "You may just as well dine here."

Elsie Marsh nodded.

"I'm going to write some letters," said Lydia Flight.

"All right, my dear," said Lucrece Bouchette.

"And if you don't mind, Madame Bouchette, your boatman shall put me on shore as he fetches Mr. Stallard," said Julius Ricardo.

He was very glad to get ashore. It had been a most uncomfortable tea-party. He had nothing against Elsie Marsh, but he definitely did not like her. Of Madame Bouchette he was rather afraid. And though he was drawn to Lydia Flight, he knew not whether to be more angry with the other two women for so deliberately humiliating her, or with her for so tamely submitting to it.

"I, myself," he added with a little titter as he walked along the hard, "was not at my best. I have seldom known myself less entertaining."

But when he had got over these small and unpalatable conclusions, he still remembered that he had not been meant to see that fishing net upon which Lydia Flight was kept at work.

CHAPTER VIII
THE REHEARSAL

All through that last week of July, Lydia Flight counted the minutes as they passed. On the Thursday morning she rose early, and slipping a dressing-gown over her pyjamas, went out to the after-deck and smoked a cigarette. It was five o'clock, the light clear and still, and a peace so deep sleeping on that green bay of the Seine that it seemed impossible that distress or anxiety could have a meaning there. Thursday was the day fixed for Mr. Stallard's informal fancy dress dance at the House of the Pebble. On Friday night, after the close of the Goodwood Races, the young Rajah would cross by the boat from Southampton to Havre. There he would be met by his secretary, Major Scott Carruthers. Thence the pair would motor to Trouville. On Saturday morning the party on the house-boat, Lucrece Bouchette, Oliver Ransom and herself, would travel also to Trouville. By midday the great rope of pearls would be handed over to the Prince, its lustre quite restored, and she would be free.

She drew a deep breath as she imagined that moment. Apart from her responsibility, all the greater now that it was more difficult to pretend that these were pearls from the Arcades, as Monsieur Crevette had described them, Lydia had been conscious of a growing fear and uneasiness. Lucrece Bouchette had become difficult, exacting—more than exacting. Lydia had noticed a glitter of hatred in her grey almond-shaped eyes more than once, when she had lifted her face from the net and caught Lucrece staring at her. Lydia had put up with it silently. To get through with her job and finish, and go back to her own life—she yearned for that. Two days more—only two days! But there was something being planned.

She had refused to acknowledge it until this moment. Now it sprang at her out of the clear still morning, a conviction which would not be denied.

In a little while Marie brought out to Lydia a cup of tea.

"Thank you, Marie," said Lydia, and as she hitched her chair nearer to the little table, something dragged at her foot. She looked down and laughed. It was the fishing net, which had been left lying on the floor, and one of its meshes had caught the rosette of Lydia's mule.

"We finished that net last night, Madame Bouchette and myself between us."

"I expect that mademoiselle did most of the work," said Marie with a sly amusement.

"I shan't say no to that," Lydia said, as she stooped to free her slipper from the mesh.

"Let me, mademoiselle," said the maid, and she dropped upon her knees at Lydia's side. The rosette was an outrageously big, fluffy thing like a powder puff, and the string had twisted itself tightly about it. Moreover, Marie's shoulders were shaking with laughter as she bent, so that her fingers fumbled as they worked.

"It is rather absurd that we should have sat up all last night to finish it," said Lydia, "for after all, we shan't now be using it."

Marie's shoulders ceased to dance, and her fingers to work.

"Oh?" she said without lifting her head. For a moment she remained quite still. "It seems a pity, mademoiselle. After all that work?" Her voice was growing stronger now, and more natural. "Your fingers, mademoiselle, must have fairly ached with all this knotting and unknotting. And now it's not to be used, you say?"

She released the mesh now from the rosette and gathered up the net in her arms.

"It's strong, too," she said regretfully, as she pulled at it here and there.

"Oh, it'll come in useful, no doubt, Marie, for some other purpose than catching fish."

"No doubt, mademoiselle," said Marie, with her eyes on the ground, and she turned and carried the net towards the saloon. In the doorway she met Oliver Ransom. He had slipped a pair of flannel trousers over his pyjama legs, and a blue fisherman's jersey over his trunk.

"Early," he said. "I'm glad."

"I, too," said Lydia; and she stood up as he approached her, all her heart in her grave and quiet eyes. He took her hands and drew her towards him.

"This is our hour," he said, and he kissed her upon the lips.

"Our little desert island of an hour amongst all the troublesome, crowded hours," she answered with a smile. She placed the palm of her hand against

his cheek. "You have had a great day in the Law Courts. Judges have thrown bouquets at you. Your clerk is marking up extra fees on your briefs. I have had the success of my life to-night at Covent Garden. I don't know how many calls I've taken. My old Maestro was in the wings tearing his hair and crying: 'What a farce! She can't sing!' We're both at home now—where are we living, sweetheart? A little house, all to ourselves, backing on a park. There's a cable on the table for me. Toscanini's on his knees. There's a telegram from the Government for you: 'If you won't be Attorney-General, we're done.' All the trumpery things must wait till the morning. We have our desert island of an hour, later nowadays than we had it at Caudebec, but we have it, all the same."

She was speaking in a low voice with such a depth of tenderness that the scene she pictured became actual before his eyes.

"Gorgeous," he said with a laugh.

"No, my dear. Lovely," said she; and she held him off from her and looked over his shoulder into the dark saloon, where the blinds were still drawn down over the windows.

"But this morning is spoilt," she said.

She took his hand and drew him to the stern of the boat, and sat him down in a chair beside her, so that they both faced the door of the saloon. Behind them the dinghy swung upon its painter; still farther behind, the tender and the launch were moored. Not a person was visible on the embankment; the river was empty; the water made a rippling music at their side, with now and then a little gurgle of laughter. Behind them, the sun had risen.

"I am afraid," said Lydia simply.

Oliver Ransom looked at her anxiously.

"Because we're so near to what we are longing for. The end of all this."

But Lydia would have none of that explanation. She shook her head. "You're only saying that to comfort me." She laid her hand upon his arm. "You mustn't do that, my dear. You're afraid too—oh, for me, I know. But you are afraid."

And now Oliver Ransom was silent.

Lydia dropped her voice to a whisper.

"Why was that girl brought here—Elsie Marsh? She came after Scott Carruthers had gone to Trouville. He never mentioned that she was expected before he went. He never knew that she was coming. She came secretly."

"But Stallard came here that afternoon. He saw her here."

"I know," Lydia returned. "But he was not meant to come that afternoon. I am sure of it."

"How can you be sure of it?"

"Lucrece didn't want him here that day." She nodded her head with the air of wisdom of an octogenarian. "Lucrece is obvious, my dear, as far as Guy Stallard is concerned. The first time she saw him, she was all hot and open-mouthed, and her eyes lengthening out till you thought they'd run round her head. And ever since, Oliver? Stuttering with passion, and all the more passionate, since——" and she broke off.

"Yes," Oliver Ransom answered. "Since . . ."

There was no need for words more explicit between them. Ever since Guy Stallard had made the acquaintance of the house-boat party during the first days of its arrival, he had singled out Lydia Flight for his attentions. With discretion, both Oliver and Lydia had to admit, but with persistence.

"What makes me wild, Oliver," Lydia said, clenching her fist and thumping upon her knee, "is that he's so sure that I'm going to run along to him in the end." She looked up with her brows bent in a frown, seeking for words which would define the kind of siege he was laying. "He's not complacent; I could let a little of the complacency out if he were. He can be quite attractive, indeed. He's just good-humouredly sure that try as I may to avoid him, and try as Lucrece may to allure him, sooner or later I shall drop into his arms."

"That's it," said Ransom, suddenly agreeing as much with an idea which Lydia's words had evoked in his mind as with the words. "He's the hunting dog. The worst of the jungle beasts, because of his unshakable patience. He'll sit under the tree his quarry has climbed until——" He broke off, impatient with himself and the cross-purposes of a mismanaged world.

"It's this great chaplet that keeps us quiet," said Lydia, feeling the rope hidden beneath her dressing-jacket of swansdown. "We can't help ourselves until we get rid of it."

Oliver Ransom nodded his head.

"That's right."

"And after all, it's only to-day and to-morrow," said Lydia, jumping up and laying a hand upon her companion's shoulder.

"That's all," replied Ransom with a laugh, "and this day we'll make a real day."

He had a small yellow two-seater open car garaged at the end of the quay.

"We'll motor to Saint Wandrille and see the abbey. Then we'll carry on to Rouen and lunch there. We'll pick up your dress for the party."

"Yes, it's at the station. I heard yesterday."

"Then in the afternoon we'll cross the river and motor down to the Château du Caillou."

Lydia shivered suddenly, and he put an arm about her waist and held her to him.

"You don't look forward to that?"

"I told you I was afraid."

And in a whisper he said:

"I too! I too!"

He had more reason indeed for fear than Lydia herself at this moment. He had watched the growth of Lucrece Bouchette's hatred for Lydia and knew it for the hatred which would find a pleasure that was quite exquisite in inflicting pain upon her victim. He, too, was aware of something being planned—something which aimed at Lydia. And beyond all that he was troubled by the riddle of Guy Stallard. That he was the chance tenant of the house across the river, he did not believe. There had been a few minutes when Mr. Ricardo had put the millionaire from Arizona to a good deal of discomfort. Left to himself, Ransom would have insisted that Lydia and he should refuse Guy Stallard's invitation. But Carruthers had wanted it to be accepted.

"We shall be there together," he had said. "I, too, am waiting for Nahendra Nao just as anxiously as any of you. Every little shadow frightens me too. But so long as we are together, we shall be all right."

The invitation could hardly, therefore, have been refused. It had been accepted, and Scott Carruthers had gone off to Trouville on the excuse of arranging suitable accommodation for his Indian Prince. There he had

stayed, however; and Oliver Ransom was beginning to wonder whether he would join the rest of the party that afternoon at the House of the Pebble.

Lucrece Bouchette was in her most gracious mood that morning when Lydia and Oliver Ransom were waiting in the stern for the dinghy to come alongside and set them ashore. She looked at her watch and said:

"You ought to get off if you are going to get your enjoyment out of the day. It's ten o'clock already, and you have got to get your car out of the garage. You haven't told me yet what you're going to wear to-night, Lydia."

"No! I'm going to keep that a secret," said Lydia teasingly. "As a matter of fact, it's too elaborate for the occasion, but I can't help it. It'll hide these pearls better than any other dress which I have got."

"All right," said Lucrece. She was not interested at all in the dress which Lydia had sent for from her little store of operatic costumes. What she wanted to do this morning was to get both her and Oliver out of the way as promptly as she could. She turned to Oliver as the boatman brought the dinghy up. "We are to have a floor of the house to ourselves, Monsieur Ransom, to-night. I'll arrange for the rooms so that there'll be no risk at all. You'll be at the house in the afternoon some time. Enjoy yourselves!"

She watched them land and walk along the embankment to the quay. It was a broad stretch of earth like a parade ground, and at the far side stood the garage in a row of shops. Lucrece Bouchette looked a little uneasily down the river. It did not matter, she assured herself, but she wanted those two to hurry. They were sauntering along, side by side, as if time was their servant, and Lucrece Bouchette's face lost all its beauty as her eyes followed them, or rather, followed one of them. There had been an hour on the Riviera when she had felt a pang of pity for Lydia Flight. But that hour during this last month had been altogether erased from her recollections.

"Fools!" she said to herself angrily. "Why don't they hurry? They have got one day, and they're wasting it." And again her eyes glanced anxiously down the river.

The yellow car was wheeled out from the garage, and its tanks filled. She could hear faintly the roar of its engine as Oliver Ransom started it. She saw it turn and disappear between the houses up the hill to Rouen.

"Just in time," said Lucrece with a little mocking bow towards the cloud of dust it left behind. For at the wide seaward bend of the river, a fast motor launch was dividing the water at its bows into two white swathes.

Mr. Guy Stallard came on board ten minutes later, debonair and Byronic, with a straw hat and a careless black silk tie.

"I reckon you've had a letter this morning, Lucrece," he said.

Lucrece Bouchette nodded.

"Telling you to take your orders from me?"

"Yes, Guy."

"And to ask no questions."

"Yes."

Guy Stallard looked at her with amusement.

"You're up to some trick, you know, Lucrece. You're being fine and modest, and whatever-you-want, sir, but you're up to some tricks, my lady. That girl, Elsie Marsh! What did you bring her here for?"

His tone was gentle and smooth and his lips were smiling, and he seemed to be asking the most innocent of questions. Lucrece Bouchette raised her eyes to his and shook her head.

"Won't answer, eh?" he went on softly. "Did Harvey Carruthers know that you were asking her?"

Lucrece raised her eyebrows languidly.

"I think you are the only person except myself who calls Major Carruthers Harvey," she said.

"Meaning?" said he.

"That we will leave it at that," she returned.

Guy Stallard was at a disadvantage. Carruthers had worked out his plan upon one clear principle. It was better that each agent of it should know no more than it was necessary for that agent to know for the successful performance of his own particular job. Guy Stallard suspected and, in spite of his demeanour, with a good deal of alarm, that Lucrece was twisting the threads of this plot to make a more attractive pattern for herself. If she was, she might be spoiling altogether a careful and elaborate scheme; and bringing an exceedingly nasty catastrophe upon them all. But he didn't know. He wasn't sure.

"Very well," he said grudgingly, at length. "Is your maid here?"

"Yes."

"We'd better go into the saloon and have her in."

They went into the saloon, and whilst Lucrece rang the bell, Guy Stallard drew up a chair towards the table. The foot of one of the legs, however, caught in something on the floor.

"What's this?" asked Stallard, as he stooped down and freed the chair.

"A fishing net we've been making," said Lucrece, and Marie came into the saloon.

"Now," said Stallard. He told each in turn exactly what she was to do. He showed each one how to do it. He made each one rehearse her movements and her actions, timing them, criticising them, until each one was exact and neat and noiseless. Outside the windows, the ships went up to Rouen and down from Rouen to the sea; Caudebec basked in the sun, its visitors and inhabitants going about their pleasant, easy occasions. Here in the saloon the grim and ugly rehearsal was repeated until even Lucrece Bouchette began to shiver with the horror of it.

"Harvey Carruthers will be there," said Lucrece, when at last Guy Stallard was satisfied.

"Yes, I've no doubt of that," Stallard replied. "But remember, Lucrece, it's up to you. As soon as the rocket goes up, you upset the bottle of champagne."

"You can trust me," said Lucrece slowly.

"You have Harvey's letter to you. The one you received this morning?"

"I tore it into the smallest pieces and dropped them a few at a time into the river."

"Good."

Guy Stallard had tied his launch to the side of the house-boat. He stepped into it and cast off.

"Until to-night," he said, and the launch gathered way and set the *Marie-Popette* rocking.

CHAPTER IX
IN THE ROSE GARDEN

So Lydia Flight and Oliver Ransom had their one day. A sky of a pale clear and pearly blue made their canopy. The high forests of the Lower Seine, St. Arnould, Le Trait, Jumieges and Brotonne, welcomed them into their warm and tender gloom. The sunlight splintered by the branches made a crazy pattern on the turf; and when they tired of this one, the yellow car carried them a mile along a golden road, and here was another. There was a spot where a rough side road turned up into the trees and stopped. Oliver drove his car to the end of it, and they got out. It was very still. They seemed to be walking in a green cathedral, and the moss was deep beneath their feet. They sat down side by side and rested their shoulders against a bank, hardly talking. The place was a place for dreams. A whisper, perhaps:

"Oliver!"

And another.

"Lydia!"

There seemed very little more in this world which was worth saying on that July morning. At their feet a broad band of gold ran across the moss, and changed as they watched it. It broadened until it looked like the doorway to a lighted room, of which the door was standing ajar. A few minutes, and the door stood wide open, and a great oblong panel of sunlight lay like an invitation. To escape through it and not come back! To leave the *Marie-Popette* and the House of the Pebble on this side of the doorway, and to run swiftly and silently down the golden corridor. Both of them played with the fancy.

"We should be very careful not to meet any of them again," said Oliver.

Lydia shook her head and smiled.

"I make an exception in favour of Mr. Ricardo," she said with a little bubble of laughter. "I should like to come upon him suddenly when he's showing off a little amongst delightful surroundings, and hear him say 'Really! Really!' and titter a little, and see him blush with pleasure."

She suddenly became practical. That image of an open doorway put another thought into her head.

"Oliver! What if we did bolt for it now?"

"Where to?"

"Havre!"

Oliver Ransom sat up with a jerk.

"We could cross by the night steamer. We could get rid of the pearls to-morrow. The rope's ready to be given back. We could take it ourselves to Nahendra Nao!"

The proposal was tempting, to Oliver as to her.

"But we don't know where he is," he said slowly.

"Oh, Goodwood."

"We can't hand it to him at the races. If we knew where he was staying . . . In that case we might perhaps . . . But even then . . . Don't you see, we might be thieves? If we don't appear at the Château du Caillou—we'd have the police after us. We shouldn't get away from Havre."

Disappointment showed in Lydia's face.

"I hadn't thought of that. No, I see. It wouldn't do." She pointed, with a whimsical flourish, to the golden door upon the turf. "I thought if we could only slip through"; and then she clasped her hands together in the urgency of her desire.

"A day and then a day," she cried.

They got into the car again.

They picked up her package at the station, lunched at the famous restaurant of the town, and dawdled on through the afternoon along the road to Caen, and turned northwards to the forest of Brotonne. They reached the park wall of the Château du Caillou by the river road about five in the evening. A narrow track ran up the slope by the side of it to a courtyard, on the front side. Here a pair of great iron gates gave entrance on the eastern side. The house, a manor house rather than a mansion, was a long building of red brick and white stone, and built in two storeys. A shrubbery with a winding path through it divided it from the park wall, outside of which the two lovers had come; and its large front door and a smaller service door beyond both opened upon the court. Opposite to them some tool houses and

sheds were built against the wall. A small postern door of wood towards the end of the wall upon their left hand gave admittance to the forest; and between this postern door and the iron gates stretched a garage with living rooms above it. A large car stood within the garage and a smaller purple one outside of it. One little man, who had the air of an ostler turned mechanic in his old age, was washing down the sides with a hose; and he was the only man visible. Over the domain hung that Sabbath peace which seemed the speciality of the district.

"For a house that's giving a ball to-night, it looks like good staff-work, what?" said Oliver to his companion; and the little man straightened his back and looked at them.

"You can find room for me?" asked Oliver Ransom in English.

"Mr. Ransom?"

"Yes."

"If you'll back her in, sir."

"Right!"

Oliver backed the car in and got out with Lydia.

"We have some luggage here."

"That'll be all right, sir," said the little man.

He watched Ransom come out of the garage, and said jocosely:

"Not much to spare, sir, between the top of your head and the garidge roof."

Oliver turned and looked back.

"Well, I suppose there isn't," he answered.

"Frenchies don't run to what you may call statcher," said the little man ingratiatingly, "though I'm told that's changed since the war. Near upon six feet, you are, I shouldn't wonder."

"To be exact, five feet eleven and a quarter," said Oliver Ransom with a laugh; and he crossed the courtyard to the big central door of the house. A French manservant received them into a small square stone-flagged hall.

"Monsieur Stallard's other guests," he said, "are having tea upon the garden terrace. Would you like to join them? Or would you prefer first of all to see your rooms?"

"I think," said Lydia, "that first of all we should see our rooms."

Behind the outer hall a wide lounge with tall windows opening on to a stone terrace occupied the body of the house. Beyond the terrace, a small rose garden spread its colours and its perfumes in the air, and then the grass dropped in a series of terraces to the park wall and the river beyond. On one of these terraces, Oliver Ransom observed, a strong mast was planted and stayed, and from the top of it a cable stretched to the first floor of the house.

"There is to be an entertainment after supper to-night," the butler explained.

"A tight-rope walker?"

"From the circus at Rouen. He calls himself Prince Ali Ibrahim, I understand, sir, but I think he comes from Nancy."

The butler led Oliver and Lydia Flight across the lounge to a broad stone staircase which, turning back upon itself half-way up, brought them out on to a wide corridor on the forest side of the house, with a row of windows overlooking the courtyard. A suite of rooms upon their right was occupied by Mr. Stallard, and beyond, a large gallery stretched above the lounge. The butler threw open the door and showed them the room waxed and polished for the dance, with a long balcony reaching out over the terrace below. Oliver was taking a note in his mind of as many details as he could. Both he and Lydia were uneasy, more indeed because their charge was almost fulfilled but not quite, than for any substantial reason; and he was as curious of the arrangements for the dance as if he was looking for a way of escape from an enemy's camp.

At the opposite end of the corridor a smaller staircase ascended and descended in a spiral by the outer wall, and a door faced them. It stood open.

"We are making a ladies' cloakroom here on the right," the butler explained. "There are one or two bedrooms and the passage leads on to the servants' quarters. We go up by this staircase to the next floor."

"I see," said Oliver, and as he took a step up he looked down. "This doesn't lead into the lounge, does it? I didn't notice it."

"No, sir. It leads down to the service door beyond the stone hall. I think I hear your luggage being brought up it now."

They mounted to the next floor, which was arranged upon the same plan; with the exception that in place of the long gallery below stretched a row of five bedrooms with a bathroom between each two; and at the end there was a

suite corresponding with the chambres de maître on the first floor. All these rooms looked out over the river, and their doors opened out on to the corridor with its windows upon the forest of Brotonne. They were well above the courtyard now. On the left the round smooth brown rock which gave its title to the house, rose like the rock of Sigiri above the Jungle of Ceylon. Just opposite to them stood an open square of turf on the slope of the hill. But for the rest, as far as the eye could reach, everywhere else the forest stretched upwards unbroken like an enormous canopy of green velvet. Here and there where a clump of trees grew on a mound, there was a boss, as though here a pillar supported the canopy; here and there was a dent, a hollow, as though here the canopy sagged through the weight of its fabric.

The butler went forward to the last door facing the corridor, and opened it.

"This Madame Bouchette assigned to you, monsieur. And the little suite here to mademoiselle."

The suite stretched across the end of the corridor, and its door faced the mouth of the staircase up which they had come. Ransom followed Lydia into a passage. Opposite to them as they stood in the passage with the bedroom door upon the left, were first a bathroom, and next to that a dressing-room. The windows of those three rooms looked up the river to the east, and were above the shrubbery between the house and the park wall. A door from the dressing-room led into the bedroom, as did the door from the passage. The bedroom itself was a large room with two windows overlooking the terraces and the Seine, and a low bed of satinwood was ranged between them.

The luggage was brought in as they stood there.

"Mademoiselle and monsieur are content?" the butler asked. "I was to make sure that they were satisfied."

"Quite, thank you," said Lydia.

"Then I leave you. As you will understand, there is much to do."

"Of course," said Oliver.

As he went away, Lydia said, looking around the room:

"Bachelors are the people to run houses! Look! Amber toilet water on the dressing-table. Balkan cigarettes by the bed. And did you notice?—a great bowl of powder in the dressing-room."

"Oh?"

Ransom opened the door of the dressing-room. There was a table beside the door on the left, and near to the window. Above the table hung a mirror, and on the table stood a big bowl of cut glass with a lid. Ransom took off the lid. There was a big puff, quite new, and under it a pinkish powder filled the bowl. He returned into the bedroom, to find Lydia bending over her big package from the Rouen railway station.

"You're it, you know, in this house, Lydia."

"I seem to be popular."

"Shall I help you with the cord?"—and he took out his knife.

"No," said Lydia with a smile. "I'm going to be it to-night, but not before. You can go out and wait for me in the corridor. I just want to see that the whole dress is here."

"All right!"

Oliver Ransom left her to her work. Lydia was quick. She put out the dress she was to wear, the stockings and the shoes and the gloves. She took perhaps fifteen minutes; then she came out into the corridor. Oliver was standing in one of the embrasures of the windows with his back towards her.

"Oliver," she said, "I am ready."

And he did not so much as turn his head.

"Oliver!"

Again he did not answer. She moved into the embrasure and stood behind his shoulders. The window was open; he was looking directly across the courtyard and over the enclosing wall to the small square space of turf on the slope of the forest. Above it was the dark green sea of leaves and branches, below it the spread of the tree-tops. This clear space had been empty when last they had looked at it. It was occupied now. Guy Stallard in a suit of grey flannel, which set off the beauty of his lithe figure, stood out against the slope. For a moment it seemed to her that he was practising a series of graceful movements, with outstretched arms and beckoning hands. Then she realised that all about him were birds. They were perched upon his shoulders. They swooped down at the beckoning of his hands, settled upon his wrists, and swirled in circles about his bare head. Lydia had never seen a sight like it in her life. She had been uneasy about Guy Stallard, she had shrunk from his advances, she had been afraid. She lost all her fears in a moment.

"Oliver!" she said, her eyes shining, her lips smiling. What fools they both had been. "Oliver!"

And Oliver turned to her. His face was white, and in his eyes there shone some secret knowledge which made him a mask of terror.

"Stand back, Lydia! Quick!"

And he himself stepped back from the embrasure. Had her cry of pleasure carried on the still air across to that open square of the forest of Brotonne? Or had their quick movement caught the eye of the man who was standing there? Neither of them could guess, but in a second he was gone.

"We must change our plans," said Oliver, looking about that wide corridor with restless eyes and speaking in a whisper. "We must get away from here—as soon as we can—without being seen—yes, without being seen."

"Oliver?"

Lydia's voice had sunk to a whisper which matched his. Oliver Ransom drew her by the arm to a spot where the strip of wall between the windows hid them from the forest.

"It may be all right," he said. "Very likely he didn't see us . . . and very likely I'm wrong . . . even if he did. Anyway—you were standing at the back—behind me. I don't think he could have seen you."

Oliver drew some consolation from that thought. But there was little evidence to support it. The panelling of the corridor and the doors of the rooms were of dark wood, and Lydia was dressed in white. She must have gleamed against that dark background like snow in a crevice of rock.

"I was looking over your shoulder. I think, too, that I was at your elbow afterwards, wasn't I?" she asked.

Her voice shook, though she tried hard to keep it steady. All the vague fears which had been darkening about her during these last days had been fused suddenly into one, a definite one, carrying an immediate threat.

"What did you see, Oliver?"—and she shook him.

Some dreadful revelation had been made to him. He had the look of a man searching for an outlet where no outlet was. Something he understood now which had been a secret, and he was not sure that he was not too late.

"What did you see, Oliver?" she repeated, and the question quickened him to action.

"We'll go down," he said, and he hurried Lydia to the staircase. They ran down to the first floor, and crossed the wide passage to the big staircase. Oliver Ransom looked out of the window. The doors of the garage were closed, and so were the heavy gates of the courtyard.

"We must take it easily now," he said. "We saw nothing out of the window, unless we are asked."

"But if we are asked? . . ."

"Then we say what we saw. We are thrilled by it. We are full of admiration. It was wonderful."

"Very well." And Lydia laid a hand upon his arm. And to her he applied the words which he had just spoken. He was thrilled by the feel of her hand; he was full of admiration; he thought her wonderful. For the hand was as steady and cool as if nothing had disturbed her. The fear was smoothed out of her face. Even her colour had returned to her cheeks.

There was no longer any clatter of voices from the terrace. It was extraordinarily silent in the lounge. The buzzing of a fly against a window-pane was a sound which was startling. They went out on to the terrace. Lucrece Bouchette sat there alone with a cigarette between her lips. She smiled at them lazily.

"You found your dress waiting for you?" she asked of Lydia.

"Yes."

"It is still a mystery?"

"Until to-night."

Lydia Flight was not planning a surprise to achieve a success for herself, though she knew very well that with her slim figure and her long and shapely limbs she could carry off her dress in this gathering as well as she had ever done it on the stage. The reason she had chosen it was that it would conceal the rope of pearls she must still wear, this chain as she had begun to think of it, more completely and effectually than any other costume. It was no longer possible to picture that the pearls were mere beads from the Arcades. They had got to be hidden. She had selected a dress which would hide them, and which at the same time might naturally be worn by her.

Lucrece Bouchette did not press her enquiries. She laughed with an amusement which Lydia did not understand.

"Well, you had your day in the woods, you two, at all events"—and out on to the terrace from the lounge walked Guy Stallard.

"Ah, you have come!" he cried, and he bowed low over Lydia's hand. "I should have been at my gates to welcome you. We shall dine early, and, I expect, rather haphazardly. The hotel at Rouen is providing the supper and the service, and so far as I can make out my own small staff is in hysterics already."

He laughed gaily and continued:

"We shall dine at seven, just as we are, and we shall have time then to dress comfortably afterwards."

"I suppose that Major Carruthers will be here in time for dinner," said Oliver Ransom.

"Oh, I hope so," said Stallard. "He ought, indeed, to be here already. I'll ask."

He went out through the lounge. It was close upon seven o'clock now.

"I shall go and tidy up, even if I am not to dress," said Lucrece Bouchette as she rose. "You have seen your rooms, and know where you are? Right! We'll meet down here, then."

She strolled off, and left Lydia and Oliver together.

"Let us have a look at the rose garden," said Ransom. "I think we have time."

They stepped off the terrace out on to a gravel path which turned and twisted amongst banks of roses, red and yellow and pink. Lydia turned and looked towards the house. No one was overlooking them whom she could see. Certainly no one could overhear.

"Yes?" she asked in a low voice.

"I think that I was alarmed without reason," said Oliver. He was anxious to spare her, and spoke therefore in a casual tone which did not deceive Lydia in the least. "But we might as well get away at the first chance."

"Yes."

"The gates will be open, of course, when the guests begin to arrive. They will be open for them to go away."

"They are shut now?" Lydia asked, bending over a rose the better to smell its fragrance.

"Yes."

"Locked?"

"I don't know."

"It was wiser not to make sure?"

"I thought so."

They strolled on side by side for a few yards. The light tone with which Oliver Ransom had begun, he was unable to sustain. He knew, moreover, that there was little need to sustain it. The hard bright flame which had fired Lydia to confront the first audience at the Costanzi Theatre, was burning steadily in her now. She had felt and even betrayed the artist's sinking heart and quivering nerve on the eve of the ordeal. Now that the ordeal was beginning, she had her wits as sharp and her courage as quick as ever in the rest of her life.

"You have a plan?" she asked, and she buried her nose in a big yellow flower, and inhaled its perfume with delight.

"A bit of one. We can't be very precise. This entertainment," and he glanced upwards towards the rope above her head, "is to follow on the supper."

"Yes."

"Something will be said about it, no doubt. We shall be asked to take our places on the terrace, shan't we? Everyone will jump up. I'll upset a glass of wine at our table—a full glass, or a bottle."

"Over me?" cried Lydia with a little grimace.

"Yes."

"And my fine dress?"

"I'll buy you another."

"Darling!"

In front of the windows they played their parts. If anyone watched them there was to be seen a couple of lovers laughing in a rose garden on a summer evening.

"As the guests crowd out on to the terrace, we'll slip upstairs."

"Unnoticed?"

"It oughtn't to be difficult."

"No. I shall have the excuse, too, of my wet coat."

"How long will it take you to change?"

"I must have that Gloire de Dijon, Oliver. I think I may steal that, don't you? About seven minutes."

"I am going as a chauffeur. So I shan't have to change. I'll wait for you outside your door."

He bent the spray down towards them and cut off the rose to which Lydia had pointed, smelt it, and handed it to her. "Exquisite, and therefore for you," he said.

"And this?" she said. "I am going to put it in your button-hole."

"Thank you. Then we must trust to chance. If I can wheel the car out of the garage. . . . There are bound to be other cars in the courtyard. Chauffeurs in attendance—too many for anyone to try to stop us."

Lydia pinned the stem of the rose under the lapel of his coat.

"There! You look half a bridegroom already, my dear." She gave his coat a pat. "Yes, we shall go straight to Trouville."

"Hand over the chaplet to the hotel manager, and tell him to lock it up for the young Rajah in his safe."

"And we should be free of it. Oh!"

She drew a breath of relief, as though she saw the safe-door closing upon it, as though she held the manager's receipt for it in the palm of her hand.

"If for some reason we can't escape that way, we must slip down to the river. There'll be a launch or two waiting to take people back to Caudebec."

Lydia shook her head.

"Guy Stallard's launch! We couldn't trust to it!"

"Perhaps Mr. Ricardo's too."

Lydia laughed joyously, and for the moment she was not acting at all.

"I'm all for Mr. Ricardo's launch," she cried.

"Hush!" said Oliver. "We ought to go in, oughtn't we?"

"Yes."

She slipped her hand into his and walked towards the windows of the lounge. But when they had crossed half the distance, she stopped.

"There's something I don't understand. This rope I am wearing—it's beyond value in some ways. I mean, I can understand any money being spent to keep it."

Oliver Ransom stopped and in his turn swung round quickly to face her. He did not interrupt. He waited indeed, as if he knew just what she was going to say.

"I can understand Nahendra Nao going to any expense," she continued. "But if our fears are right, don't you think a great deal of money is being spent to steal it?"

Oliver nodded his head.

"Yes, I do. I've been wondering about that myself. You see, there's one horrible possibility, isn't there?"

For a moment Lydia did not answer. She looked to this side and to that, with a puckered forehead, as though from some quarter surely she could draw an answer different from the one which stood and stared at her.

"We had better face it, my dear," said Oliver.

"That it's Nahendra Nao's own money which is being spent?"

"Yes."

Her voice sank to a murmur which was almost inaudible.

"And it's being spent by Scott Carruthers."

The suspicion which had been gathering for some days in each of their minds, was out now. And their knowledge that each had surely considered and rejected and considered it again, gave to it now almost the strength of a certainty.

"Yes, but even so," Oliver Ransom exclaimed, "we haven't got the whole truth. There's more than we suspect, I'm sure. If there's a plan, it's too elaborate, too worked out, for a theft even of that chaplet to explain it. If that were my last word, I should say there's some plot of which the theft of that chaplet is only a step."

And now Lydia whispered "Hush!"

But no one was watching them from any windows. No one sought to overhear a word of their conversation. Guy Stallard had gone straight from the terrace through the lounge and the hall to the courtyard. The little garage assistant had laid aside his hose and his clogs, and was standing with his

hand upon the door of the tool house close by the postern gate into the forest.

"Nick," Mr. Stallard cried, but the little man looked over his shoulder towards the garage.

"Nick," Mr. Stallard repeated, and he crossed the courtyard.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Nick, touching his forehead. "A little 'ard o' 'earing, nowadays, sir, old Nick Furlong."

Guy Stallard grinned.

"But willing, Nick."

"And I do say, sir, pardon the play on me names, one willing Furlong's worth a couple o' lazy miles."

"You damned old rascal," said Mr. Stallard, bursting out into a laugh, and he continued on the same level of voice with the same pleasant humour on his face: "That fellow saw me, Nick. He saw me from the top windows—saw me up in the woods."

"Oh?" said Nick Furlong, thrusting out his lower lip. "Birds?"

"Yes."

Nick Furlong tilted his cap on one side and scratched his head.

"I never could understand about birds. A nice mouse, now, you can make a friend of a mouse and keep 'im in your shirt. I've done it myself. But birds! I don't like their beady eyes. In'uman, you might say, sir. So that bloke saw you?"

"Yes."

"D'you think he's wise to anything? An Indian flattie, ain't he? Hugh! I should bother my 'ead about him."

"I'm not bothering my head, but I'm taking no risks," said Mr. Guy Stallard. "He was staying with the Doctor, you know."

Nick Furlong's face lit up.

"Now there's a bit of nasty work, sir," he said venomously. "Never gave you credit for an innocent thought, did he? A cold and sneery God-damned bloke"—Nick Furlong spat to give due emphasis to his words. "Always picking on you for something, just because you wasn't brought up in the same circle as himself. People who smoke 'Avana cigars ought to take the

bands off. Why? I asks. What's the use of me paying fourpence for a 'Avana cigar if I've got to take the band off before I smoke it? I wants to know."

"I can't answer that one, Nick," said Mr. Stallard. "But I reckon the Doctor did a bit of showing off and talking to his friends. Psychology stuff! And I'm taking no risks."

He repeated that phrase without stressing it, but Nick Furlong understood that the argument was closed.

"All right, Mr. Stallard. His little musical box see you too?"

"I don't know. But I've got other plans for her, Nick."

He turned and went back into the house. Nick Furlong pulled at his long lower lip.

"Five foot eleven," he said discontentedly. It seemed to him almost inhuman that an Indian flattie should measure up to five feet, eleven inches. "Oh, well, hit goes!"

He spat on his hands and retired into the tool shed.

CHAPTER X
A BOTTLE OF CHAMPAGNE

Mr. Ricardo did hire a launch for that evening and brought over in it to the Pebble Castle the last stragglers amongst Mr. Stallard's guests. Night was still at odds with day when Mr. Ricardo pushed off from the Caudebec hard, and as his launch swept round the bend of the river, the blaze of lights in the high gallery still fought with the afterglow of the sunset. A little pier jutted out into the Seine with a private gate upon the road, and a motor carried the guests up the hill to the courtyard. There were some cars from the neighbourhood with their chauffeurs, as Oliver Ransom had foreseen.

Mr. Guy Stallard received his guests at the top of the big staircase. Wearing a high stock, a frilled shirt and the black pantaloons of the eighteen-twenties, he was more Byronic than ever. His dark hair was parted on one side and pomatumed.

"One of the Aisles of Grease," Mr. Ricardo murmured brightly. He followed the stream into the gallery and watched for a little while the usual medley of these affairs—blackamoors, pirates, columbines and houris. Mr. Ricardo looked about for his little friend Lydia Flight, and saw her dancing with Oliver Ransom. She was wearing the white satin of the young Octavian in *The Rosenkavalier*, when he is presenting the silver rose, and a cravat of batiste was wound about her throat under the high collar of the coat, and tied in a huge bow under her chin. She was looking quite lovely, Mr. Ricardo thought, with a colour in her cheeks and a sparkle of excitement in her eyes; and he was not surprised to hear Guy Stallard at his elbow say:

"I am going to take that young lady away from her boy friend. Wouldn't you do the same, Mr. Ricardo, if you were the host instead of me?"

"And if I were your age," Mr. Ricardo answered politely. "As it is, I am afraid that I should feel a little ridiculous if I were still indulging in the light fantastic, eh?" And he tittered modestly.

For a moment Mr. Stallard was baffled. Such phrases no doubt were seldom heard in the copper fields of Arizona. Then he grasped Ricardo's meaning.

"You don't dance? Then the host's privileges must wait upon the host's duties. You play bridge?"

"Just a normal game," said Mr. Ricardo, who rather fancied himself as a bridge player.

Guy Stallard took his guest by the arm and led him downstairs into the lounge. There was one table already occupied, and a second set out. Stallard busied himself in collecting three others, and Mr. Ricardo found himself in partnership with a Madame de Viard; and from that moment his evening became a continuous descent of the long stairs of melancholy. Heaven forbid that a full account should ever be given of his desperate efforts to enliven the slow and portentous game which was played that evening. Let one sad instance suffice. He was playing the hand, and Madame de Viard was dummy. She was something of a grenadier with a long, sallow face, black unfriendly eyes, and more than a suggestion of a black moustache. A daunting woman, but Mr. Ricardo had collected four tricks from dummy and saw his way to making game. He encouraged himself to make a little jest. He said:

"*Maintenant où est-ce que nous irons pour le miel?*"

The silence of the frozen North received those words. His partner stared at him as if he was a natural. Mr. Ricardo made the gravity of the situation worse by a nervous giggle. He then led out of the wrong hand and went one down.

The rubber was hardly over when Guy Stallard reappeared. The doors of the supper-room were thrown open, and to Mr. Ricardo was allotted the duty of attending upon Madame de Viard. Ricardo was a gallant little gentleman. Moustachioed ladies were never favourites of his, and he especially disliked them at meals. But he stifled a sigh and offered his arm. Madame de Viard shot at him a glance—a basilisk glance he considered it—and sighed quite openly.

"I do not think that this party is one to be remembered with pleasure," she said. "At all events by a woman who has moved in a different world in Paris."

"No?" said Mr. Ricardo. He could not with honesty declare that he was enjoying himself.

"No," said Madame de Viard.

The supper-room was a long room alongside the lounge, running from the garden terrace through almost the whole depth of the house. Double

doors from the lounge opened into it, and on the opposite side towards the courtyard end was the service door. It was a charming room panelled in dark lustrous wood with a painted ceiling and its two long windows opened upon the terrace. A waiter led Madame de Viard and her companion to a small table for two just below the doors. Ricardo had his back to the wall, the open windows upon his right, and the room with its tables in front of him. He was, in fact, occupying exactly the position which perfectly satisfied him. He could observe the guests, their whims and behaviour, he could fit them into little stories of his imagining and take no responsibility for any one of them whatever. Unfortunately he was hampered by a censorious and moustachioed lady.

"The ceiling, I take it," he said, "is by Cottele de Meaux."

"The supper is certainly by the Railway Buvette," Madame de Viard replied, as she drank her cup of *consommé*.

He noticed that at a table laid for four near the centre of the room, Guy Stallard, Lucrece Bouchette, Lydia Flight and Oliver Ransom had taken their seats.

"So you are of Paris, madame?" Mr. Ricardo continued. "The Ville Lumière?"

It has been said that he had the proper phrases at the tip of his tongue.

"Yes, and anyone who has moved in the great world of Paris—the real Paris, monsieur"—this to keep Mr. Ricardo in his place if he fancied that he knew anything of Paris except the Place de l'Opéra, the Boulevard des Italiens and such sham-wicked places in Montmartre as industrious French people instituted to ease the pockets of the foreigners—"must realise that this is a party definitely of the second class. Nice people smile but they do not guffaw. No! There are artists here! They will throw bread before the supper is over."

"I have many friends among artists," said Mr. Ricardo stoutly.

"Ah!" said she disdainfully. The basilisk eye swept over him. "I am not astonished."

For herself she had never mixed with such people. Her papa would never have allowed it. But when one marries a little doctor of the provinces, what is one to do?

"Monsieur de Viard is then the Medical Officer of the district?" Mr. Ricardo asked.

"Yes. So you see!"

No more clearly or unpleasantly could she have declared that she had been sent in to supper on the arm of the last of the Has-Beens. Mr. Ricardo, however, was not to be put down. He bridled. He replied with spirit.

"But, madame, you must pardon me if I point out that you are entirely wrong. The young lady at the table there is an operatic singer of high distinction. Your host is a millionaire from Arizona. The supper comes from a famous restaurant and not from the Railway Buvette, and, honestly, you are one of the worst bridge players that I have ever seen."

"Monsieur, that is enough," she replied, drawing herself up with dignity. She looked around the room, throwing up her chin like a horse. Then she spread out her hands. "And I—think of it—I am a Tabateau."

Mr. Ricardo refused absolutely to be impressed.

"A Tabateau," he repeated carelessly.

He saw Guy Stallard rise from his table, and beckon forward a guest from the doorway. He heard Mr. Stallard say: "You must take my place—Mr. Horne, isn't it? Yes. I saw a most admirable one-man show of yours, I think at the Leicester Galleries. Charming!"

Stallard pressed the artist down by the shoulders into his seat. "Madame Bouchette will look after you. I have to see that my tight-rope dancer has arrived from Rouen sober."

He moved away and so resolved a tiny little problem which had plagued Mr. Ricardo beyond its merits. Ricardo had not been able to make out why he rather disliked Guy Stallard. He was friendly, well-mannered, quiet and more than usually handsome, and the touch of roughness in his phrases and the unmistakable look of pain in his eyes were fast disappearing as Arizona was left farther and farther behind. Yet Mr. Ricardo was not at ease with him. Something offended him and he realised what it was. There was an excess of elegance in Guy Stallard's movements. He was too graceful to be permissible. His elegance amounted to slinkiness. Ricardo watched him moving in and out amongst the tables, a god, but a slinky god. Byron without his limp and with a sort of dancing-master's finish which certainly Byron never had.

"I am glad," he said, "I have got that settled."

Madame de Viard's grim face relaxed a little. She took his words to herself. This little wisp of unimportance at her side had been trying to place

her in her category all the evening. He had been paying her his due tribute, and tributes even from little wisps of unimportance are pleasing.

"Yes. I am a Tabateau," she said, expecting congratulations. She was disappointed.

"Ah, yes! So you said!" Mr. Ricardo adjusted his pince-nez and nodded. "A Tabateau!"

"A Tabateau," she repeated impressively.

"From the Rue de la Paix."

"The great jeweller."

"I once bought from him a little trinket for a Christmas present," Mr. Ricardo continued. "A miniature gold fish with the tiniest of ruby eyes. Quite charming, Madame de Viard."

It seemed to Ricardo that the moustache bristled upon her lips. With a glance she basilisked him. But before she could say a word, outside the open windows there was a loud hiss as though a play had failed; and a rocket shot up into the air, burst and descended like a flaming parasol.

Everyone in the room jumped—even Madame de Viard *née* Tabateau, even Mr. Ricardo. But Mr. Ricardo, whilst he jumped, kept his eyes open and so witnessed one of the intriguing little incidents of everyday life which to him were the salt of the earth.

A bottle of champagne, still three-quarters full, was standing upon the table where Lucrece Bouchette, Lydia Flight, Oliver Ransom and now Mr. Horne, the artist, were taking their supper. As the rocket hissed and ascended, two arms were suddenly stretched out towards the bottle, the shapely white arm of Lucrece and the arm of Oliver Ransom sleeved in his dark blue pilot coat. Oliver Ransom won—and very clearly to Lucrece Bouchette's annoyance. Annoyance? Mr. Ricardo reflected that annoyance was not the descriptive word. Some emotion much stronger than that shook her frame and contorted her face. The bitterest disappointment, the sudden fury of one who has been the fraction of a second too late and sees herself in consequence utterly defeated. Oliver Ransom held the bottle.

"Madame Lucrece?" he asked, tilting it towards her glass.

"No, thank you," she cried angrily; and upon that Oliver Ransom dropped the bottle, so that it fell upon its side on the table and rolled gushing out its contents in a foamy stream towards Lydia Flight. Lucrece Bouchette stared at that bottle as though she could not believe her eyes. She sat with

her mouth agape, her eyes wide open, and then as the wine slopped over the edge of the table on to Lydia's fine white satin coat, she suddenly leaned back in her chair and rocked with laughter. She carried her amusement up to the very edge of hysteria.

Mr. Ricardo could not misunderstand the odd little scene. No pantomime could have been more explicit. For some reason to which Ricardo had not the key, Lucrece Bouchette had wanted that bottle of champagne to be upset. She had stretched out her arm to seize it. Oliver Ransom had anticipated her. She had lost her chance. She had been wild with disappointment and fury. And then, to her stupefaction, by an accident the very thing which she wanted to happen had happened. The bottle had slipped from Oliver Ransom's fingers and had rolled over to drench and stain the skirt of Lydia Flight's fine gold-embroidered coat.

But Mr. Ricardo had noticed a detail still more intriguing which had altogether eluded Lucrece Bouchette. There had been no accident; Oliver Ransom had dropped that bottle deliberately. With a twist of his fingers, quite obvious to Ricardo, he had even set it rolling towards Lydia. He had wanted her on her feet, as she was now, trying to dry with her napkin her saturated coat.

"Lydia, I am so sorry," he cried in dismay, and at that moment Madame de Viard at his side cried:

"Mon Dieu!"

Ricardo turned to her. She, too, then had observed with consternation the ruin of as pretty and decorative a garment as could be found in that room. But there was no regret whatever visible on Madame de Viard's face. For a moment Ricardo fancied that the daughter of the Tabateau was scandalised by the sight of a pair of slim and shapely legs sheathed in silk stockings and satin breeches. But Madame de Viard was staring at Lydia Flight's hands, which were nimbly readjusting the huge butterfly-winged bow under her chin. When she sprang up, her cravat had been twisted awry and the lace fall had caught on one of the glittering buttons on the breast of her coat.

"Mon Dieu!" Madame de Viard repeated with a gasp.

"She is certainly exquisite," said Mr. Ricardo.

"I meant nothing of the kind," Madame de Viard returned tartly. For she was now aware and unappreciative of Lydia Flight's legs.

Meanwhile Lydia was plying her napkin.

"I'm drenched," she said. "I shall have to run upstairs and change."

"I'll come up with you," cried Oliver Ransom.

But it was easier to say it than to do it. They tried to make for the door opening into the lounge. But the whole company was on foot now and pressing towards the windows. There was a glare of light over the garden and the quartette from the ballroom was tuning up on the terrace. The entertainment was about to begin. Oliver and Lydia Flight were forced to wait by their table until the stream had passed them by. Lydia noticed that Lucrece had crossed the room, and moving away from the terrace on the side where the press was lightest, had slipped out by the service door. "That's the way we should have gone," she realised. By the time, indeed, they were able to cross, there were only Madame de Viard and Mr. Ricardo left in the room and they were following the other guests out by the glass doors.

Chairs had been arranged on the terrace during supper. The glare of light came from two powerful projectors upon the balcony of the gallery on the first floor. They lit up the thick rope stretched tightly between the mast in the garden and the balcony, and turned it into a cable of gold. The moon had sunk, but the night was clear and the sky above spangled with a pattern of innumerable stars.

Mr. Ricardo found a chair for Madame de Viard and another just behind her for himself, and prepared to enjoy himself. There was something charmingly bizarre in the setting of this entertainment, and Mr. Ricardo had a liking for the bizarre so long as it was not dangerous. He also loved to see people doing perilous things, so long as he was not involved in the peril. At a prize-fight he felt the punch without the pain. At a football match he was winded, yet breathed equably. So now he was going to slip with the tight-rope dancer, fall like a man in a nightmare, and yet keep his feet firmly on the terrace slabs. He looked at his watch. It was a little after half-past twelve. He lit a cigar.

"Oh!" cried Madame de Viard in front of him, shaking her head as though a swarm of gnats was stinging her. "Do gentlemen smoke cigars now in the neighbourhood of ladies?"

Mr. Ricardo was greatly inclined to say "No" and go on smoking. But he had not time to make any answer at all. For as he took his cigar reluctantly from his lips, the music crashed and out from the balcony Prince Ali Ibrahim, as he styled himself, of the Rouen Circus, slithered out on to the rope, his balancing pole waist-high in his hands.

Mr. Ricardo applauded and Madame de Viard shrugged her shoulders at his naïveté. Prince Ali Ibrahim was dressed in white with a scarlet sash about his waist. He ran, he danced, he brought out a table and a chair, he cooked an omelette and ate it and at last he slipped.

"Oh!" Mr. Ricardo gasped, feeling his heart stop.

"Puerile," commented Madame de Viard, and that was more than Mr. Ricardo could endure.

The scene was absorbingly picturesque: he was making a speech to her in his mind, a dumb speech but utterly crushing. The odd dresses, the white shoulders of the women, the man on the rope so much more at his ease than many of the guests had been on the floor of the ballroom, the contrast between the fierce glare of the projectors and the calm beauty of the night, the little cries of awe and fear which burst from the spectators—all combined to make up an entertainment, with just enough of the barbaric to give it a pleasantly sharp tang.

"That old camel has spoilt my enjoyment altogether," Mr. Ricardo reflected; and very quietly he slipped out of his chair. He was standing close to the long windows of the supper-room. One step back and he could light his cigar again and be free of her supercilious comments. He took the step back and finding himself in the supper-room remembered that he had noticed neither Lydia Flight nor Oliver Ransom come out on to the terrace. The girl had certainly had time enough to change even from her elaborate costume. He walked out of the supper-room into the lounge. There, too, the glass doors stood wide open; and Ricardo argued that on coming down the stairs they had slipped out by the door nearest to them in order to lose as few of the tight-rope dancer's feats as they could.

For himself the evening had been spoilt. He would not return to the terrace. Prince Ali Ibrahim might stand on his head on the rope. He probably was standing on it at this moment. "I shan't see him," said Ricardo firmly; and he could not avoid a sensation that he was unjustly punishing Prince Ali Ibrahim by not seeing him. Nevertheless that had to be. He turned his back on the terrace and went out through the stone hall into the courtyard; and there he relit his cigar.

CHAPTER XI
MR. RICARDO THINKS IT TIME TO GO

It was very quiet in the courtyard, quiet and cool and dark. A lamp shone at each side of the gateway. Inside the garage, but sufficiently at the back to be out of Mr. Ricardo's sight, another light was burning. It lit up the entrance and the pavement of the yard in front of it. The windows of the living rooms above were in darkness.

The chauffeurs of the different cars stationed in the courtyard were no doubt watching the entertainment. Mr. Ricardo had seen a group clustered about the garden door of the servants' wing. He heard a prolonged exclamation now from the other side of the house, which greeted some new audacity of Ibrahim Ali. No one would be likely to return to his car until the performance was over.

So he reasoned, and was aware that he was wrong. For someone was moving in the open garage. A car was wheeled out, a small two-seater with a yellow body—Oliver Ransom's car. Ricardo had seen it too often flashing about the roads round Caudebec to be in any doubt. The man who pushed it out swung it round to face the gateway, and Ricardo saw that he was dressed in a chauffeur's uniform, a dark pilot coat, breeches and leggings, and a peaked cap.

"Oliver Ransom," said Ricardo to himself in considerable perplexity.

He could not see the man's face, but he was wearing the dress which Oliver Ransom had worn at the ball; and Oliver Ransom had left the supper-room on the heels of Lydia Flight. What in the world was he doing here alone?

The man went back into the garage, and Ricardo saw that he was of the build of Oliver. He saw no more, for the light inside the garage went out. He looked around him, for he expected now to see Lydia Flight come running from the house to join her friend. But no one came from the house behind him.

He heard a door bang, the whirr of the engine, and suddenly the small yellow car moved forward. The exhaust was open, a foot was on the accelerator, and the car shot out between the high gate-posts with a roar and

went throbbing down the slope to the river road. Mr. Ricardo ran to the gates. He watched it turn to the right at the bottom of the slope on the road to Rouen. For a second or two its lights flashed amongst the trees. He could see here and there a few yards of road bathed in a momentary radiance; and then all but the noise of its engine had gone, and a little while after that too ceased. Mr. Ricardo looked at his watch. It was one o'clock in the morning.

Ricardo was uneasy, although he could not have given any reasonable grounds for his uneasiness. He could not say that there had been anything furtive in this departure. It was unexpected, and perhaps—yes, certainly—disappointing, as it would not have been had Lydia Flight slipped out and jumped into the car by the side of the driver. But it was not secret. Mr. Ricardo turned round to go back to the house, and saw standing quietly just behind him the little old man who was posted at the gate.

"Did you see that genelman go, mister?" asked Furlong. Ricardo was not then aware of his name.

"Yes, I did."

"I hope I don't git into trouble over this. Mr. Ransom, wasn't it?"

"It looked like Mr. Ransom, and it was Mr. Ransom's car," replied Ricardo.

"I ought ter 'ave been on the spot, sir, to make sure he was all right. That's my dooty. But I was looking at that Indian on the tight-rope. A 'uman fly, I calls him."

"I don't think Mr. Ransom was in need of any help," said Ricardo.

Nick Furlong nodded his head gratefully. His little beady eyes looked up and down Mr. Ricardo and gave him an odd sensation of discomfort.

"Well, if I gits into trouble, mister, p'r'aps you'll speak up for me," said Furlong. "'Ow could I expec' Mr. Ransom would want to go rushin' off whilst that man was dancin' between heaven and earth?"

And how could anyone else expect him to go rushing off whilst Lydia Flight was changing her dress? Ricardo wondered. He walked back to the house. Here was a mystery which for once did not amuse him. Something's wrong, he felt, and for those two young people he wanted everything to go right. He opened the front door and passed into the lounge. As he crossed the lounge a great round of applause told him that the performance was over. Half-way across he stopped. Against the dark staircase he saw a gleam of white, a sparkle of buckles and gold embroidery. Lydia Flight, still dressed

as Octavian, from head to foot, stumbled down the stairs and leaned against the wall as if she was on the point of swooning.

"My dear," he cried, in the greatest concern. "What has happened to you? You are hurt?"

Lydia gazed at him with blind eyes. She heard a kindness in his voice, but the speaker might have been the wild man from Borneo for all she knew.

"No, I am not hurt," she said, shaking her head. "I am not hurt at all." She gave him an odd suspicious look. "Are you a friend of mine?"

"Of course."

"I don't know," said Lydia stubbornly. "Lots of people aren't friendly, lots and lots, you know. Perhaps you haven't had to fight"; and Mr. Ricardo felt a trifle ashamed. It was true that he had made a fortune in Mincing Lane by his own abilities, but he had inherited a little business to start with. He had not had to jump into the cockpit and fight as this young girl had had to do with no other weapons than God had given her.

Again the applause burst forth on the terrace. The acrobat had slid forward along his rope and with bended knee was bowing his acknowledgements. The applause and the cries and the grating of chairs upon the flags awaked Lydia's attention. Her lips parted, and her breath came fast, and a light burned in her eyes.

"I have made a success!" she cried. "'Que schiva?' It's no use, old Manotti," and she began to laugh wildly, clapping her hands. And then she stopped, and tottered and would have fallen, had not Ricardo slipped an arm about her waist and held her up.

"Find Oliver for me," she said. Her head was bowed forward against his chest, and the words only reached him in a whisper. There was so tender an appeal in her voice that Ricardo dared not give her the only answer which he knew. But Lydia insisted. She threw her head back, and shook him by the arm.

"You can find him for me? Why can't you? It's not like you."

Mr. Ricardo answered miserably:

"He has gone."

Lydia frowned at him. Gone? Gone was a word, but it didn't mean anything. Gone? What was he talking about?

"He went in the car. The little yellow car. I saw him go. He went towards Rouen"—and he felt her whole weight upon his arm. A couch stood against the wall at the foot of the stairs. Mr. Ricardo lowered her on to it gently.

"I'll get you a glass of water. I'll be back in a minute. Stay there!" he said, but whether she heard him or not, and if she heard, whether she understood him, he had no idea. He ran across into the supper-room, found a glass and a jug of water and a bottle of brandy. He mixed a strong grog, and hurried back to Lydia. By this time, however, the people from the garden were crowding back into the lounge. Some stood in groups chattering at the tops of their voices. Others were mounting the stairs for their wraps. When Ricardo reached the couch, Guy Stallard was standing in front of Lydia and shielding her. Ricardo gave her the glass, and she drank from it, and gave it back.

"Better?" he asked gently.

"Yes."

She sat staring at the floor, and then raised her head. She looked at Guy Stallard.

"I'm distracted," she said with a little break in her voice. "He says that Oliver has gone."

Guy Stallard wheeled round upon Ricardo.

"Gone?" he asked. "What do you mean?"

There had been an odd violence in his movement, and a peremptory abruptness in his voice. Mr. Ricardo was not to be browbeaten.

"I saw him go."

"In his car . . . towards Rouen . . ." Lydia added, leaning forward.

Stallard's eyes were still upon Ricardo. They were rather implacable, rather menacing.

"When did you see him?"

"Ten minutes ago."

"Where were you?"

"In the courtyard."

"Did anybody else see him?"

Mr. Ricardo remembered the little man's prayer that he should not reveal to his employer his absence from his post. He contented himself with saying:

"Your man at the gates."

"Furlong?" said Stallard. A smile suddenly softened his face. "You seem to see a good deal, Mr. Ricardo, one way and another," he said, and he turned back to Lydia.

"But I don't believe it," he continued reassuringly. "It was dark in the courtyard, I expect, wasn't it?" The question was put to Ricardo.

"Yes," he admitted. "But there was a light in the garage as he pushed the car out."

Guy Stallard refused to accept that confirmation of Ricardo's statement.

"Mr. Ricardo has made a mistake, that's all."

"Yes, yes," said Lydia eagerly, and Lucrece Bouchette slipped on to the couch at Lydia's side. She was dressed as a lawn tennis player, with a bandeau about her head, a short white flannel skirt, and a short-sleeved shirt.

"What's the matter, dear?" she asked, and she clasped Lydia's arm affectionately as she spoke.

Lydia Flight, as she said herself, was distracted. She was not accountable for the movement she made, or even for the word she used. But she reacted in the strangest way to the greeting and the touch of Lucrece Bouchette. She uttered a scream—a little sharp, piercing scream which drew the eyes of everyone who was in their neighbourhood, her face grew scarlet, and she shrank away trembling to the end of the couch.

"There are still some people in the garden," said Stallard quickly to Lydia. "Let us see if Oliver is amongst them."

Lydia was on her feet in a second.

"Yes," she said gratefully, and she slipped a hand between his arm and his side. They went off together through one of the window spaces. Lydia in her eagerness was no longer aware of Mr. Ricardo with the tumbler in his hand.

Lucrece Bouchette was also unaware of him. She sat watching Guy Stallard and Lydia Flight as they passed out on to the terrace. The light from the two great projectors on the balcony overhead had been turned off. A step beyond the windows, and the dark night received the two searchers. Guy

Stallard in his black dress disappeared from view at once. But Lydia's, which was outlined against the gloom, flickered as she moved. Ricardo had an illusion that she was quite alone, and that she was following in the dark and through many perils a trail which led to nowhere. He heard her voice raised in a loud cry: "Oliver! Oliver!" He heard Stallard repeat the cry: "Ransom! Ransom!"—and a movement by Lucrece Bouchette upon the couch caught his eyes. She was sitting crouched forward, her face towards the window. Her lips were drawn back from her teeth, her mouth was open in a grin, the grin of an animal. Her face was a livid mask, such a mask as a votary of horrors might design, ugly, wolfish, cruel, and cruelty was the dominating note of it. She stood up suddenly and no doubt Mr. Ricardo moved. For her gaze swept round upon him. For a moment, before their fire was veiled, he saw her eyes; and though he had once or twice seen murder in a face before, he had never seen it so paraded.

Mr. Ricardo was so shocked that he drank the rest of Lydia's brandy and water in a gulp.

"It's time for me to go," he stammered, and from the stairway an acid voice remarked:

"I think so indeed."

Ricardo would never have imagined that he could greet the intervention of Madame de Viard with pleasure. But he was warm with gratitude now. Her basilisk eyes meant less than nothing to him. There were still a few stragglers to be collected. It was two o'clock in the morning when his launch, the only one which was left, pushed off from the pier and beat upstream for Caudebec.

CHAPTER XII
BIRDS OF A FEATHER

To Julius Ricardo that evening was a bitter disappointment. The gloom of it clouded the next day and it was to be the last day which he would spend at Caudebec. He had hoped to carry away with him into his quite unnecessary villégiature at Aix-les-Bains charming memories of a forgotten townlet on a bay of the Seine. Instead he was actually going to carry away some grim and disturbing pictures; the yellow car shooting out from the gateway of the empty courtyard and purring swiftly along the road to Rouen; Lydia Flight stumbling down the stairs in her gay gala dress, with despair on her face and a cry for Oliver upon her lips; Lucrece Bouchette crouched upon her seat in the lounge, the very likeness and epitome of hate. Ricardo even in the sunshine of noon shivered as he recalled the steady fury of her long and narrow eyes, the cruelty of her face. She had been all Mongol at that moment when Guy Stallard disappeared in the garden by the side of Lydia Flight.

But the night brought to him some consolation. For whilst the moon was still up and the sky clear, the motor launch of the *Marie-Popette* came tearing down the stream past the hotel, and a girl was riding behind it on an aquaplane board. She wore a bathing-dress and a scarf about her head tied in a flowing knot which blew about her face. The motor launch swept down to the bend and turned on a wide curve, the water breaking from the bows in two rolls of white fire. Mr. Ricardo held his breath as he watched the girl hardly keeping her balance and straining back upon the reins. Then under the opposite bank, where little but the flash of the water was visible, the launch sped homewards to the house-boat. Ricardo's anxieties were allayed. He, like ten thousand others, had seen a picture of Lydia Flight aquaplaning in the channels of the Bahamas on a moonlit night.

"I shall probably never go aquaplaning myself," his argument ran. "My youth was spent in the age of bathing-machines on wheels. But I need not aquaplane myself to be sure that it is a sport for young people on the top of their spirits. I don't see despair upon an aquaplane board. So if my little friend Lydia is swaggering down the Seine on hers to-night, I may infer that her troubles are now unloaded."

Whether it was sound or not, the argument satisfied Ricardo; and the next morning, his bill paid, his luggage all packed upon his car and many cordial farewells taken, at the reasonable and gentlemanly hour of a quarter to twelve he set off for Havre-de-Grace. His plans, of course, were all mapped to the last detail. He would take his luncheon at a famous restaurant on the Quai which had a spécialité de la maison. Mr. Ricardo's palate was in fact no more delicate than yours or mine, but he liked to think that it was. "On mange bien chez Victor," he would say. "Recommend yourself to him by mentioning my name, and ask for les croustilles du batelier. You will not be disappointed." After his luncheon he would saunter round the quays and criticise the yachts. He might with luck meet his friend Hanaud, Inspecteur Principal of the Sûreté Générale, who had been engaged at Havre upon a question of incendiarism on one of the great Atlantic liners. He would look into the Museum, he would dine at the Hotel Frascati, and towards eleven o'clock he would occupy his cabin-de-luxe on the Havre-Southampton steamer. He would reach London on the Saturday morning, pick up his valet and more luggage at his fine house in Grosvenor Square, and leave again for Aix-les-Bains on Sunday morning. Meanwhile his chauffeur would drive his forty-nine-fifty Rolls-Royce car, the latest model, from Havre to Aix, and he would find it waiting at the station to carry him up the hill to the Hotel Majestic. Thus he planned, and certainly he did lunch chez Victor at Havre-de-Grace.

It was a few minutes past one. At his elbow a high window commanded a corner of the sunlit quay and a basin where grimy smacks from the Normandy bay threatened the white daintiness of half a dozen pleasure yachts. In front of him was the comfortable square room with its cushioned benches against the wall; and by the side of his table stood Victor himself.

"The croustilles du batelier, Victor, a minute steak with a few soufflé potatoes and a flan," said Ricardo.

"And to drink, monsieur?"

"I think—yes—a bottle of the Haut Brion, Victor."

He named the year of the vintage, pretending to a Frenchified taste in wines. Three in the cask and seven years in the bottle. No more. A foolish humorist had once sought to jest with Ricardo on this important matter.

"I've always thought it should be seven years and a quarter in the bottle," he had said.

"I cannot allow it," Mr. Ricardo had replied, and there was an end of the conversation. He now turned to Victor.

"It is two years, my dear Victor, since I ate in Havre, and I confess I came to you with trepidation. The Café Anglais, Voisin, Paillard—where are they? We need a new Villon to write a ballad of dead restaurants. The transatlantic ladies ordering water and their hometown cereal, and that is the beginning of the end. Beware of them, Victor!"

The croustilles were placed in front of him crisply brown. The Haut Brion glowed darkly in a thin wine-glass. Mr. Ricardo would not admit for a moment that his sense of contentment was due to the picture of a girl whom he had thought to be sunk in distress, racing joyously down the Seine on an aquaplane board. No! It was due to the cooking at this famous Restaurant du Sceptre. Ricardo saw himself as a modern and more respectable Elagabalus and wondered with a tinge of awe that Mincing Lane should thus compete with the Imperial purple. And whilst he thus wondered, to his insufferable disgust a dirty grey feather from some bedraggled fowl floated down from the air and settled on the white table-cloth beside his plate.

"Really?" said Mr. Ricardo, as with the tips of his fingers he dropped the offensive thing upon the floor.

Behind him a full ripe voice chuckled and said:

"Birds with a feather flock together."

"Of——" Ricardo corrected automatically and realised that he had only one friend who so maltreated the English language.

"Hanaud!" he cried warmly, and he sprang to his feet. He shook hands with a large and burly man who had the mobile face and the blue chin of a comedian. "You shall lunch with me. Victor, another chair, another plate, another bottle of wine. I shall mark this day with a white stone after the fashion of the Romans." He placed Hanaud in a chair at his elbow. "You cannot do better, my friend, than eat exactly as I am eating."

Hanaud, Inspecteur Principal of the Sûreté Générale, waved his hands with enthusiasm.

"Have I not always said that Mr. Ricardo was amongst the princes of gastronomy!"

It would have needed the long memory of Macaulay to recall amongst the sayings of Hanaud anyone half so flattering to Mr. Ricardo; and even Ricardo himself was puzzled. But there was growing up within him a desire to confide to his friend the disturbing little riddle of the House of the Pebble and to ask if he could solve it. After all, once or twice they had put their heads together in other days; and continuing his thought he spoke it aloud:

“Together, my dear Hanaud,” he said rather fiercely, “we were to be reckoned with.”

“Together,” replied Hanaud without a twitch of his lips, “we were formidable.”

“Formidable is the word,” cried Ricardo, and he ordered the largest cigars and the fine de la maison. “I shall tell you something. I leave Havre to-night by the Southampton steamer. But I am a little troubled. Oh, no doubt I am making anxieties for myself out of nothing at all. But I should like you to hear—yes it is curious—the house-boat, the net——” Mr. Ricardo broke off suddenly. Not until this moment had he thought of linking up his visit to the *Marie-Popette* with the events at the House of the Pebble. That visit, however, became very vivid to him now: the girl working away obediently at the meshes, Lucrece Bouchette, the petite fonctionnaire in petticoats and—oh, yes, certainly not to be forgotten, the vulgar little creature about whom some Highness or another was crazy. Here was another troublesome picture taking shape by the side of the other. “Yes, it just shows,” Ricardo continued aloud. “To tell one’s story is the first step towards understanding it.”

“It certainly will be for me,” Hanaud interposed drily. “For up till now I do not understand one word of what you are saying.”

“Very well,” said Ricardo, “I shall begin again. This morning I left Caudebec.”

“Caudebec?” exclaimed Hanaud and he jumped in his chair.

“It is a town between Havre and Rouen,” said Ricardo. “Caudebec-en-Caux. I have been staying there for the best part of a month.”

“You?”

“I!”

“At Caudebec?”

“At Caudebec.”

“But what are you saying to me, my friend?”

“Very little up till now,” Mr. Ricardo rejoined, “and I shall say still less if you interrupt me at every word.”

Hanaud grovelled. Later on he would try to make his dear friend understand that his interruptions were not without reason.

"I beg you to proceed," said he. "You keep me on the pothooks."

"I do not," Ricardo rejoined firmly. "Only backward children are kept upon pothooks, and I am not a schoolmistress, though to be sure two nights ago," and he giggled lamentably, "I was a cordon bleu."

Hanaud clamped his jaws together. He would not utter even a cry of despair. He would try to find a way through this maze of words. He fixed his eyes upon the opposite wall and he listened.

Ricardo told him of his first meeting with Lydia Flight and her escort, with Lucrece Bouchette, Scott Carruthers and Byron without his limp, in the cool shadows of the cathedral; of his visit to the *Marie-Popette*; and of his discomforts and perplexities during the ball at the Castle of the Pebble. He tried a little word-painting, and listened to his own narrative with considerable pleasure. When he came to the upsetting of the bottle of champagne, he described it with the mock heroics which really seemed to have a faint kinship with the Rape of the Lock. But as he reached the flight of the yellow car, Lydia stumbling down the stairs and the murderous glances of Lucrece, the story deepened of itself. And on the top of his uneasiness, a certain alarm chilled him. Hanaud was so very still, so very alert. Ricardo was driven to force himself to a lightness of tone.

"Of course what had happened was a lovers' quarrel between Lydia Flight and Oliver Ransom. Everything's so terribly serious to young lovers. A quarrel and what is left but the interminable years of loneliness waiting for old age and the tomb. Oliver had dashed off in a rage and Lydia stumbled down the stairs," and his voice trailed away miserably, for he did not believe a word of his explanation, and he added defiantly:

"Anyhow, I sleep to-night in my cabin-de-luxe on the Southampton steamer."

If Hanaud heard that statement, he paid no attention to it whatever. He said:

"But that pretty explanation leaves two things unexplained. The young lady's shrinking from Lucrece Bouchette upon the couch, and the violence of Lucrece Bouchette's reaction."

"Oh, that!" returned Ricardo. He was more than ever determined to sleep in his cabin-de-luxe. Old adventures gave a pleasant tang to a choice luncheon in a restaurant of the first order, but it would be deplorable to repeat them. "It is possible," he said airily, "that Lucrece Bouchette had set her cap at the limpless Byron."

Suddenly Hanaud turned towards his companion.

"I shall tell you a question which troubles me," and the look upon his face was a shock to Ricardo. There was a fierceness in it, and an absorption. Furlong, the little ostlerish man, would have said he was not "'uman," and indeed he was not. He was a hound which had picked up the scent.

"Yes?" asked Ricardo.

"What was Elsie Marsh doing that afternoon on the *Marie-Popette*?"

Ricardo was staggered. Certainly the question had passed through his mind, but he had dismissed it as an odd but insignificant problem.

"Elsie Marsh? You know her?"

"Of course. Elsie Marsh of the Casino de Paris. Who doesn't know her?"

"Of the Casino de——" Mr. Ricardo sat with his mouth open. So that was who she was! "I'll tell you something she wasn't doing. She wasn't doing any work on that fishing net. She was talking of a Highness."

"The young Rajah of Chitipur, whose mistress she used to be," Hanaud explained, "and whose quite irreplaceable rope of pearls was stolen on the night of the fancy dress ball at Mr. Stallard's Château du Caillou."

"What!"

"Yes. And your friend, Miss Lydia Flight, was wearing it, and her friend Oliver Ransom was guarding it."

Mr. Ricardo opened his mouth once or twice like a fish gasping for air. Then he touched Hanaud on the arm.

"That is undoubtedly of the utmost interest," he said, "and nothing would have delighted me more than to hear what you have to say about it had I been free. But I have a cabin-de-luxe on the Southampton steamer ——"

"I could not wish you to travel in any less commodious manner," Hanaud interposed. "But I point out that the steamer does not leave until midnight."

"That is so, of course."

"And during the summer months, a boat with cabin-de-luxe leaves every night except Sunday at the same hour."

Mr. Ricardo lifted a finger to summon his dear Victor. This effort to delay him must be stopped at once. He must have his bill and take flight and

lock himself in a room at the Hotel Frascati. He must see the light on the Nab Tower wane in the dawn and the banks of Southampton Water slide past him in the fullness of the morning. He must breakfast on the boat-train to London.

"I have my curriculum," he said.

"A minute ago it was a cabin-de-luxe," said Hanaud, who was puzzled. "See! There is a clock on the wall. It says a few minutes after half-past one. For a few minutes more I shall tell you my difficulties. Then for another few minutes we put us the heads together in the old way. Again the world will say: 'Oh, la, la, la, that formidable couple!'"

Mr. Ricardo could not but smile with pleasure. He was torn and rent. The young man dashing off in the car—Octavian stumbling down the stairs. Of course if they were thieves, private inclinations must be suppressed and justice done. They wouldn't have much chance—poor people—if Hanaud and himself were launched in pursuit. On the other hand if they were innocent what a fine stroke of fortune they would experience! What all these arguments really meant, of course, was that Mr. Ricardo was as curious as a giraffe. He was twitching with excitement.

"I shall hear you," he said magnificently, and Hanaud drew so profound a breath of relief and one so cloudy with all the incense of flattery that the light upon the Nab Tower was extinguished and the banks of Southampton Water were hidden out of sight. Hanaud wanted help.

CHAPTER XIII
THE FORMIDABLE COUPLE

"Yesterday," said Hanaud, "the young Rajah Nahendra Nao received a telegram telling him that his famous rope of pearls had been stolen. The telegram was sent by his secretary, Major Scott Carruthers, from Trouville, on information which Miss Lydia Flight had given to him that morning at Trouville. The telegram was brought up to the Goodwood Private Enclosure from the house at which Nahendra Nao was staying, and Nahendra Nao received it at one o'clock. There was a little delay at the house and a little more on the race-course before the Rajah was found. He acted thereupon with a good deal of common sense. Your Ambassador to France was present and Nahendra Nao told him the story of this chaplet. And at once telephones got busy and your Ambassador missed a race or two. I need hardly tell a citizen of the world like Mr. Ricardo that such an affair found us sympathetic to the extremest degree. We have our own Princes of the East and we know the difficulties when, young and inexperienced and headstrong and rich, they find themselves in our glittering cities with the smooth mob of rascals and thieves at their elbows. We are tender with them. Perhaps we strain the laws a little so that they may go home without a scandal. So in this case. The chaplet spoilt by Elsie Marsh and cured by Lydia Flight must be recovered. Not so easy, hein? But more, it must be recovered quietly. Otherwise Nahendra Nao's papa may shut Nahendra Nao up in a box for the rest of his life. And, mark me, Nahendra Nao is a gentleman. I have seen him. I bear the testimony of Hanaud. A great gentleman. That is agreed."

"That is agreed," said Mr. Ricardo meekly. He might have had a word or two to say, of course, if he had not been so terribly anxious to hear the rest of the story.

"Well, then! Tact is wanted. Discretion is wanted. The keenest sagacity is wanted. And authority is wanted. Where shall all these qualities be found combined in one man?"

"Where?" echoed Mr. Ricardo.

"But by a stroke of fortune, Hanaud is at Havre. He has just concluded with superb success a most difficult enquiry. Hanaud is at Havre!"

"Oh, what a blessed thing!" cried Ricardo fervently, clasping his hands together, "that Hanaud is at Havre!"

Hanaud looked at him, his forehead puckered in a frown.

"You draw my leg," he asserted.

"I do not," said Mr. Ricardo stoutly. "And even if I were an artist, I would refuse to draw it. There are limits even to the distortions which artists allow themselves."

It seemed that Hanaud had been paid a compliment. He chuckled, he nudged Mr. Ricardo in the ribs with his elbow, a familiarity which Ricardo had never found to his liking.

"You are a comic," said Hanaud. "But I continue. The Prince Nahendra Nao was a wise one. He telephones to the Major Scott Carruthers that he and Miss Lydia Flight shall wait for him at Trouville. But a message comes to me through the Prefect of Police at Havre that he will cross by the Southampton boat—if in a cabin-de-luxe he does not say—and see me alone this morning."

"And he crossed?"

"Yes, he crossed."

"And you saw him?"

"I saw him."

"And he told you?"

"He told me of his affair with Elsie Marsh, of which I knew already," and Hanaud explained to his companion the enlistment of Lydia Flight and Oliver Ransom and Lucrece Bouchette by Major Scott Carruthers, and their long pilgrimage, which had ended so disastrously at Caudebec.

"But of what happened on that night of Thursday at the House of the Pebble in the forest of Brotonne, I know nothing except what you have told me," he concluded.

"And what have you done?" Mr. Ricardo enquired.

"Ah! I have asked the Rajah to stay quietly at Havre. I do not want the newspapers to get busy with his name. I have asked him to send Major Scott Carruthers and Miss Lydia Flight to meet me this afternoon at the Château du Caillou."

"I agree," said Ricardo sententiously.

"And I am now wondering whether my friend Mr. Ricardo, who has his fingers on the pulse of this affair, will drive me back to Caudebec in his fine Rolls-Royce car and give a poor worn-out detective the benefit of his assistance."

Ricardo could not resist the appeal. The cabin-de-luxe must go unoccupied. Aix-les-Bains must wait with what patience it could. If Lydia Flight and Oliver Ransom had proved false to their trust, he would be gentle with them, but firm.

"I go with you," he cried magnanimously. He scribbled a telegram to the patron of his hotel, re-engaging his rooms, another to the shipping company cancelling his passage; he sent a message out to his chauffeur to hold himself in readiness.

"I am ready," he cried, thumping the table with his fist.

"That is excellent," Hanaud replied calmly, and he raised his goblet with the liqueur brandy swirling in the bottom of it to his lips. "For I have a munch."

Ricardo stared at him in perplexity.

"A munch?"

"It is my habit to make use of your English idioms," said Hanaud.

A smile spread over Ricardo's face.

"No, no, my friend, you have had a munch."

"You will excuse me," said Hanaud patiently. "I have had a lunch."

"You have had a munch with your lunch," Mr. Ricardo explained. "Now you have a hunch."

Hanaud laughed and patted his friend upon the shoulder. Mr. Ricardo no more liked pats on the shoulder than he liked digs in the ribs.

"Did I not say that you were a comic!" Hanaud exclaimed agreeably. "A hunch! I know him. He is a non-conformity of the back."

"He is also the authorised version of a guess which is generally wrong," said Mr. Ricardo tartly. "What is this hunch?"

And all the laughter and the fun died out of Hanaud's face. It became disconsolate and sad, the face of a lonely man.

"I laugh, yes. I make my foolish little jokes, yes. I do waggishnesses like dropping a feather I pick out of the gutter on to your white table-cloth. I

must laugh. For my soul's sake, I who live amongst crimes and squalor must laugh when I find friends to laugh with." His eyelids half closed over his eyes: "Even though there is very little to laugh at."

He sat and drummed with the broad tips of his fingers upon the table in a sort of rhythm; and Ricardo, in silent communication with his companion, seemed to hear the Furies, band upon band of them rushing upon them like cavalry.

"Once or twice," Hanaud went on, "accident, destiny—God—has brought us together. And each time there has been something"—he hesitated for a word and found it—"fantastic in its horror, and dark because of some queer strain of cruelty. Yes, that's it—of cruelty and hatred which ran through the affair like a motive in music. Well then—I am not superstitious, no—but I have my creed—and here we are brought together again. Shall we not say it? See! I am troubled. I see my dear Mr. Ricardo disappearing into the Restaurant du Sceptre, I who am on my way to a restaurant of a humbler kind. I pick up a dirty feather from the gutter and I do my waggishness. And at once you tell me much that I want to know."

Mr. Ricardo was more than a little moved. He had seldom seen his Inspecteur Principal so troubled, his face so heavy with foreboding, his eyes so scared. He looked out of the window at his elbow, hardly knowing what to reply. He saw, without remarking them, the roof-tops of the houses about the basin, the yards of ships cutting across them, and a small purple motor-car flash across a bridge. It was an open car, driven by a girl. Ricardo suddenly leaned towards the window. The car disappeared from his sight as it reached the end of the bridge. Mr. Ricardo was in a twitter of excitement. If out of sight that little car turned to the right, then it would be lost in a maze of narrow streets. If it turned to the left, it would appear again at this corner opposite to the window, and Hanaud might have another argument to support his creed. The car did appear. It swept round the corner and with all the abruptness of its four-wheel brakes it stopped at the door of the Restaurant du Sceptre. Ricardo composed himself quickly in his seat.

"Here is a visitor who can tell you the truth about this affair," he said; and there was a thrill in his voice which could not be disregarded.

"Where?" Hanaud asked.

"She is at this moment getting out of a car."

"She?" Hanaud repeated. "She is getting out of a small yellow car"—rather triumphant this statement, and Mr. Ricardo must put him in his place.

"She is not. She is getting out of a small purple car."

"Well, whether purple or yellow, she is Lydia Flight," said Hanaud testily.

"She is neither purple nor yellow, but she's Lydia Flight," said Ricardo. And Hanaud nodded his head thoughtfully.

"Let us be clear about her," he said quickly. "Lydia Flight was wearing that invaluable chaplet of pearls which you thought a string of beads too vulgarly big to suit so delicate a person."

"Yes."

"At the suitable moment when those pearls have recovered their pristine lustre, Oliver Ransom deliberately upsets a bottle of champagne over the skirt of her coat."

"Agreed," said Mr. Ricardo.

"She runs upstairs to change her coat, with her sentinel Ransom, dressed as a chauffeur, at her side."

"Perfectly."

"A little later, when Stallard's guests are watching the antics of a tight-rope dancer, a chauffeur in Ransom's car dashes out along the road to Rouen and disappears."

"That is in order," said Mr. Ricardo.

"Lydia Flight then comes half fainting down the stairs and cries to you: 'Find Oliver! Where's Oliver?'"

"Correct."

"And besides Oliver Ransom and the yellow car, the chaplet of pearls has disappeared too."

"Yes."

"Lydia Flight hurries in the morning to Major Scott Carruthers at Trouville, and a telegram announcing this bad news is sent to the Prince at Goodwood."

"So you tell me."

"The Prince comes to Havre, and after a private interview with me, telephones to Trouville that Lydia Flight and Major Carruthers . . ."

"Scott."

“I beg your pardon?” Hanaud enquired.

“Scott Carruthers,” said Ricardo. “People are apt to be touchy if you take the aristocracy out of their names.”

“The Prince then telephones that Lydia Flight and Major Scott Carruthers are to meet Hanaud at the Château du Caillou at six o’clock in the afternoon.”

“I have your authority for believing it.”

“And upon receiving this order, Lydia Flight jumps into a purple car, and comes to the Restaurant du Sceptre.”

“Your recapitulation, my dear Hanaud, is unnecessary but precise,” said Ricardo indulgently.

“Unnecessary? Hanaud speaking words without value! What a fun! No, no! For this recapitulation leads us to a question we shall do well to note. Does Lydia Flight come in a hurry to meet an accomplice secretly? Or does she come in the hope of finding a friend and an answer to a dreadful problem? Or does she come on the chance of noticing without being noticed by this terrible Hanaud?”

Mr. Ricardo giggled offensively.

“I know which of the questions Hanaud will select,” he said. “But there is another explanation which Hanaud has forgotten.”

“And what is that, if you please?”

“She may just be hungry, and wanting her luncheon.”

Hanaud laughed suddenly and with relish.

“Well, I hadn’t thought of it,” he said. “So! To meet these questions, we make a little arrangement. When she comes in, you speak to her.”

“I will,” Ricardo promised.

“I put my cigar on my plate—so.” And Hanaud suited his action to his word. “You see him?”

“I see him.”

“You will continue to see him. If I take him up with my left hand, you will present me to Miss Lydia Flight. If I take him up with my right hand, you will neglect me altogether.”

Mr. Ricardo had the look of one bearing with difficulty a ridiculous companion.

"You should be acting at the Châtelet, Hanaud. You have melodrama in the tips of your fingers."

"Of the right hand or the left?" Hanaud enquired. "Can you see the number of the purple car?"

"Yes," said Ricardo, looking out of the window.

"Will you give it to me, please?"

"Seven, nine, six, four, R.F.6," said Mr. Ricardo.

Hanaud wrote the figures and letters down in a little pocket-book. The door of the restaurant swung open, and Lydia Flight stood upon the threshold, her glances travelling slowly round the room, as if she hoped to find there—a friend?—at all events, someone whom she knew.

At Ricardo's side Hanaud said in a low voice:

"I shall tell you. Of all the pictures which you have shown me in your gallery this morning, this is the only one which has not frightened me."

By this time Lydia's eyes had reached Mr. Ricardo. He rose, and advanced towards her.

CHAPTER XIV
THE STONE OF DESOLATION

Lydia Flight was certainly good to see that morning. She was wearing a dark blue frock of crêpe de Chine, a straw hat, and shoes to match with beige stockings, and a pair of rucked gloves of pale suêde covered her arms to the elbows. The eager hope which lit her face and informed her whole aspect would have made a plain woman beautiful, and with the bright gold of her hair shining under her hat, and the delicate carnation of her cheeks, Lydia was vivid and lovely as the glint of a kingfisher above a sunlit river. Even when her hopes fell and disappointment clouded her, she held the eyes of Victor's clients; and if Mr. Ricardo strutted rather importantly as he approached her, who shall blame him?

"You will do me the honour to lunch with me, Miss Lydia, I hope," he said.

"But you are not alone," said she. "I shall be interrupting you."

"We are not talking business."

"Besides, you have finished."

Ricardo was a gallant creature as well as an inquisitive one.

"We will begin all over again at a word from you," he said, "and the friend whom you expect may have arrived before we have ended."

"I couldn't put you to that ordeal," she declared with a smile. But her manner was absent, and her eyes rested upon Hanaud with a curious speculation. Her scrutiny, indeed, gave Mr. Ricardo something of a shock, and took all the strut out of him. Had she in truth come to this restaurant to spy upon this Inspecteur Principal of the Sûreté?

"But I shall be happy to lunch with you, Mr. Ricardo," and she fell in at his side.

As they approached the table Hanaud rose to his feet. He certainly held his cigar in his left hand, but whether that signified he was to be introduced or not, Ricardo had clean forgotten. In any case Hanaud should have discreetly removed himself if he had no wish to be presented, and "As for

the tricks of the Châtelet," Ricardo argued stoutly if silently, "I have no use for them."

"Miss Lydia, this is Monsieur Hanaud," he said.

Hanaud bowed. Lydia Flight bowed. There was neither surprise nor apprehension in her manner. Appraisement, on the other hand, was very visible. Her glance was direct and steady, and she made a little nod with her head, as if she knew very well who Monsieur Hanaud was and on what business he was set.

Ricardo fluttered about her, to put her at her ease. Now that the hope had died out of her face, it was obvious that she was tired and distressed. Her eyes were shadowed, and her manner very quiet. Ricardo called for Victor. He pulled a chair from a neighbouring table and set it with its back to the room, he ordered luncheon for her, the croustilles du batelier first, a cutlet to follow, and a glass of the Haut Brion. Whether Oliver Ransom were her accomplice or not, she was his guest, and so long as that condition lasted, sacrosanct. He chattered, more to stop Hanaud from cross-examining her, than because he had anything to say.

"You have forgotten, no doubt, our first meeting, Miss Lydia? In the cathedral at Caudebec. You must peg away at the croustilles whilst they are hot, or Victor will never smile again. Ha, ha, ha! Of course you have forgotten our meeting, but I, on the other hand, how can I not remember it?"

Lydia Flight began to draw off her gloves, but changed her mind, and tucked the fingers in under their sleeves. She looked up from her croustilles with a smile of friendliness for Ricardo. She appreciated his talkativeness for its true and kindly intention.

"I remember it as well as you do, Mr. Ricardo," she answered. "I asked you to show me the Stone of Desolation."

"Yes, but I wouldn't do it," said Ricardo, more hastily than prudently. "I mean, I didn't do it! No! I showed you something finer, something with a higher message. The window which Foulkes Eyton, Captain General of Caudebec . . ."

Lydia Flight looked at him so that he felt ashamed of his haste and incoherence. She seemed to be weighing the application of that fine message to herself and her distress.

"Je m'y oblige," she said slowly and seriously. "And Priez pour moi."

Silence followed, a silence long enough to make Ricardo uneasy, and Lydia aware that Hanaud was no longer puffing at his cigar. She said, with a pretty peremptoriness:

"Unless you smoke, I go. But I don't want to go, for I have something to say to you."

"Mademoiselle," said Hanaud with a smile and a tact for which Ricardo would never have given him credit, "Je m'y oblige."

He struck a match, and relit his cigar. Lydia watched him until she was sure that it was drawing.

"Good," she said. She turned her head and looked behind her into the room. There were still people eating their luncheon, others smoking over their coffee and liqueurs. She shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, then," she began, and Hanaud stopped her.

"No, mademoiselle, you shall tell me nothing here," he said with a most disagreeable laugh. "We are to meet at six o'clock at the Château du Caillou. You shall talk to me there."

"But I should like to talk to you before that meeting," she rejoined quietly.

"Oho!" said Hanaud. He might just as well have said that he didn't believe what she was saying, or what she was going to say.

As for Ricardo, he must look a little further than Hanaud. He must keep his emotions and judgments separate. Was Lydia a very astute young lady, anticipating suspicion by her frankness, or was she just a girl at her wits' end in her need for help?

"Mademoiselle," Hanaud began, "you are going back to Caudebec."

"No!" Lydia cried. There was fear in the cry of horror. "Never!"—and Ricardo had never heard so much vehemence within a single word.

Hanaud shrugged his shoulders. He looked at Lydia Flight angrily, contemptuously.

"Very well, mademoiselle. I have my instructions. I cannot compel you. For myself, I must go now to Caudebec. Yes, that is necessary. So I shall not hear what you have to say until I meet you at the Château du Caillou—if I meet you at the Château du Caillou."

Lydia flushed red under his biting disbelief in her. But she kept her voice level and her eyes steady upon him.

"I shall certainly be at the house by six. You will cross perhaps in Mr. Ricardo's launch? I shall go as far as Lillebonne, and cross by the ferry at Port Jerome."

Hanaud laughed unpleasantly. Here were excuses and excuses. He was bidden to act with discretion and secrecy. No charge had been made against the girl. Well, if she didn't appear at the house, it would not be long before he brought her back to it.

"I shall expect you, then, mademoiselle," he said indifferently, and he turned towards Ricardo with impatience. "The most charming party must come to an end at some time," he began, and stopped.

For Ricardo was paying no attention to him whatever. He was gazing at Lydia, his mind all at sea.

"But—but . . ." he stammered, and Lydia raised her eyes to his in a complete perplexity.

Ricardo had forgotten one chapter of the story he had set out to relate to Hanaud. He had forgotten and omitted it from his narrative altogether. Lydia Flight had returned to Caudebec yesterday. According to Hanaud's story, she had arrived at Trouville on the morning after the ball, she, or Scott Carruthers using her account, had telegraphed to Goodwood from Trouville that the necklace had been stolen, and she had been definitely instructed to wait at Trouville until Nahendra Nao appeared. Yet she had gone back. She had gone back and enjoyed herself—just as if her commission had been discharged with the most perfect success. She had come into Havre again this morning.

"Yes?" Lydia asked.

"What I mean is—since you were at Caudebec yesterday evening, Miss Lydia, and obviously in the highest spirits—isn't it odd that you can't go back there again to-day?"

"I was in Caudebec yesterday?" she asked slowly.

"Yes."

"You saw me?"

"Yes."

"And I was in the highest spirits?"

"As far as I could judge, Miss Lydia. I was not face to face with you, that's true. But I am assuming that one would need to be in high spirits before one went rushing down the Seine on an aquaplane." And Lydia Flight's fork slipped from her hand and clattered on the plate. She picked it up again at once, however.

"Or in very low ones," she said.

Mr. Ricardo thought over that alternative, and accepted it.

"I see," he said. "A reaction, a refusal to admit that one was beaten, an effort to throw off a depression."

"So you saw me aquaplaning yesterday, Mr. Ricardo," she went on, as she went on with her meal, her face looking down upon her plate.

"But of course I saw you," he rejoined. "And so did everyone on the balcony of the hotel. Even though I had seen a charming portrait of you aquaplaning in the Bahamas, I was nervous, I can tell you. If there are sharks in the Bahamas, there are tides in the Seine, and upon my word, when the launch swept round at the bend of the river, I thought that you had gone. We all did."

"No doubt," said Lydia, and now she raised her eyes. Mr. Ricardo received a shock. Lydia was white to the edge of her lips, her great eyes were wide with dismay, and held in their depths such an appeal for help as he had never before had made to him. They were cries, loud and piteous cries; and she shivered. Mr. Ricardo was quick to seize the decanter and refill her glass.

"Come, Miss Lydia, drink this up, if you please," he cried with all the heartiness he could command. "For this is what the doctor ordered."

Even for such an occasion he could be trusted to be ready with the perfect cliché. But it served its turn. For Lydia drank and smiled, and a little colour flowed again into her cheeks. It seemed that she was on the point of speaking to Hanaud, but she recoiled, unable to make up her mind, and sat uneasily twisting the stem of her wine-glass round and round in her fingers. For a moment she closed her eyes tight. Then she threw back her head.

"Monsieur Hanaud," she said, "I have changed my mind."

"It is your privilege, mademoiselle."

"I shall go back to Caudebec to-day."

"I thank you, mademoiselle," said Hanaud.

She turned and looked at the clock on the wall of the restaurant.

"I have something first of all to do here. I shall try to come to you before you cross the river to the Château du Caillou."

Hanaud looked at her with the lids half closed upon his eyes, doubting her, appraising her.

"Very well, mademoiselle," he said at length.

Lydia Flight drew out the fingers of her gloves and fitted them on.

"I thank you for my very good luncheon," she said to Ricardo with a smile, as she rose to her feet, and she held out her hand to him.

"I shall see you again," he said. "Hanaud, if I know him—and I do—will set up his headquarters in my sitting-room at the hotel. And you go back to Caudebec?"

"Yes, I go back," she said as she buttoned her glove at the wrist. She lifted her eyes to his, and he saw again stark terror looking out of them. "Je m'y oblige," she added slowly. Then she turned on her heel and was gone.

Old Foulkes Eyton's motto. For a moment Mr. Ricardo had thought that she was going to add that appeal which was also inscribed upon the window: "Priez pour moi"; and he sat quite still after she had gone, his heart troubled, his judgment uncertain. It was Hanaud who spoke first.

"My friend, you may not have shown that young lady the Stone of Desolation in the cathedral, but you showed it to her very clearly to-day in the restaurant."

Ricardo nodded his head. He was exceedingly uncomfortable.

"But how?" he asked.

Hanaud had no words with which to ease his pain.

"I don't know," he said. "But," and he knocked the ash off his cigar, "this affair of a stolen rope of pearls, it is of enormous importance to Nahendra Nao, Prince of Chitipur, and to his father the Maharajah. It has traditions, it lies for centuries in his treasury, it is very important—out there. To steal it and sell it would mean a great deal of money, to people over here. Yes, but to me the interesting thing is the little drama of strong passions which is revolving about it as a pivot. Hatreds and loves, and intrigues, and —yes—and crimes, which—how shall I say it?—swirl about it, which began with it and have spread out beyond it—far beyond it. This girl here, and Oliver Ransom, Lucrece Bouchette and Scott Carruthers, Elsie Marsh and

Nahendra Nao, and this unknown Monsieur Stallard and the rest of them, each with his little plan, each using this chaplet of pearls for his ends—how shall we get the truth of them? It would not be easy, if I could say to the Examining Magistrate: 'Here, sir, is this one! It may be that she is guilty. I beg you to hold her.' But in this case I must not do that. I must walk on tiptoe amongst the egg-shells. It is more difficult still. To get back the invaluable necklace! Fine! A good thing for Hanaud! But suppose the great crime breaks before I get it back? The crime where cruelty and passion go hand in hand. What then! I tell you I am afraid."

And even on that hot day, in that restaurant stuffy and close with the odours of the midday meal, he shook his shoulders as though he felt the cold.

"And yet you wouldn't hear Lydia's story," Ricardo exclaimed, and Hanaud laughed aloud.

"Here?" he returned. "In public? Where we must speak in undertones? Where no question can be pressed? Where she will hear her own story and recognise its weak points and remember them so that she may connect them when she hears it again? No, my friend, I do not give those advantages, especially when I have the prickles in my spine. For I, too, at this moment am seeing—oh, very clearly, the Stone of Desolation."

Victor was hovering in the neighbourhood with his bill, and Ricardo discharged it. Victor was expecting compliments, and Victor duly received them.

"We go, now?" said Hanaud.

"Yes."

"We pick up my bag?"

"Yes."

"And we go to Caudebec?"

"Yes."

Mr. Ricardo's fine forty-nine Rolls-Royce, the latest model, was waiting at the door.

CHAPTER XV
THE IMITATION

For a quite unusual length of time Hanaud was silent. The car passed through the eastern suburbs and reached Harfleur. Beyond Harfleur, Hanaud took from his side pocket a very blue packet of very black cigarettes and extended it to his friend. Ricardo shuddered deeper into his corner. Once, on a summer day, after a good breakfast, when he was feeling very well, he had tried one, and the taste of it was sharp in his mouth each time the packet was reproduced. The paper had stuck to his lips, and little shreds of the tobacco had clung to the interstices of his teeth, and he had exclaimed: "Really! Really!" he didn't know how many times, and the experience had been extremely distasteful to him.

"But you may," he conceded graciously, and prepared to hold his nose. For the fizzle and smell of an abominable sulphur match would now have to be endured. But the years had brought their education to the Inspecteur Principal. Hanaud used a briquet.

"Thank you," said Ricardo.

"I kiss your hands," replied Hanaud.

"Absurd!" said Ricardo, and Hanaud relapsed into silence. He smoked a chain of cigarettes, till the air in the car was acrid and blue. At Lillebonne he shook himself and sat up.

"You have been wondering all this while what strange deep thoughts were occupying your Hanaud," he said.

"It is no doubt extraordinary," replied Ricardo, "but as a matter of fact, I wasn't. I was wondering why Lydia Flight dropped her fork as if it burned her, when I mentioned that I had seen her aquaplaning last night."

"And why that statement of yours persuaded her to change her mind—if she did change her mind—and to return to Caudebec—if she is returning to Caudebec," Hanaud added. "Certainly these are questions, but we shall not get the answers to them out of our invention. 'Je m'y oblige.' How she said it, hein? Such a summons to her courage, and such a gasp of fear in the same breath! Let us remember how she looked when she said it, and the tone of

her voice! '*Je m'y oblige!*' And at some moment, perhaps, the reason will stare us in the face."

"But we must begin somewhere," Ricardo objected. "We must have a point of departure."

"I have him," Hanaud rejoined imperturbably. "Yes. I sit in the Restaurant du Sceptre, and I let all that Nahendra Nao told me and all that you told me, and the little which your Lydia Flight told me, and the ever so much more which she did not tell me, and your looks and your accents, go revolving round and round in my mind like the little prize tickets in the big glass globe of the lotteries. At last one slips out and at once, before he can vanish, Hanaud has him."

He leaned back majestically in the car, folding his arms, and a small meek voice beside him and below him asked with a mock diffidence:

"And may Ricardo know what is written on Hanaud's prize ticket, eh?"

"He may," returned Hanaud. "Two words only. Mon Dieu."

Ricardo sat up abruptly.

"The exclamation of Madame de Viard."

"*Née* Tabateau," Hanaud continued, "when the bottle of champagne was upset, and Lydia Flight sprang to her feet. That fancy dress, the slim legs in the knee-breeches, and the silk stockings. They did not explain that cry to you."

"No," Ricardo admitted.

"Nor do they to me. Madame de Viard despised you all. You were not of her world, smug and proper. You were artists, boisterous vagabonds amusing yourselves in foolish vulgar ways. We of Passy and such suburbs hold us the noses when you pass. A pretty girl from the Opera dressed as a boy! We expect it. We do not sit all startled, with round eyes, and cry 'Mon Dieu!' We shall ask of that moustachioed lady why she cried 'Mon Dieu!'"

Ricardo laughed in the most irritating fashion.

"And you think that she will answer? My poor friend! If ever I saw one who would not mix herself with the affairs of police, it is that one."

"Oh?" said Hanaud. "We shall see." And the car climbed between the trees of the forest of St. Arnould to the top of the Calidu Hill, and swung down into Caudebec. It stopped at the long hotel with the balcony which faced the river.

"You will fix the rooms?" said Hanaud. "In ten minutes I return."

He was less than ten minutes, and he came back with a small, black-bearded man in a tail-coat and a bowler hat.

"This is Monsieur Parcolet, the Commissaire of Police of Caudebec," said Hanaud; and Monsieur Parcolet, pressing his bowler hat to his chest, bowed.

"Monsieur Ricardo is known to me as a patron of the arts and a distinguished visitor to our town," he said very politely; and to Hanaud: "I have had instructions from the Prefect of Havre. I am at your disposal."

They were standing in Mr. Ricardo's fine sitting-room upon the first floor. They went down the stairs to the broad open space between the hotel and the river.

"Of course we cannot long conceal the fact that Monsieur Hanaud is with us," the little Commissaire continued.

"It does not matter," said Hanaud, with a wave of the hand. Ricardo curved a hand about an ear and held up the other hand to stop his companions.

"Hush! Don't I hear the cathedral bells pealing their welcome already? There were eleven of them once. What a pity so many have gone!"

Hanaud nudged Ricardo in the ribs for the second time that day and smiled indulgently.

"My friend," he said to Parcolet, "he makes the amusements."

Parcolet the Commissaire was a little baffled by these exchanges, but he laughed dutifully, since so he was expected to do. He turned to the right. A few yards farther on a grove of beech trees made a shaded promenade between the roadway and the river bank. Twenty yards more, and a handsome mansion of yellow stone stood back behind a smooth green lawn. The mansion was of two storeys and ornamented in the Renaissance style, and in front of the lawn high iron railings and gates separated it from the road. Parcolet the Commissaire pushed the gate open. A broad straight gravel path led to the big door in the middle of the house.

Mr. Ricardo began to feel agitated. He could not pretend to himself that he would be well received. He would be taken for a sneak. He would be basilisked.

"I think I'll wait for you," he said timidly. "Out here, you know. Charming! Quite charming!"

But Parcolet held up his hands in despair and such a look of dumb reproach was directed at him by Hanaud that Ricardo could not stand out against it.

"You desert me! And at the point of departure!" that look protested. Ricardo clenched his hands and set his teeth.

"Lead on," he cried with a gesture of Napoleon. But as he followed them, he felt like a martyr on his way to the arena.

The door was answered by a manservant.

"Madame does not receive to-day," he said politely, and Ricardo's heart jumped with pleasure.

So Madame still had days. But of course she would have; and indeed, he thought, there was a great deal to be said for that ancient practice.

"Well, it can't be helped," he said with as much regret as he could manage to work into his voice, and he took a brisk little step away from the door. But Parcolet the Commissaire was not to be dismissed so easily.

"Madame will receive me, I am sure, if you will tell her that the Commissaire of Police has called officially."

The manservant opened his eyes wide, and ushered them into the most uninhabitable room that ever daunted three grown-up men. The parquet floor was waxed and polished to the lustre of enamel; straight chairs overloaded with needlework challenged you to sit down on one of them if you dared. A gilt couch upholstered in eau-de-nil satin flaunted its untouchability. And even on that day the air was moist and cold, and shouted that the windows had never been opened nor the fire lit upon the hearth. Hanaud shivered and said:

"We should have come in our overcoats. Madame is in her wrapper and pantoufles and will keep us waiting half an hour whilst she dresses herself."

In time a tinkling of little ornaments announced that Madame de Viard was descending, and she entered the room dressed in puce satin, and a little flustered in manner. Parcolet spoke up at once.

"I ask your pardon for our intrusion, Madame de Viard, but not for our belief that you will help us to preserve the laws of property and order. This

is Monsieur Hanaud, a Principal Inspector of the Sûreté Générale, of whom you have no doubt heard."

Madame de Viard turned her sharp eyes upon Hanaud and made a small bow.

"And this is an English gentleman, Monsieur Ricardo, who has already given valuable evidence."

Madame de Viard had paid no attention to Ricardo. But when she saw him now she stiffened, and made him no bow at all. A faint smile of derision curled her lips as she seemed to recognise a pigmy who had once given her a moment of amusement.

"If the little gentleman's assistance is as remarkable as his bridge, it must be very entertaining, at all events."

She certainly was a detestable woman. Mr. Ricardo would have given much if he could have produced a crushing reply. But he could think of nothing, though he was quite sure that in the middle of the night he would wake up with a most venomous retort ready on his tongue. All that he could contrive was a little simper and an inclination of the head, which, he hoped, looked ironical. Madame de Viard turned back to Parcolet.

"I beg you all to be seated."

She enthroned herself on the eau-de-nil couch and designated chairs for her visitors.

"I am, of course, as a good citizen, eager to help the cause of justice," she said to Parcolet. "But these gentlemen will understand that nothing can be more distasteful to me than any publicity."

"That, madame, is clear," Hanaud said swiftly. "And happily His Highness the young Rajah of Chitipur is even more anxious that the utmost secrecy should be preserved. A whisper in the newspapers, and his position is prejudiced, and, it may be, his throne lost."

Madame de Viard made a movement up on her sofa.

"His Highness . . ." she murmured.

"Nahendra Nao, Prince of Chitipur," said Hanaud.

"He might lose his throne?"

"And with it the power to reward his friends with the jewel of the Order of his Kingdom," said Hanaud gravely; and again Madame de Viard started

upon her couch, and her eyes opened wider, and she drew a breath. Already she was pinning the Order upon her bosom.

Not for nothing was Madame de Viard *née* Tabateau. Hanaud had counted on her birth. Who could stand superior in a jeweller's hierarchy to a Prince of the East with his fabulous gems and his treasure of gold. The Rue de la Paix was hushed in reverence and hopeful smiles at the mere name of such a one. And an Order, with a jewel attached to it! Madame de Viard's mouth watered at the prospect.

"But how, monsieur, can I help His Royal Highness?" she asked. "Only tell me!"

Hanaud rejoiced when he heard "Royal" added to the title. Aware of the folly of spreading butter thin, he had almost applied it himself. But once again truth paid. It was so much better that Madame de Viard should apply it than that he should.

"I am here to tell you. I saw the Prince this morning. I said to him: 'Madame de Viard,' and he repeated my words. He added," and Hanaud leaned forward impressively: " 'That is a name not to be forgotten.' "

"He said that?"

"He said that"; and Mr. Ricardo stirred uneasily. Hanaud was really going too far. He could not possibly have mentioned Madame de Viard's name to Nahendra Nao, for he did not know of Madame de Viard's existence until after he had left the Prince. But before he could interrupt, a quite malignant glance from the Inspecteur Principal warned him to keep his mouth shut.

"And what made you mention my name?" Madame asked, now quite bewildered.

"Ah! We come to it," cried Hanaud, and he hitched his chair forward. "Madame, two nights ago a ball was given at a house across the river."

There crept into the woman's face a look of wariness. She was suddenly upon her guard.

"Yes," she answered.

"You were present."

"Monsieur, when one marries the Doctor of a Department, one does many things from a sense of duty which are not agreeable."

"But you were present?"

"I was."

"And a bottle of champagne was upset?"

"Ah!"

Madame de Viard jerked round like an automaton towards Mr. Ricardo. She threw him an annihilating glance, and he squirmed and writhed in his chair. "Basilisked again!" he murmured unhappily.

"So the little gentleman who plays the bridge also tells the stories," she said vindictively.

"And a young lady, in a boy's dress of the eighteenth century, sprang to her feet," Hanaud went on persistently.

"No doubt at such a party, such things would happen," she replied disdainfully.

"But you saw her?"

"It is possible."

"And having seen her, madame, you cried out in a very startled voice: 'Mon Dieu!' Madame de Viard, what did you see that made you utter that cry?"

Madame de Viard was at the end of her evasions. Hanaud's voice demanded, compelled an answer. His steady eyes held her to the question. She might twist, and blink her eyes, and twitch her fingers, and tap upon the gilt arm of the couch. Hanaud was waiting, ready to wait apparently for a fortnight. Madame de Viard did not think to deny the exclamation, nor to make light of it. She had let the moment go when that would have been possible.

"Monsieur," she said at last, "yes, I saw something which startled me. But I am under a promise. I gave my promise to Papa. I should not have been startled at all—for I should not have seen what I saw—unless my papa could trust me to keep the promise which he was going to ask me to give."

The answer sounded involved, but Hanaud was not disheartened. He knew now for certain that he had taken the right point of departure.

"So it was Monsieur Tabateau who made you promise?"

"My papa, yes," said the grenadier.

"To keep his secrets?" Hanaud pressed her.

Madame de Viard shook her head at him archly. Did he not as good as hold the ribbon of an Order in his hand?

"I shall show you."

She got up from the eau-de-nil couch and hurried out of the room. When she returned she was carrying in her hand a long book, like a washing book. But it was bound in red leather, and the edges were gilt.

"I keep a diary," she explained. "I was brought up when I was a child to record in it the events of each day, and such reflections upon the conduct of life as occurred to me."

"What an admirable training!" cried Hanaud enthusiastically, as he reached out his hands for the book.

"Assuredly!" exclaimed Parcolet the Commissaire, beaming, since that was the line to take. "If only the young people of to-day were submitted to that discipline, should we not find them more orderly and methodical?"

"But much more censorious and judgmatical," said Mr. Ricardo stoutly. He was unable, malignant glances from Hanaud or no, to endure this adulation of a very offensive female, and besides, he held a brief for the young.

Hanaud glared at him. Parcolet the Commissaire was shocked. Madame de Viard looked about the room, bending her head a little as though she had heard a kitten mewing. But Mr. Ricardo was going to be neither basilisked nor abashed. He let himself go. He was going to show her that a little gentleman could bite. He sniffed the air of that close and unventilated room.

"If you are looking for the cat, madame, I think it must be the dead thing behind the panels," he declared.

Madame de Viard gave him her attention for the first time that afternoon. She looked him over, and grinned at him devouringly.

"There is nothing dead behind the panels, monsieur, but perhaps there ought to be," she said.

Mr. Ricardo was ashamed of his friend and of the Commissary. For both of them were flung into paroxysms of sycophantic laughter.

"What a reply!" said Parcolet in a loud aside.

"Paris, my dear Commissaire. The quick wits of Paris," Hanaud explained.

Mr. Ricardo thought their conduct completely revolting. Had they no dignity! He flung himself back in his chair. Meanwhile Hanaud kept his hands outstretched for the diary.

Madame de Viard turned over the pages until she came to the first pages of the book.

"There!" she said, and she gave it open into Hanaud's hands. From the chair on which he sat, Ricardo could see lines of Indian ink thick as enamel across the page.

"I wrote down what happened upon that day when I got home in the afternoon," she continued. "At dinner Papa told me to forget the day altogether, and that night before I went to bed I blotted out what I had written."

Hanaud examined the page. He even took it to the window in order to examine it the better. He brought it back, and with a bow handed it back to her.

"Madame, I make you my compliments. The censor at Moscow could not have done better work."

But he was elated. Mr. Ricardo knew the signs—a jauntiness in the step, and a ring in the voice, an amusement in the eyes. He could not read one word of what was written and erased. No, not one. But something else had made up for the erasures.

"Now what?" Ricardo asked of himself. He put himself into an attitude of thought, the attitude of Rodin's Le Penseur, as nearly as he could assume it with his clothes on, a thumb at his jaw, a finger at his brow. "Let me consider."

And for a while he must be left considering.

Hanaud meanwhile came dramatically to a decision.

"Madame de Viard, I shall be frank with you. The rope of pearls belonging to the Maharajah of Chitipur, and lent by him to his son that he might appear with fitting ceremony on State occasions, was stolen from the Château du Caillou on the night of Mr. Stallard's ball."

A cry burst from the woman's lips.

"Stolen!"

"Stolen."

Hanaud proceeded to give a sketch, which lost nothing in the poignancy of its details, of the fate which awaited the young Rajah if he returned home without it.

"The poor youth!" she said.

A Royal Highness in a gaol. Unthinkable.

"The East!" said Hanaud, shaking his head.

"Yes, it is not the West," said Parcolet.

"How true!" murmured Mr. Ricardo.

But Madame de Viard had an idea.

"But you must see Papa!" she exclaimed. "I shall give you a letter to him. . . ."

Hanaud saw no hope in that procedure.

"I leave the scene of the crime when every hour is of importance? I go to the Rue de la Paix? I, Hanaud! And what of those busy journalists from whom nothing can be hid? And the Order, madame? Must I say to the Prince: 'You must erase from your memory the name of Madame de Viard, even as she erased the story from her diary. Tabateau is your man, the admirable, frankly spoken Tabateau.'"

This was more than Madame de Viard could endure. Filial respect was the cardinal motive of her life, her strong suit, in fact, but if ribbons and orders were going it was infinitely better that she should wear them than Papa. Papa was getting old; Papa was famous amongst the world's great tradesmen; Papa already had a wisp of red ribbon in his button-hole; whereas Madame de Viard—and at this point in her reflections she once more cried out: "Wait!" and departed from the room.

This time her absence was more prolonged, and her activities more audible.

"'Allo! 'Allo! 'Allo! 'Allo!" and a great ting-tinging of telephone bells occupied some minutes. Then it seemed that connection was established, for her voice ceased to be heard. She returned triumphant.

"Papa consents, if my statement is looked upon as confidential."

"Yes," said Hanaud. But his voice was doubtful and his face grave, and he must qualify his acceptance of Papa Tabateau's condition.

"It is from every point of view desirable that the whole affair should be confidential, and trouble will be taken to stifle any scandal, even if justice gets a little the worse for wear. I belong to the Fourth Section of my Department, and foreign Princes are my charge. I know. But it might be impossible. I must say that. We are in deep waters—how deep we are not yet sure. There are crimes which may not be concealed."

Madame de Viard was disturbed. But she was not going to be balked of her ribbon now.

"I shall not anticipate anything so alarming," she said, and she took her place again upon the couch. "I shall tell you why I exclaimed 'Mon Dieu!' in a voice so startled. As the girl in the boy's dress sprang to her feet, the lace fall of her cravat caught upon one of the ornamental buttons of her coat and twisted it aside. I saw that she was wearing concealed in the folds of her cravat the rope of pearls of the Maharajah of Chitipur."

"You are sure of that, madame?"

"There could not be two such ropes."

Mr. Ricardo could not remain silent. His friend Hanaud must not be led astray. His task was difficult; the most meticulous exactitude was required.

"Madame de Viard," he cried, "could have had but a glimpse of those stones at the best. They might very well have been beads."

"Beads!"

It would be impossible to convey the accent of scorn with which the word was launched at Mr. Ricardo. She turned to him and he shaded his eyes with his hand. He was being basilisked. He wouldn't have it.

"Monsieur, I think, knows jewels as he knows the bridge," she said derisively. "Beads!" She turned again to Hanaud and Parcolet, as though it was a physical relief to remove her eyes from Ricardo.

"I must tell you Papa always said that no Tabateau had ever had a sharper eye for a false stone than I. He offered, indeed, to take me into his business, so completely he trusted me. I had seen the great necklace only once before, it is true, but I could not mistake it again. It was wound in three coils round that girl's neck, and as the great bow of her cravat was twisted aside, I saw that the rest of the rope disappeared into the ballet-shirt she was wearing."

Hanaud was satisfied. He looked at Ricardo.

"When you went out on to the terrace, and before you lit your cigar, you looked at your watch, I think?"

"Yes. It was a few minutes after half-past twelve."

"Very well. We can be sure that at half-past twelve Lydia Flight was wearing the Chitipur pearls. That is settled."

He turned again to the blotted page in the diary.

"I come now, madame, to a point of the greatest importance," he said, and Ricardo sat forward in his chair. He was going to learn now why Hanaud had been so elated by the sight of the diary, even though the passage he was looking at was nothing but a smother of ink.

"Yes," said Madame de Viard.

"The day on which you saw these pearls was the twenty-seventh of January."

"Yes."

"Of this year."

The 27th of January! Mr. Ricardo made a calculation, and came to the conclusion that that wouldn't do. It wouldn't do at all. He had listened with the greatest care to the story which Hanaud had told to him in the restaurant at Havre. It was not until some time in February that Nahendra Nao had lent the rope to Elsie Marsh. It was not until late in March that he had taken them back discoloured and spoilt. He had shown them to Crevette in Bond Street early in April, upon his return to London. It was clear, then, that Tabateau must have had them in his possession, to see if he could restore them, some time towards the end of March. Thus Mr. Ricardo argued very reasonably, and he could not go on allowing Hanaud to make such mistakes. He would be hurt in his career. The 27th of January—nonsense! There was no reason in the world why Nahendra Nao should entrust the Luck of his Principality to Tabateau before the end of March.

"But . . ." he began, and Hanaud held up his hand.

"The twenty-seventh of January," he repeated firmly; so firmly that Ricardo retired from the discussion. "I should be glad, madame, if you could tell me how you came to see this great chaplet on that day."

"I was at our house in Passy," Madame de Viard said. "Papa had gone to his office as usual at nine o'clock in the morning. At a quarter to twelve he rang me up and told me that he had something to show me that I should

never see again. I was to take the car and drive to the Rue de la Paix at once. When I got there, Papa took me into his private office at the back of his shop, locked the door, and took the pearls from his safe."

"You admired them, madame?"

"I had never seen anything like them. I cried out with wonder at them. It was not only their size, or the way they were matched. But the purity of their colour and the delicate sheen made them utterly marvellous. I was allowed to handle them, and I could have gone on handling and feeling them, and however long one held them, they were still cold to the touch. Beads indeed!" And she turned and hissed the offending word at the unhappy Ricardo. She might be a basilisk. At this moment she was a cobra, and of the most poisonous variety.

As she spoke, Hanaud kept nodding his head, as if these were exactly the words which he was expecting her to speak.

"And how long had Monsieur Tabateau been in possession of that rope?" he asked, as soon as she had finished.

"He had received it only that morning."

"Then, you say, he locked it away again and took you out to luncheon."

"Yes, monsieur, and something very interesting happened."

Hanaud, who had been on the point of putting another question, leaned back.

"Tell me what happened."

"Papa took me to the Café de Paris," she continued, "and whilst we were eating a young Indian gentleman, very good-looking and elegant, came in with a girl. Some people, no doubt, would call her pretty, but she was too common a little thing to please me. Papa asked the waiter to find out who the Indian gentleman was, but the waiter did not have to find out. The Indian lunched at the Café de Paris every day, and with that girl. He was the young Rajah of Chitipur."

"Ah!" cried Hanaud, in a voice which was fierce with excitement. "Then Monsieur Tabateau had not until that moment seen Nahendra Nao?"

"Not till that moment."

"Then who brought the rope of pearls to Monsieur Tabateau? Were you told, madame? It is of the last importance."

Assuredly Madame de Viard had been told. It was the young Rajah's secretary, a man older than the Prince and with a name so uncouth and unpronounceable that she could not be expected to remember it.

"Scott Carruthers," cried Hanaud. "Major Scott Carruthers!"

"That was it, monsieur."

"You are sure?"

"Now that you speak it, yes."

"And why did he bring it?"

Madame de Viard hesitated.

"It is delicate, monsieur."

"But you have Monsieur Tabateau's permission," Hanaud urged.

"I'm not sure that he would have given it if he had anticipated this question, Monsieur Hanaud."

She wanted to answer it. That was clear. She wanted that imaginary ribbon. Every now and then her fingers went to her bosom to feel it there. But on the other hand she was her father's daughter. She was *née* Tabateau, and she had the pride and tradition which belonged to Tabateau's high position in the trade.

"You see, Monsieur Hanaud, the business of a great jeweller requires that the customer should have complete confidence in him. I mean, not only in his honesty and judgment but in his silence. A loquacious jeweller, monsieur! How long would it be before his stock was sold by the receiver? And his name despised?"

She was pleading with Hanaud not to press his question, and Mr. Ricardo was actually moved to a reluctant sympathy with her. She was detestable. She had a narrow aggressive vanity. She had a social perspective which was ridiculous, but she was upright. She had a code of honour and was being desperately tempted to drive a coach and horses through it.

"This Major Scott Carruthers"—she made a dreadful bungle of the name—"Papa was curiously impressed by him. His face and appearance, they had no significance. But he was a person precise and masterful. One had confidence in him. One respected the confidence he made to one. I don't think Papa would be pleased if I betrayed it."

It seemed to Ricardo that his unfortunate friend Hanaud was going to be defeated by the simple honesty of a tradesmen's rubric. But the Inspecteur Principal had a card up his sleeve, and he now proceeded to play it.

"Madame, I shall make it very easy for you to tell me about this commission of Major Scott Carruthers."

"I hope so, monsieur."

"For I shall show you that your duty to Monsieur Tabateau compels you."

"I am listening, monsieur."

"The young Rajah to whom this rope of pearls was entrusted by his father knew nothing whatever of Major Scott Carruthers's visit to Monsieur Tabateau."

Madame de Viard stared at Hanaud with incredulity.

"What is it that you are saying?" she asked.

"Nor does he know of it to this day. Consider, madame. I have seen the Prince to-day. He is in the greatest distress. This sacred jewel is stolen. He told me all that he knew to help me to recover it. But he told me nothing of any visit of his secretary to Monsieur Tabateau. He does not know that Monsieur Tabateau ever had those pearls in his safe. Should I be asking you these questions if he had known?"

"That is true. You would not," she answered slowly. "Then Papa was mistaken about this man?"

"Madame, whatever object Major Scott Carruthers had in taking this jewel to your father, it was an object of his own. Nahendra Nao neither consented to it nor knew of it. That, believe me, is the truth."

Hanaud spoke with a quiet energy which carried conviction. Madame de Viard was now thoroughly disturbed. She was not thinking of orders or ribbons any more. Some attempt had been made to misuse and trick the great firm of Tabateau. She was scandalised. She was shocked.

"It was then a dirty business!" she cried.

"I don't yet know," replied Hanaud.

"You shall judge for yourself," said Madame de Viard. "The Major brought that great chaplet so that an exact copy of it should be made."

"Oh."

Hanaud rose from his chair with a spring, upsetting the diary off his knees on to the floor. He plunged his hands into his pockets, and gazed at the woman in front of him with a face of perplexity.

"So that was it!"

"The copy, monsieur, was to be exact; the pearls of the exact weight, the exact colour, even the string was to be exactly matched. It must be so perfect a copy that an expert would be deceived. And it must be done at once."

"Yes, yes," Hanaud interposed. "At once, of course. Lest His Highness should ask for it, and find out that his secretary had taken it to Tabateau. We see that, don't we? But he gave a reason, I suppose—this Major Carruthers?"

"Certainly, monsieur, and the most natural reason—His Highness was afraid that so precious a thing might attract the thieves."

Suddenly Hanaud laughed harshly.

"A witty fellow, the Major. Yes, yes, it might attract the thieves. Perhaps it had attracted one of them. Continue, madame! I beg your pardon."

"His Highness, therefore, as soon as the copy was made, would lock away the genuine article in the bank, and only bring it out for the great ceremonies. For the minor affairs the copy would do."

"Nothing could be more plausible," Hanaud agreed.

He picked up the diary from the floor and handed it to her with a bow.

"Madame, I kiss your hands. I thank you from my heart for the information you have given me. It is most valuable, and we shall keep it—shall we not?—entirely to ourselves as long as we can."

"And you will not forget to recall my name to the Prince?" she asked anxiously.

"When I explain to him the service you have rendered, it will be impossible for him to forget it. Do not ring for your servant, madame. We will find our way to the door."

"Good morning, Monsieur Parcolet."

Madame de Viard was all smiles for him. Mr. Ricardo followed Parcolet from the room into the passage. He bowed to Madame de Viard without looking at her. But in the passage he turned to close the door. Madame de Viard's kind thoughts did not apparently include Mr. Ricardo. She was

regarding him with a grin of triumphant derision. Why this particular comparison rose into his mind he never could explain. But he thought of a Chinese executioner advancing with delight to administer the first of the Thousand Cuts.

"Beads!" she hissed at him, and he fled down the passage in a hurry to rejoin his companions.

CHAPTER XVI
THE COMPLETE SLOPS

The three men crossed the road into the grove of trees and sat down upon a bench above the river.

"So! We have some moments and we smoke," said Hanaud. He took his blue packet from his pocket and extended it to Parcolet the Commissary. Parcolet took one, Hanaud took another, and they lighted them with the briquet.

"Monsieur does not smoke?" Parcolet asked politely of Ricardo.

"Yes, but only the 'Avana," answered Hanaud, and with a beaming smile he drove his elbow into Ricardo's ribs. Ricardo smiled acidly.

"We have now a college in England, where the police learn good manners," he said, "and I hope that a similar institution will be established in France, and that you, my dear Hanaud, will be the first pupil."

"Aha! He puts me in the place. But I am an impermeable. The sarcasm!" And he blew a ring of smoke to show what he thought of it. He was certainly in an excellent temper with himself.

"The point of departure—Madame de Viard—well chosen, oh? No complaints? No. The little ticket with 'Mon Dieu!' upon it from the revolving globe, a prize. So! Let us see how far we have got."

He sat still for a moment or two, and then spoke his summary.

"The excellent Major, that quiet and forceful man, has a copy of Nahendra Nao's sacred jewel made in January, without Nahendra Nao's knowledge. But a little while afterwards Nahendra Nao lends his jewel to Elsie Marsh, who is envious to wear it, and by the end of March, the pearls are sick. Then the copy is no good. It is a copy made when the original was unblemished. It cannot now be substituted at the convenient moment, no. The pearls must be healed first, if that can be done. It can be done. It is done—thanks to the forcefulness of the excellent Major, and some admirable quality in the blood of the charming Miss Lydia Flight. Good! So there we are at the end of July, the scene all set—eh? A robbery at the ball in the

house of a Mr. Stallard from Arizona has so conveniently taken, and the substitution of the copy for the original. That is right!"

He looked first into one, and then into the other, of two utterly astonished faces.

"Agreed," he said cheerfully. "It is not right—it is wrong. It is all wrong. In a phrase, it is the complete slops."

"You mean, I think," Ricardo corrected gently, "a complete flop."

"No, no," Hanaud replied, and he turned to the black-bearded Commissary, who was looking a little puzzled. "You must not mind, my dear Commissaire. It is my habit to intergrease my remarks with the homely idioms of England." A twitch of pain, as though the nerve of a tooth had stabbed Mr. Ricardo in the cheek, was the only comment which the poor man made upon that abomination of a word, "intergrease."

"I too am spikking the English by day by night," said Parcolet the Commissaire, making more or less use of that tongue.

"Well, then," Hanaud resumed, "it is all wrong. It is the complete slops. For the copy was not substituted. The moment comes, the great rope is stolen, and instead of the excellent Major saying: 'Stolen! What farce! Here it is all the time!' and producing the copy—no! Everyone begins to telegraph and to telephone to Nahendra Nao: 'It is gone!' And mark you, the excellent Major was not at the ball, he was at Trouville, waiting for his Rajah. It is a difficulty."

Parcolet the Commissaire nodded his head profoundly. He was a deep thinker. Yes, yes, one must be aware of it.

"It is certainly a difficulty," he agreed.

"For, look you"—("Oh, he's being Welsh now," Mr. Ricardo groaned) —"either the excellent Major told the truth to Tabateau, he wanted the copy for safety and—an idiom again—I have them—he leads the Great Bear honestly . . ."

"No, no," exclaimed Ricardo. He was not bothering about the idioms. He must keep Hanaud on the proper rails. "He does not lead the Great Bear honestly. If he did, he would have told Nahendra Nao of the copy which Tabateau was making."

"Yes, that is true," Hanaud agreed. "He would have told Nahendra Nao. He would have said: 'Gor-blimey, Highness. . . .'"

"I think it is extremely likely," replied Ricardo sarcastically.

"I learned the exclamation once from your excellent chauffeur, my friend," Hanaud rejoined mildly. "He would have said 'I am having a copy made by Tabateau and you can lend that to the young Lady of the Casino de Paris.' But he did not."

"No, he did not," said Ricardo. And then an idea blazed across his mind, like a comet across the sky. "Wait! Listen! What if it was the copy which was stolen, and the Major keeps the original."

Parcolet the Commissaire said here in effect was an idea. Hanaud, on the other hand, would have none of it.

"I anchor my sheets to Madame de Viard," he cried, and Mr. Ricardo murmured:

"Redoubtable man!"

"If Lydia Flight had been wearing the copy that night, there would have been no startled 'Mon Dieu!' from that lady. She knew. Lydia Flight wore that rope of pearls. Let us have no bad bones about that!"

"No, and no broken blood either. I agree," Ricardo acknowledged.

"Very well, then," continued Hanaud. "We must accept that the excellent Major is subtle as well as masterful. He has something in the sleeve—yes, the ace of strumpets."

"And he means to play it bye-bye," concluded Parcolet the Commissaire.

"We must watch this Major, so masterful and perhaps so subtle," said Hanaud.

"We shall watch him on the links," Parcolet agreed.

But this was more than Mr. Ricardo could endure.

"Like a lynx," he said to Parcolet. "Meanwhile may I merely suggest that Miss Lydia Flight is by arrangement waiting in my sitting-room to tell you what happened to her at Mr. Stallard's ball. And if you'll take my advice, you'll do a little lynx-work on Mr. Stallard from Arizona too."

"Ha, ha!" cried Hanaud. As he rose from the bench, he looked at Ricardo with appreciation. "We pay attention, Parcolet and I. I have him in my book, here," and he thumped his chest. "The man from Arizona. A comic opera, what? But also a riddle. You know him?"

“All I know,” Ricardo answered, “is that I made him extremely uncomfortable one afternoon by insisting that I had seen him, or someone closely resembling him, before.”

But what neither Mr. Ricardo, nor Hanaud, nor Parcolet the Commissaire, knew at this time was that Guy Stallard had only to go out into an open space and extend his arms, and from every quarter birds would come, settle upon his hands and his shoulders, and climb over his coat, and hop about his feet, and treat him as a friend who has been too long away.

CHAPTER XVII
FOOTPRINTS IN THE CORRIDOR

Lydia Flight was not waiting in Mr. Ricardo's sitting-room when the three men returned to the hotel. Enquiries were made. She was not in the hotel. She had not called at the hotel. No girl in a small purple car had stopped for a moment anywhere near the hotel. Hanaud shook his head and pursed up his lips.

"This does not look well," he said.

"I cannot say that it does," Parcolet the Commissaire remarked sagely.

"And we have great need that she should tell us what happened to her when she went upstairs after the bottle of champagne was upset."

"We may get the story from Scott Carruthers at the House of the Pebble," Ricardo suggested.

"We shall get a story without a doubt," Hanaud rejoined. "But will it be true?"

At that moment there came a knock at the door.

"Aha!" said Ricardo, "it is she!" He ran to the door and opened it. On the threshold stood a gendarme in uniform.

"It is the Brigadier Durasoy," said Parcolet.

"He has news of the car, then," said Hanaud. "Come in, Brigadier, and shut the door behind you."

He explained to Ricardo.

"When I called upon Monsieur the Commissaire, whilst you were arranging for our rooms, I asked him to get me news of that yellow car which you saw dash from the gates of the château. And if I may judge from the importance of the Brigadier Durasoy, he has information."

Durasoy stepped forward, he gave a neat flick to his tawny moustache, he took a little note-book from his pocket, he stood at attention, and read:

"The car with the registration number G.F.432 was garaged at the depot of Savelle opposite to the landing place of the ferry. It had the G.B. plate and

was owned by a Monsieur Oliver Ransom of the house-boat *Marie-Popette*. . . ."

"Your yellow car," Hanaud interrupted with a wave of the hand to Ricardo.

"It was noticed first of all at three o'clock on the morning of Friday at the side of Rouen railway station. It had not been there at two. It was empty, and the lights were out. The gendarme who had noticed it kept watch upon it for an hour. No one approached it. At four he examined it. He found in the pocket of the door the Customs' *carnet* and the driving permit, made out to Oliver Ransom. He telephoned to the police station and the car was removed to the police garage. No one has asked for it."

Hanaud's face had grown grave and troubled whilst the story was being told. He looked at Ricardo.

"And this does not look well, my friend," he said gently.

It certainly did not look well at all. Ricardo had kept a keen if silent sympathy with the young couple. But the discovery of the car abandoned outside the railway station in the early morning, and the failure of Lydia Flight to keep her appointment with Hanaud, were unpleasant shocks. Were those two in a conspiracy with the excellent Major? Had they anticipated the excellent Major, beaten him to it, as the saying goes?—and Heaven forfend that Hanaud should ever hear of that saying. Mr. Ricardo's emotions were in a whirl.

"We must go at once to the Château du Caillou," he cried. "It is imperative. My launch waits by the hard."

Hanaud, Parcolet and the Brigadier and Mr. Ricardo went on board. The sun was still high and the sky colourless, as though the sun had bleached it. But a light breeze was blowing up the river and the four passengers turned their faces to it gratefully. Beyond the bend the vast forest of Brotonne rose in a dark unbroken sweep. At its foot, above the river, the road wound like a ribbon and the fringe of the forest was here and there broken by a cottage or a field or a hay-cock. A tiny cape thrust its tongue into the water and the big brown pebble lifted out of the canopy of foliage, and suddenly the house itself glowed red like a jewel against its thick curtain of trees.

"One thing," said Hanaud, as the launch slowed down. "I make the mistakes, but shall we keep the corrections till afterwards? Yes, I think so. We watch with all our eyes, and we listen with both our ears, and when that

inefficient one Hanaud puts the large foot in it, we do the criticisms in our memories."

"That is the way things are done," said Parcolet wisely. Mr. Ricardo blushed and hurriedly agreed. The Brigadier saluted. And the launch sidled up to the pier. The iron gate of the pier stood open, as did those high gates of the courtyard. No one was about, not even the little garage assistant, Nick Furlong. The butler—it was the same man whom Ricardo remembered—conducted the party through the lounge on to the terrace. He had not asked for any names, and he did not give any.

"These gentlemen," he said, and Guy Stallard and Major Scott Carruthers rose from their chairs. They had been sitting with a whisky and soda each in front of them, at a round iron table. Guy Stallard was ease itself.

"Mr. Ricardo, of course, I know," he said. "You too, sir, I know very well by sight, the Commissaire of Caudebec. Then you will be Monsieur Hanaud of the Sûreté Générale. You will be seated? You will drink something?"

Hanaud refused the drink, but took the seat.

"And this, I suppose," he said, looking from Guy Stallard to his companion, "is Major Scott Carruthers?"

"Yes," said Stallard, and Scott Carruthers nodded his head. He was dressed in a suit of grey flannel, a negative, retiring man who did not seem at all to accord with the picture which Madame de Viard had drawn of him.

"I understand that you have come here at the request of the young Rajah of Chitipur," Guy Stallard resumed, "and I put myself and my house and my servants at your disposal. That a theft should have taken place under my eyes, as it were, is very galling to me, and whatever I can do to free my guests from suspicion, I certainly shall."

"That is charming of you," said Hanaud, with a bow of acknowledgement. "We know that when the signal was given outside the windows of the supper-room that the entertainment was going to begin, Miss Lydia Flight was wearing, hidden in the folds of her cravat, this precious necklace of the young Rajah."

"She was wearing it then? You are quite sure?" cried Major Scott Carruthers in rather a shrill voice.

"Absolutely sure," Hanaud answered calmly. "So we are only interested in what happened after that time."

"I quite understand," said Stallard with a smile. "You would like, for instance, to know my movements?"

"If you please," said Hanaud.

"I gave up my chair at the supper-table before the rocket was fired," Stallard explained. "I went out into the garden to make sure that it was ready. I then returned to the house. I didn't re-enter the supper-room. I went into the lounge and up the stairs to the gallery on the first floor. I wanted to be certain that the equilibrist was dressed and sober, and that the projectors were working all right. As soon as I was certain, I gave the signal from the window of the gallery for the rocket to be fired. I stayed for a few moments watching the performance. Then I ran down again. I was a little uneasy about the mast in the garden the tight-rope was fixed to. A pretty heavy strain was being put on it, and I wasn't too confident that it would stand it. The lounge was empty, but the terrace was crowded. It looked to me as if I should have to push a good deal to get past the orchestra and the guests. So I went out by the front door and round the house by the path through the shrubbery. The courtyard was at that time quite empty. For all the chauffeurs were watching the performance from the servants' quarters. Furlong, my man of all work, ought to have been on duty then, but I found him down by the mast. I sent him off back to his post. But I don't think he went back very quickly," Stallard concluded with a laugh.

It appeared to Ricardo that the story in all its details fitted in with the natural procedure of a host careful of the success of his party and the comfort of his guests. It was in accordance, too, with his own recollections. Lydia Flight and Oliver Ransom had been held up on their way to the supper-room door, which opened upon the lounge, by the crowd of people pushing to the terrace. During that time Stallard was in the gallery. He was in the gallery when Lydia Flight went up to the floor above. He had then descended and passed by the front of the house into the shrubbery, but some time before Ricardo himself had gone out into the courtyard to finish his cigar.

"Was anyone else with you by the mast?" Hanaud asked.

"After I had sent Furlong away I was alone."

"Whilst you were alone did you hear or notice anything unusual?"

"Well!"

For the first time Guy Stallard began to show a sign or two of discomfort.

"You are asking me a difficult question," he resumed. "You see, Monsieur Hanaud, all the people here at the time were my guests. Some of them sleeping in the house. I don't like to think that any of them were thieves."

"That is always unpleasant," Hanaud returned gravely. "But a theft was committed that night."

"Yes, I know."

Guy Stallard uncrossed his legs and shifted his feet and looked more uncomfortable than ever.

"Well, I did notice," he said at length, "that a motor-car was coming down the hill on the other side of the park wall. It surprised me. For it must have come from the house. That little side road ends at the gates of the courtyard. After all, the man on the rope was giving a very good show. I had expected that everyone would wait until the end of it."

"I see," Hanaud observed. "You heard it descending the side road. Then you couldn't tell, of course, what direction it took when it reached the main road?"

"Oh, yes, you could," said Scott Carruthers quickly, and then stopped. "I mean, you surely could get some idea."

Guy Stallard smiled.

"I could get some, certainly," he answered. "If the car had gone down the river towards the sea, it would have passed along at the foot of the garden. I shouldn't have seen its lights, I admit, because of the wall. But the noise would have been louder. As it was, it diminished all the time. It took the direction of Rouen."

Scott Carruthers took a cigarette from his case and lit it. He was obviously anxious to get the facts out clear and definite for Hanaud's mind to work upon. Now that this detail was not to be misunderstood, he was satisfied.

"Did you find out whose car it was?" Hanaud asked.

"I didn't so much find out," Stallard answered. "I was told. Furlong told me later on, when I was wondering what had become of—well, one of my

guests. He was staying in the house, you see, and the other guests had gone. And I couldn't make out where he had got to."

"I am afraid that I must press you," Hanaud pursued.

Guy Stallard nodded his head.

"Sure thing," he admitted reluctantly. "You've got to know, Monsieur Hanaud. The car was Oliver Ransom's car. Furlong was returning to his post as it dashed off. I should feel more of a sneak if it wasn't that Mr. Ricardo saw him go, as well as Furlong," and he looked for corroboration towards Ricardo.

"Yes, it was a small yellow open car and a man in a chauffeur's uniform was driving it."

"And Ransom," Scott Carruthers broke in excitedly—"yes, you told me that, Guy, this afternoon when I got here—was wearing a chauffeur's dress."

"Yes, I did tell you so," Stallard agreed with a glance of annoyance at Scott Carruthers. "But, of course, for all I know, the car may have been stolen. Furlong should have been on the watch in the courtyard, and the damned little fellow wasn't there. Anybody in a pair of gaiters and a jacket might have bolted with any car."

That, to Ricardo's thinking, was a suggestion worth considering, but Hanaud was not prepared to consider it.

"I want at this moment just the facts," he said, and he turned again to Guy Stallard. "You went out after the performance from the lounge with Miss Flight to find, if you could, this Mr. Ransom. You went into the garden?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

"We searched the rose garden as well as we could in the dark. We called out his name. We found no one. We came back to the house, which by this time was empty again except for the few who were staying here. Miss Flight was obviously in great distress, and I knew nothing at that time about the Chitipur pearls, and I was inclined to think that she was exaggerating a lovers' quarrel. Madame Bouchette was going to bed. I wanted to go, and I advised Miss Flight to do the same."

Lydia Flight had refused. She declared that she must get to Trouville, she must see Major Scott Carruthers, she must send off some telegrams.

"I assured her that I would send her off in a car first thing in the morning. She said she couldn't sleep, and she ran upstairs to change her clothes. When she came down again, changed, I had some tea ready for her, and said that she wouldn't find any telegraph offices open and that she had better wait till daylight anyway. I was rather nervous about her. She was distraught. I left her in the lounge, whilst I pretended to get a car ready for her. I took as much time as I could, and when I got back to the lounge, I was very glad to see that she had fallen asleep on the sofa. I covered her with a wrap and left her there. She did not wake until seven in the morning. I hadn't dared to go to bed myself, though I had changed my clothes. I offered to drive her in to Trouville. It's only an hour's run. But she wouldn't have that. I lent her a small Citroën car we had."

"A purple car?" said Hanaud. "With the number 7964 R.F.6?"

"Yes, that's it. She had packed a suit-case and she took it with her. I asked her whether I should have her fancy dress sent to the *Marie-Popette*. But she said that she would let me know, and she drove off."

"Thank you," said Hanaud. He sat in silence for a moment or two, and then said: "And that's all you have to tell me, Mr. Stallard?"

"Not quite," said Stallard.

He rose to his feet and going into the lounge went upstairs. He came down again with a door key.

"By the time Miss Flight drove away my small household was stirring. I went to my housekeeper and asked her to lock up the little suite of rooms which Miss Flight occupied, and to bring the key to me. I thought that in her state of distress she might have left money and whatever jewellery she had lying about anywhere."

"And this is the key?"

Guy Stallard pushed it across the iron table to Hanaud.

"Yes. So far as I know, the door has not been opened since."

Hanaud took up the key and looked at the wards.

"And that's all?" he asked.

Stallard tilted back his chair and plunged his hands into his pockets. He looked at Hanaud, his forehead puckered in a frown, his eyes discontented: in fact, a well-bred gentleman torn between consideration for his guests and respect for the Law.

"I don't know," he said. "There was something a little odd. . . . It might mean nothing at all. . . . Wait!"

He brought the front legs of his chair down on the stone flags with a bang, and went through the long dining-room behind them, and out of it by the service door. Those left upon the terrace heard him calling:

"Gavroche! Gavroche!" and then "Helène! Helène!"

He came back with a good-looking woman of middle age in a black dress. Monsieur Parcolet, the Commissaire, waved a friendly hand to her.

"This is Helène Gavroche, my housekeeper," said Stallard, and Hanaud with a polite bow to her spoke to Parcolet.

"You know Madame Gavroche?"

"But of course I know her," cried Parcolet. "Helène is the daughter of old Gavroche the farmer at La Jacquerie, a mile or two down the river. Ah! There was a time"—he slapped the spot where he imagined his heart to be —"we were all in love with Helène Gavroche. But she would have none of us. To bear a lot of children, and work like a slave without pay, and grow old when she was still young. No, Helène was a philosopher. She went into one of the big houses, and there she is with a face as smooth as a girl's and a good many nice bank-notes tucked away in a stocking."

Helène Gavroche broke into an honest laugh and showed a set of strong white teeth.

"Oh, monsieur, you will have your joke," she cried.

"Helène, when you were seven and I was nine," answered Parcolet, "there was no joke, I can tell you."

"Very well," said Hanaud. He accepted the Commissaire's testimonial, and got straight along with his enquiry. "It was you, madame, who locked the door of the rooms occupied by Mademoiselle Flight?"

"Yes, monsieur. Yesterday morning."

"Did you go into the rooms before you locked the door?"

"No."

"Did any of the housemaids?"

"No, monsieur. I was up on that floor before anyone."

"And do you know whether any other keys fit that lock?"

"The doors have separate locks, monsieur, but I can't be sure that some other key wouldn't open it."

"I understand that," said Hanaud. "Now, madame, what was the odd little thing you noticed when you locked this door?"

"Monsieur, the floor of the corridor on to which the doors open is of black wood without a carpet over it, and leading from the door of the suite there were some footmarks. They were pinkish. They were the marks of small women's shoes. It was as though a girl had got some pink powder on the soles of her shoes and had come out from that suite of rooms. The traces were quite unmistakable close to the door, then they became less easy to recognise, and towards the top of the stairs at the other end of the corridor there was just a grain or two of the powder."

"And you reported those footmarks to Monsieur Stallard?"

"Not at the time, monsieur. I didn't think them of any importance," returned Helène Gavroche. "And, indeed, why should I?"

"Indeed, why should you? We don't know now that they are of any importance," Hanaud answered with a smile. "I am wondering what made you report them at all."

"Monsieur Stallard at the luncheon hour told us that a valuable necklace had been lost and that the reception-rooms and the garden and the corridors must be searched. The footmarks had been cleaned away by then, and I told Monsieur Stallard that the necklace could not have been dropped on the upper corridor, otherwise it would certainly have been found when the powder was being cleared away. Monsieur Stallard was annoyed when I told him, but after all, monsieur, it is a reflection on the housekeeper when the passages are untidy."

"Thank you," said Hanaud. "I understand that perfectly."

But Helène Gavroche had a plea to make.

"Monsieur—we have talked this over in the servants' quarters. The loss of a valuable necklace—we do not like it at all. Monsieur Stallard's tenancy ends with the month. In four days from now we are all scattered with perhaps a little suspicion against each one of us. Monsieur knows the harm which the bad tongue can do. We wish our boxes to be searched as well as the reception-rooms and the garden and the corridors."

Hanaud spread out his hands.

"Madame, it is a reasonable wish. I am very sure that it is not in the house at all. But before we leave the search shall be made."

He dismissed her with a smile of benevolence, and then swinging the key between his thumb and his forefinger: "Meanwhile, Monsieur Stallard, I should like to open the locked door."

"By all means," said Stallard, and at the same moment Scott Carruthers jumped up.

"I must come too!" he exclaimed. "I must!" and as Stallard laid a hand upon his arm he drew himself together. "You must understand, monsieur," he explained on a note of apology, "that my future life depends upon the recovery of that great jewel. I have made my home in Chitipur. I don't know what I shall do—how I could get along at all, if I couldn't go back there."

"Yes," said Stallard sympathetically, and he passed his hand under Carruthers's arm. "Harvey stands to lose as much almost as Nahendra Nao if the theft is not solved."

Hanaud beamed upon Scott Carruthers.

"But certainly the Major has a right to come with us and see what we are doing. The Major is very deeply concerned in the affair—and perhaps all the more deeply," he added softly, "because he was not here on the night of the ball."

Major Scott Carruthers seemed in the mood to read an accusation in every inference.

"No, I wasn't here," he said with a challenge in his voice. "I couldn't be here. I had to make sure that everything was in order for His Highness's arrival at Trouville."

"Of course," Hanaud agreed soothingly. "And in consequence you only saw Mademoiselle Flight when she arrived in the purple car in the morning of yesterday."

"Yes," said Scott Carruthers, with his eyes on Hanaud. "That's so."

"And what account did she give you of the theft?" Hanaud continued.

Scott Carruthers brought his fist down upon the table with a thump that set the glasses jingling.

"The most preposterous which was ever invented," he cried. "I could hardly hear it out. She ran upstairs, she said, with the fellow Ransom at her

heels. She left him at the door of her rooms. And the lights went out. Did you ever hear anything like it? The lights went out all along the corridor."

"Well, I wonder," Stallard interposed. "We were putting on a good deal of pressure with our projectors on the floor below. I haven't heard of fuses going that night. But it might have been possible with all the power we were using, mightn't it?"

Scott Carruthers looked at his friend with amazement. "Et tu, Brute!"; Mr. Ricardo drew up the quotation from his deep well of appropriate sayings, but had the discretion to keep it to himself.

"Somebody would have had to replace the fuse if it had happened," said Scott Carruthers. "Lucrece slept on that floor, didn't she? I haven't heard that she had to go to bed in the dark."

"You are quite right," Stallard answered. "I beg your pardon, old man. Of course I must have heard if a fuse had gone. So the lights went out?"

"Lydia Flight says they went out," Scott Carruthers corrected. "You can take it or leave it. For me—I left it. She says that she was seized from behind, run along the little passage into her bedroom, and that a thick handkerchief—or a cloth—was tied over her face. The lights apparently came on again. Very handy those lights, what? She cried out, she says, but the door of the bedroom and the door of the passage into the corridor were shut, and she couldn't be heard. It seems that so many people attacked her that she hadn't a chance of resisting. Someone held her tight, someone else switched the rope of pearls over her head, and someone else knocked her out with a blow to the point. She says that she came to after a while and staggered down the stairs. Meanwhile Ransom had gone off to Rouen. A likely story, eh?"

Guy Stallard shrugged his shoulders.

"I am naturally not very keen to believe that an attack so—what shall I say?—so cowardly could have been made in my house," he said reluctantly. "But it doesn't do to wipe out possibilities. Unlikely things do happen, don't they, Monsieur Hanaud?"

Hanaud nodded his head.

"Undoubtedly they do," he answered.

"But I'll tell you an unlikely thing which couldn't happen," cried Scott Carruthers, stung to the extreme of exasperation. "You can't take a punch on

the jaw which knocks you out and not show a sign of a bruise afterwards—not unless you're a prize-fighter."

"And Mademoiselle Flight had no bruises?" Hanaud asked.

"Not one," Scott Carruthers exclaimed.

Hanaud looked at the Major calmly.

"Not one on the jaw, at all events," he said with a frown like a man remembering. "She hadn't. No—not one on the jaw."

Mr. Ricardo could not remember any bruises which had marred that eager and radiant figure as she had stood upon the threshold of the restaurant in Havre. But Hanaud's quiet comment had certainly produced the most extraordinary effect upon the two men to whom he was talking. Even Guy Stallard lost for the moment his easy assurance. Even in his eyes there was a flash of fear, and his face was pale beneath its tan. Scott Carruthers leaned forward over the iron table and shouted—yes, shouted—with a wild violence:

"You mean that you have seen her?"

Guy Stallard put out a hand to restrain him.

"What Monsieur Hanaud probably means, my dear Harvey," he said suavely, "is that he is here to conduct an investigation, and not to answer our questions."

"But what I actually mean, Monsieur Stallard," Hanaud took him up pleasantly, "is that it's high time we all had a look at whatever lies behind the locked door. Let us go!"

And still holding the key between his forefinger and his thumb, he got up from his chair, and with an amiable little bow, invited Stallard to lead the way.

CHAPTER XVIII
THE HANDKERCHIEF

They mounted by the broad staircase to the first floor, and by the spiral staircase at the opposite end of the passage to the second floor. Guy Stallard went first. Hanaud followed him immediately, Parcolet the Commissaire trotted behind Hanaud, Major Scott Carruthers pressed upon Parcolet, Mr. Ricardo came next and Durasoy the Brigadier last. At least so they started, but Mr. Ricardo walked slowly and Durasoy with an apology pushed past him. As has been stated, Mr. Ricardo was as curious as a giraffe, and being of a slight build, should have sprung up the steps in a desperate anxiety, lest some discovery of importance should be made without his presence. But he was occupied with a problem; how to reconcile the actual Major Scott Carruthers with the calm masterful character which Papa Tabateau had described to Madame de Viard.

"It can't be done," Mr. Ricardo reflected. "The Major is a creature of jerks and jumps. He's on the edge of hysteria. He hardly knows what he's saying. But a man of force—yes and of subtlety too—in an affair like this would measure his words and stand sentinel over his actions. We haven't got the psychology of the Major at all, Hanaud, and I haven't. We must keep our eyes open."

But at that moment Hanaud's voice speaking at the top of the spiral staircase came hollowly down and Mr. Ricardo bounded upwards like an elderly stag catching sight upon the moor of a young and attractive doe. Hanaud on the landing was playing with a light switch on the left of the top stair. As he pulled it down a line of bulbs in the roof of the corridor glowed bright, as he clicked it up the lights went out.

"It doesn't operate in the bedroom, I suppose," Hanaud was asking.

"No," Stallard answered. "It doesn't affect them. There's a corresponding switch at the other end of the passage opposite to us."

The detail seemed unimportant to Guy Stallard and not very interesting to Hanaud.

"You will show it to me, please, when we come to it."

Hanaud was standing with his back to the spiral staircase. On his left were four widely-spaced doors. On his right a row of windows overlooked the forest. Facing him at the other end of the corridor was the door of the locked suite of rooms.

"Let me understand," said Hanaud. "These four doors open into bedrooms overlooking the garden and the river?"

"Yes."

"Each with a bathroom?"

"No, one and two share a bathroom and three and four another," Stallard explained.

"And on the night of your ball how were these rooms occupied?"

"The first room, that is the room nearest to us, was kept for Major Scott Carruthers who didn't come. So it was empty. Madame Bouchette had the second, her maid the third and Mr. Oliver Ransom the fourth. The door opposite to us is the door of the suite which Madame Bouchette arranged that Lydia Flight should use."

"That's all clear," said Hanaud. He walked the length of the corridor to that door opposite. At his elbow in the panelling by his side was an electric light switch. Hanaud pulled it down and again the globes in the roof became incandescent. He clicked it up and they became glass and filaments.

Hanaud turned to Scott Carruthers.

"You see? It wasn't necessary that the wires should fuse. A shoulder might rub against the panel by accident and the corridor's in darkness."

"Yes, but only the corridor," Stallard objected. Hanaud stooped and fitted the key into the lock.

The door opened inwards and disclosed a small dark passage. Hanaud set the door back against the wall and stretching out an arm on each side barred the entrance.

"There is a switch just here, of course?" he asked.

"On the right hand side," said Stallard.

"Thank you," and the next moment a light glowed on the side wall of the passage. Two doors side by side faced Hanaud; at the end of the short passage on his left hand a third door was now visible.

"I want the lay-out of these rooms," said Hanaud; and Stallard answered:

"Of the two doors facing you, the end one is the door of the bathroom. The other is the door of a dressing-room. It has a bed in it. This is really a suite for a married couple. The door at the end of the passage opens into the bedroom."

"I see."

But Hanaud did not move. From the doorway of the dressing-room across the passage to the doorway into the corridor, three small and slender footprints were quite clearly stamped on the brown carpet, a left foot, a right foot and a left foot again. They were marked out with pink powder. The pointed sole, then a gap for the arch of the instep, then the circle of the small heel. Hanaud looked over his shoulder.

"Yes, beyond the door the traces were swept away as the housekeeper told us," he said. "I beg you gentlemen not to blur these marks," he added, and stepping over them carefully himself, he opened the door at the end of the passage. At once a flood of daylight poured out from the room and made the electric bulb of no account. Mr. Ricardo found himself with the others in a large bedroom with two windows looking over the garden and the river to the hills beyond. But he was not concerned with views and prospects. There was a secret to be torn out of this room, and a concentration of thought of the highest intensity was required. Between the windows stood a dressing-table with two standard lamps to light up its mirror. Facing the windows the bed stood with its head against the inner wall. Beyond the bed was a door which must lead into the dressing-room. Between that door and the end window was a fireplace in the outer wall. On this side a large Empire wardrobe faced the fireplace. There was a chair facing the mirror at the dressing-table, a deep arm-chair by the fireplace, a cushioned seat in front of each window and a chair on each side of the wardrobe. The room was prettily decorated in pale blue and silver, and the carpet was of thick pile, a warm brown in colour, without a pattern.

Having observed so much, Mr. Ricardo said to himself:

"Now!" and he concentrated.

Tossed anyhow on to the big arm-chair was Octavian's coat, waistcoat and breeches of white satin piped and ornamented with gold lace and sparkling with big paste buttons. On the dressing-table a queue of fair curls with a white satin knot which Lydia Flight had fixed to her shingled hair was lying, and by the side of it a pair of white gauntlet gloves. The cravat, the ballet-shirt, and the silk stockings with the gold clocks had been flung on to the seat in the window near the arm-chair. A pair of white satin shoes with

red heels and big paste buckles lay, one on its side one on its sole, one on the floor by the window-seat one under the dressing-table, as though they had been slipped off in a hurry and left where they had dropped. Beyond the dress, there were no signs of occupation. The bed had not been slept in. Lydia Flight had packed her own things together into her suit-case and gone.

"It doesn't look as if there was very much to detain us here," said Hanaud.

The remark so chimed with Mr. Ricardo's observations that he found himself saying aloud:

"I agree, my dear Hanaud, I agree."

As he heard his voice, his heart sank. He had broken his promise. He saw Hanaud's eyes turn to him with amazement. He might be thrown out of the room. He would certainly have to writhe under the most humiliating sarcasms. And not only did Hanaud's eyes reproach him. Everybody in the room was staring at him as if he had committed the most unpardonable of solecisms.

"But here," Hanaud continued, crossing to the door of the dressing-room, "we may have better fortune."

Mr. Ricardo was saved. Not even a rebuke from the master of rebukes. His heart resumed its normal beating, as Hanaud pulled the door open. But it almost stopped again. For a cry burst from the detective's lips.

"Zut!" and he stood in the doorway as if he was dumbfoundered by what he saw.

The others crowded close behind him, trying to peer over his shoulders and round his elbows. Parcolet stood upon the tips of his toes, Durasoy breathed heavily behind Mr. Ricardo.

"The good God, but this is prodigious," Hanaud murmured. "It's of a significance which is startling."

His bulk filled the doorway. No one could get a view of that dressing-room whilst he stood there. But it seemed that he had an eye to spare. For he suddenly said in a quiet voice noticeably different from that which he had been using:

"I beg you, Monsieur Stallard, not to disarrange that satin suit on the big chair," and he turned round as he spoke.

Stallard, who had a hand upon the back of the arm-chair, moved away at once.

"I am sorry. I don't think that I touched it," he said. But his face flushed red, and as Hanaud turned back again to the dressing-room Ricardo saw him shoot a glance at the detective's shoulders which seemed to him murderous. "Is there after all more in this bedroom than I observed?" Ricardo began at once to ask. "Have I missed something? Had Octavian's best party suit a message? Was Hanaud laying a trap when he told us there was nothing to detain us? Was the trap sprung when he uttered his cry? Has he caught Byron on the prongs?"

Ricardo was so dissatisfied with his own short-sightedness that he fell into a depression.

"Formidable! That was Hanaud's word. But am I?"

A terrible question for a middle-aged gentleman who had looked upon his formidability as a justification for self-respect and a consolation for the long years of his old age. Happily before his doubts could acquire too unendurable a poignancy, he discovered that with the rest of that little company he was standing within the dressing-room. Behind him was the bedroom. On his right was the door which led into the passage, on his left was the window; and the window was wide open.

Ricardo forgot his merits and deficiencies. That open window was damnable. It was on the side of the house; the shrubbery was just beneath it. Anyone who stood at it could drop anything to someone else who was standing on the little winding path between the park wall and the house. And someone had stood at the window and that someone a woman. There could not be a doubt about that. For a big bowl of powder which had stood on a table close to the window under a mirror, had been upset upon the floor. The powder, faintly pink, was scattered under the window and the imprints of two feet side by side with the toes to the window and the heels to the room were as precise and as clear as photographs.

"Let no one move!" said Hanaud.

He ran back into the bedroom and reappeared again with the satin shoes of Octavian in his hand. He held them together in his left hand and turned them with the soles uppermost.

"Do you see?" he asked; and he was speaking to them all. To the edges of the soles, to the rims of the heels some particles of the pink powder were still clinging. He dropped upon his knees and placed with infinite care the

shoes upon the imprints. They fitted exactly. Hanaud sat back, and though his eyes were upon the gay little pair of shoes with the red heels and the sparkling buckles, his face was blank, his thoughts seemingly far away. Then he came to life and looked along the floor. The feet had turned at the window and moved in a straight line across the room to the passage door, the marks losing with each step a little of their precise definition. Hanaud was very interested in that straight line. He handed the shoes to Durasoy and bade him set them carefully on the marks one after the other all the way to the door. Then he took them back and replaced them under the window. He looked up at Ricardo. His face was troubled, he shook his head in discomfort.

"The story these smart little shoes tell is clear," he said reluctantly. "Someone wearing them runs into this room from the bedroom. She is in a hurry. She does not stop to switch on the light. Either she has closed the door behind her or she has turned out the light in the bedroom. She is in the dark. In the darkness she brushes against the bowl of powder on the table here, and it comes crashing on the floor. The glass lid rolls over to that corner and breaks"—he pointed to where the fragments lay like strips of quartz upon the carpet. "The powder puff falls by the table. The thick glass bowl bounces under that chair beyond the window. She is in the dark and she is in a hurry. She flings up the window. She stands there, close up to it. Why? Can we doubt? To drop something out to someone standing below——"

"Who gets his motor-car and bolts," a voice interrupted, a voice shrill and a little boisterous—the voice which Nahendra Nao had once with surprise in a hotel at Paris heard Scott Carruthers use in a moment of relief. But Hanaud lifted a hand to check him.

"Let us keep to this room!" he said and resumed his story. "Having dropped this something, she turns. She is in the dark, she is in a hurry, she is excited. She goes out of this room, across the passage, into the corridor, she stumbles down the stairs and agitated, out of breath, she plumps into my friend Mr. Ricardo where and when she had expected to find no one. In her reaction—ought we to say in her sense of guilt?—she leans half swooning against the wall. All she can think of as an excuse is to gasp: 'Where is Oliver. Find him!' Is that how the story runs?"

But that was not how the story ran. Ricardo had been forbidden to interrupt. He had interrupted once and the interruption had not been well received. He was not going to interrupt again unless an irresistible need compelled him. Hanaud must make these unhappy mistakes of his and remain uncorrected until they were alone. He, Ricardo, had seen the little

yellow car wheeled out of the garage and its chauffeur drive off, he had then had a short conversation with the little ostler man Furlong, he had then without any haste gone back to the lounge. Why, if Lydia Flight had dropped something out of the window to the driver of the yellow car, and had then run down the stairs in all this haste and agitation, she would never have plumped into Ricardo at the foot of them. For Ricardo would have been still in the courtyard watching the manœuvres of the yellow car. But in a little while Hanaud seemed to reach, in another way, a suspicion that he had got his story wrong.

"Yet I am troubled," he said, pursing up his lips in doubt. "For as I watched the Brigadier Durasoy spacing out those footsteps, it seemed to me there were no signs of agitation or hurry at all. The feet marched. They didn't run. They went right, left, right, left, firmly planted, the heels as well as the ball of the foot. No, gentlemen, I am not satisfied."

He was still sitting back and staring at the shoes as though he could pluck satisfaction out of them. But Ricardo had an impression that he was really listening, listening with every muscle in his big body held tense and absolutely still, for some little sound in this room, a whisper, perhaps, perhaps only a sigh. But the four who stood were as still as he who knelt. Hanaud tried again.

"A measured tread. A gendarme on patrol, not a thief in flight. No, the hurry and the agitation, we blot them out. No, the young lady in the dark who crossed this room was, as Monsieur Ricardo would say, a cold purchaser."

Now here was one of those irresistible needs which compelled Ricardo to intervene.

"I should say nothing of the sort," he observed tartly. "I might say that a young lady was a cool customer. I cannot see myself under any circumstances using such an idiotic phrase as a cold purchaser."

But Hanaud gave no sign of having heard the just rebuke. He picked up the shoes, rose and set them on the table by the window; and the table interested him. He stood close against it. He took a folding measure from a pocket and, straightening it out, measured the distance between the top of the table and the floor.

"Eighty-one centimetres," he said slowly. Was he acting, Ricardo wondered, or had he really some notion about that table in his head? He turned and looked at the window and back again from the window to the table. If the table was high, the sill of the window was low. Hanaud,

straddling the heap of powder, stood close to the window as he had stood close to the table. Hanaud leaned forward to look out of it and down to the path through the shrubbery below; and it appeared to Ricardo that he would pitch out of it. That window was dangerous.

"Take care," cried Ricardo in a panic; and Hanaud looked over his shoulder with a smile.

"Yes," he said, "you are right."

He took now from another pocket a small morocco case and from the case the kind of magnifying glass which a jeweller screws into his eye. With this he examined the woodwork of the sill and the stone ledge outside the window. Then he stood erect again.

"Monsieur Ricardo," he asked, "can you remember whether Mademoiselle Flight was wearing her gloves when the bottle of champagne was upset?"

Ricardo visualised the little scene. It had interested him enormously when it had taken place—Ransom dropping the bottle deliberately, Lydia springing to her feet, seizing up her napkin to dry the skirt of her coat. He had seen her hand, set off by the white ruffles of her coat sleeve, snatch the napkin from the table.

"She was not," he answered.

"You are quite sure?" And he asked again with a special emphasis.

"Quite!"

"Thank you."

Hanaud raised his head. He scrutinised now with the same attention the lower sash of the raised window. He lifted his hand and without touching the woodwork held it in the position it would take, if he were to lean out above the shrubbery path, whilst holding himself safe by means of the sash.

"This is very odd," he said thoughtfully. "A young lady runs into this room in the dark, lifts the sash with her bare hands, leans out, drops her parcel, whatever it is, and neither on the sill nor on the stone ledge outside nor on the sash, leaves the smallest trace of her fingers. How shall we explain that?"

And he looked to Scott Carruthers and Guy Stallard for an answer. It was Scott Carruthers who answered.

"Her gloves are on the dressing-table in her bedroom. She went back into the bedroom and left them there."

"Did she?" Hanaud asked sharply. "Then what of that straight line of footsteps from the window to the door there? And why is there no powder from her shoes between here and the dressing-table, where the gloves are lying?"

"She might have slipped off her shoes," Scott Carruthers replied quickly.

"Oh! Then she came back and slipped her feet into them again? Then she wished to leave these impressions across this room. They were made deliberately? So that we might make no mistake when we came to examine them?" and Hanaud took a couple of swift steps and stood face to face with Carruthers. He had been speaking in a very gentle, smooth voice, with a pleasant smile upon his face. "What do you say to that, Major Scott Carruthers?"

"No doubt I was a fool," said the Major savagely. "I was wrong."

"Yet . . . yet . . ." said Hanaud thoughtfully, "we must keep it in the backs of our minds that those footprints may have been made deliberately for us to see. It is an idea. I thank you for it"; and suddenly he shut his eyes and some strong emotion shook him. He moved his shoulders uneasily. He shivered.

"I would like to know what happened in this room," he said, in a tone which was little higher than a whisper. "For I have in my mind some pictures which I do not like at all."

Hanaud certainly was not acting now. He was sincere and simple as Ricardo had often seen him; distressed as Ricardo had seldom seen him. He was no longer the impersonal creature with the rotating glass lottery globe for a mind, which he had made himself out to be on the drive from Havre to Caudebec. He was a man moved by the very spirit of justice, timid lest anyone should suffer wrong, bold lest the criminal walk unpunished. For the moment whilst he stood doubtful and alarmed, he put a spell upon the small company which surrounded him, upon their mouths, their limbs, almost their breathing. Even when he moved, no one stirred. He went slowly back into the bedroom; and very quickly the others slipped in behind him.

He drew up a chair by the side of the big arm-chair on which the Octavian dress was thrown. He had warned Guy Stallard not to meddle with that dress. He became at once busy with it himself. There was a little fob pocket at the top of the knee-breeches. He turned it inside-out. It was empty,

and Hanaud tossed the breeches on the bed. He took up the waistcoat. There were embroidered flaps to cover pockets, but there were no pockets beneath them. It followed the knee-breeches on to the bed. He took up the coat with both his hands, turned it this way and that, so that the satin rippled, and the embroidery flashed, and the stiffened skirts swung from side to side, and then stretched it out at the shoulders, so that it hung as if someone wore it. At once it became evident to all—all were watching him curiously—that under the side flaps there were real pockets. For one of them bulged.

"Let us see!" said Hanaud, and he felt in the other of the two pockets, the pocket which was flat. He raised his eyebrows. "Aha!" he exclaimed, "what have we here?" He drew out something gleaming which he concealed in the palm of his hand, and before he made any show of examining it, he carefully laid the coat back over the arm-chair. He was as careful as a tailor with a new suit.

"We shall see what we have here," he said. He was acting now; Mr. Ricardo knew the signs. A kind of jauntiness sat on him. He was saying: "Watch this clever dog of a detective! He'll show you something. But don't fancy that he's to be hurried. He'll keep you all guessing at the pretty trick he's going to show you."

Hanaud opened his hand suddenly. On the palm was lying a small flat gold case, oval in shape.

He bent over it, with difficulty found and touched a spring. The case flew open, and there was disclosed a tiny mirror, a tiny powder puff and a tiny store of powder.

"Aha!" said Hanaud with a wink. Oh! He can be common! The conviction, so often felt, returned to Mr. Ricardo's delicate mind. "The magic which averts the terrible catastrophe of the shiny nose!" and Hanaud flourished the tiny powder puff in the air. Perhaps he saw Mr. Ricardo's expression. But he put the tip of his tongue out at him and grimaced in the most vulgar way.

"This is not one of the moments when that poor Hanaud is at his happiest, eh, my friend? No! Assuredly it is not. We are agreed? Perfectly!"

Very neatly he replaced the powder puff in the case and closed the case. He handed it to Durasoy. "You will wrap this up and you will wrap up the shoes on the table in the next room, my Brigadier. And you will see that they are handed to Monsieur Parcolet in his office for safe keeping. So! Very well! We see now what is in the other pocket."

He lifted up the coat again, and felt in the bulging pocket. A look of perplexity overspread his face. Was he still acting? For the life of him Mr. Ricardo could not have told. His hand fumbled in the pocket and the voice of Scott Carruthers, hoarse and passionate and loud, broke in a second time.

"Can't you stop play-acting? If there's anything in that pocket, out with it and let's see!"

"Harvey!" Guy Stallard remonstrated, and Hanaud smiled amiably at the new Byron.

"Monsieur, I am not offended. Major Scott Carruthers has all his world to lose. It is natural that he should be even as explosive as he is."

Scott Carruthers with an effort as visible as it was violent, controlled himself. He took out his handkerchief and dabbed his forehead. But he was a man on the rack and near to the limit of endurance. Suppose that he snapped and crumbled altogether, before Hanaud ceased to torment him? Ricardo found himself wondering how he would behave—this masterful and resolute person! And whether Hanaud was deliberately driving him to the snapping point?

"There is something," said Hanaud, and he drew out of the pocket a corner of some fabric coloured gaudily. "But this is astounding," he cried. "It opens the mouth. It makes one stare. For a young lady of elegance. How strange an item of the toilette!"

He drew it out altogether—a large cotton handkerchief, thick and coarse and as vulgar as a cheap taste could invent. It was woven in parallel strips and in two colours, crimson and yellow. It was a duster rather than a handkerchief. Mr. Ricardo was affronted by the gaudy thing. "Oh!" he murmured, and he retreated from it in disgust. He saw for the first time a sign of real discomfort in Guy Stallard, who gave a little gasp and for the fraction of a second bared his teeth like an animal. Scott Carruthers was as white as paper.

"It does not match with this fine coat, no," Hanaud resumed. He held it against the white gold-embroidered satin, so that all might make their own comparison. "And look!" He plunged a hand down the side of the arm-chair and held up a tiny wisp of delicate lawn edged with lace. "Here is the little handkerchief that did match."

Then he tossed the coat on to the bed, and laying the lace handkerchief on the seat of the arm-chair, he spread the other across his knees. He pointed to two of the four corners.

"Do you see?"

They were twisted, as though they had been tied in a knot. Hanaud sat and stared at the handkerchief, lost in perplexities.

"I can make neither head nor tail of it," he cried suddenly, and his voice now betrayed passion in the cry.

But that mood did not last with him. His face changed as he stared at the handkerchief. He was no longer away amongst guesses and speculations. He was aware of it outspread upon his knees. He bent his head down to it. He sat up again with a jerk and whipped out of his pocket the case with the magnifying lens. Fixing the glass in his eye, he bent again, and then lifted his head with a smile upon his lips.

"You have seen something—which helps you?" Guy Stallard asked, carelessly enough; but there was a little break in the division of the sentence.

"Yes—something which helps me," Hanaud repeated.

Durasoy had returned to the room with a parcel under his arm, and Hanaud called to him.

"Brigadier, you will find in the rack of the writing-table in the lounge some large square envelopes. You permit me, Monsieur Stallard? I thank you. Brigadier, fetch me one!"

The others waited in an uneasy silence whilst Durasoy, his parcel still held tightly under his arm, went off upon his errand. Parcolet the Commissaire broke the silence after a few seconds. He whispered to Ricardo with a nod towards Hanaud:

"But he is marvellous! A lesson, Monsieur Ricardo—— He is disconcerting!" The whisper was overheard by Scott Carruthers.

"Why?" he asked, impolitely, and Parcolet could not answer that one.

So the silence began again, and was only ended by the heavy tread of the Brigadier with the envelope in his hands. Hanaud folded the big handkerchief and placed it with the small one inside the envelope, and tucked the envelope into the inside pocket of his coat. He stood up.

"We can go now. Monsieur Stallard, I beg your pardon if I put you to an inconvenience. I shall ask Monsieur the Commissaire to fix his seal upon the door of this set of rooms."

"That is as you wish."

“It certainly must be done,” said Parcolet. He had brought a little black bag with his bands of linen and his seal and his sealing-wax. The brigadier fetched it up from the hall, and in the corridor the door was locked up again, and the seals affixed.

“So,” said Hanaud, and he handed the key to the Commissary. He looked at his watch. It was past eight o’clock, and the light was waning. There were shadows now in the corridor.

“Yes, we can go,” Hanaud repeated.

But before they had crossed half the distance to the staircase, a gun was fired in the forest, and the noise of it brought them all to a stop.

CHAPTER XIX
THE VAGARIES OF LYDIA

The windows of the corridor were open and it may have been that Mr. Ricardo's imagination was working overtime. Or again it is possible that the high background of hills which made a hollow about this tract of the forest gave to the explosion a particular reverberation. But to him the noise was startlingly loud. He could have believed that the shot had been fired close to his ear. "Really!" he exclaimed, and made a little jump in the air. Parcolet the Commissaire waved a hand and laughed indulgently:

"The bad ones! It is Saturday evening."

"Poachers?" Stallard asked.

Parcolet the Commissaire winked. He raised an imaginary gun to his shoulder.

"Bang! Bang!" he said, firing both barrels. It was as obvious that he would have liked to have been among the poachers himself as that he never expected to kill his bird with the first barrel. Durasoy suggested another explanation.

"Monsieur, it may have been the forest guard. He lives at La Vacquerie, the village just below."

Hanaud was standing in one of the embrasures with his face to the forest, and he did not turn his head.

"So there is a forest guard living at La Vacquerie?" he asked.

"Yes, monsieur."

"Oho!"

He was quite indifferent, it seemed, as to whether a poacher or a guardian fired the shot. Ricardo fancied that his mind was still occupied by the riddle of the rooms which they had just left; his voice sounded far away.

"Shall we go down?" Guy Stallard asked with a touch of impatience.

"To be sure," Hanaud answered absently.

"Very well, then," and with a friendly gesture Stallard ventured to take the detective by the arm. Hanaud turned away from that embrasure at once with the obedience of a good pupil in the presence of his master. But Guy Stallard had moved, in his impatience, and moving had uncovered Major Scott Carruthers. Scott Carruthers was leaning against the wall between Hanaud's window and the next one, his head thrown back, his eyes closed, his face distorted as by some spasm of the heart. To Ricardo it looked as if he was on the point of swooning like a girl; and Hanaud drew back from Stallard and stopped in front of him.

"I am afraid that that shot startled your friend," he said to Stallard.

"He has had, as you acknowledged yourself, Monsieur Hanaud, a good deal to unnerve him during these last two days."

"Yes, the poor man," Hanaud agreed, purring with sympathy. "He has not slept."

Hanaud's sympathy, however, was not one of the Major's needs at this moment. He opened his eyes.

"I'm all right," he said sullenly, and to prove that he was all right, he stood away from the wall, and walked shakily towards the head of the stairs.

"A glass of brandy in the lounge, a comfortable chair, and the Major will be ready to charge the Light Brigade."

Hanaud was winking and blinking at Stallard and digging him in the ribs with the affection of a foster-brother. Mr. Ricardo was not very pleased with this exhibition. Apart from its vulgarity the spirit which engendered it was reprehensible. Mr. Ricardo himself was anti-Stallard. He did not wish Hanaud to adopt his point of view, but certainly nothing had occurred since he had entered this house which should have made him so violently pro-Stallard. He should not be winking and nodding and nudging—that was all wrong. It was ignominious and Mr. Ricardo in due course would have to point it out. That was not the way grave problems of crime were solved.

Meanwhile they had all reached the lounge, and Guy Stallard was ordering the brandy, and Hanaud was speaking quietly to Durasoy out of earshot at the foot of the stairs. He took Durasoy's indelible pencil from him, and the Brigadier went off by the door into the dining-room, as the brandy and soda was brought into the lounge. Hanaud sat down at the writing-table.

"We agreed, Monsieur Stallard, since your housekeeper insisted, that an examination of the servants' trunks and belongings should be made. I have

sent Durasoy to make it"; and he began to write.

Stallard rather roughly pushed Scott Carruthers's glass with his hand.

"I had better join him, then."

He was already moving when Hanaud said:

"I think not. It is, after all, the routine work of his profession. Let us leave him to it!"

There had been so much quiet authority in the voice of the Inspecteur Principal that Guy Stallard found it difficult to insist.

"I think that I can save time, perhaps, if I help him," he said, nevertheless, and he took a step or two towards the door.

"You can save much more time, Monsieur Stallard, if you will stay here with us," said Hanaud; and the words were now an unmistakable order.

Guy Stallard shrugged his shoulders and sat down, and Hanaud continued to write. Parcolet, the Commissaire, and Ricardo drew chairs near to the table. And still Hanaud wrote, but not very much and that very slowly.

"You are making a résumé no doubt of your investigation, monsieur," said Stallard. "If you will read it to us we can check it with our own recollections."

Hanaud finished his writing and put the pencil in his pocket with a flourish.

"My investigation—it is here!" he cried, slapping his forehead with the flat of his hand.

"Very, very transpontine! He is in his Châtelet mood," Mr. Ricardo murmured under his breath, and he prepared to suffer.

"But I am in difficulties," Hanaud resumed. "Yes. Where was Moses when the light went out? It is an old English saying which I learnt from my friend here. In the dark. Well, where Moses was, Hanaud is."

Ricardo noted the dejection which overspread his actor's face and seemed to shrivel his body. The young girl had left the old homestead for the maelstrom of Paris, and here was the father after reading her heartless message of farewell. It was excellently done, if you liked that sort of thing, but for himself, Ricardo didn't.

"In the dark," Hanaud whispered.

Two voices encouraged him with the same question. Guy Stallard's and Scott Carruthers's.

"Can't we help you?"

Hanaud hardly dared to hope that that was possible. But one never knew. He sat up, he came to life, he felt in his side pocket for the blue packet of cigarettes. He lit one of the atrocious things.

"It's possible. I put my embarrassments in front of you. Please to draw your chairs up! So! We are better. You listen? Good! I find the movements of this Lydia Flight during the last two days very erratic—if I were young and inexperienced, I should say almost too erratic to be believed."

The Major looked as if he were sorry that he had brought his chair up to the circle; into Guy Stallard's face there crept a wariness and an attention which Ricardo was beginning to associate with Guy Stallard, expressions all the more noticeable in that they were totally unsuited to anyone Byronic. Such an one should be full of fire and impetus.

"But her movements aren't known," he said.

"That's exactly what troubles me," said Hanaud.

Guy Stallard pointed to the sheet of paper on which Hanaud had been writing.

"But in that case, what have you been putting down?"

"Oh, the few details which I did know," Hanaud answered easily.

"May we hear them?"

This time it was Scott Carruthers who asked the question. There was suspense in his voice, and in the very attitude of his body.

"Certainly. You may correct them. Perhaps you may add to them." He held the paper up. "At seven in the morning, then, she left this château in the small purple car which you had lent to her," and he looked towards Stallard for confirmation.

"Yes."

"From here to Trouville, sixty kilometres, and in the early morning. Half-past eight then, she arrives, Major?"

"A little before," returned the Major.

"Good!" and Hanaud added a word or two to his sheet. "You saw her—when?"

"A little after nine."

"And she tells you the absurd story which you repeated to me?"

"Perfectly."

"And you send a telegram to his Highness at Goodwood?"

"Yes."

"When, Major, did you send that telegram? It had not arrived before the house-party left for Goodwood?"

"No," replied Scott Carruthers. "I tried at first to telephone, but I could not make the connection. When that was impossible, it took me a little while to draft the wording of the telegram. We had to be careful, you see, Monsieur Hanaud, to make sure that whilst we made the disaster clear to His Highness, we were keeping it secret from every one through whose hands it passed."

"Yes, I understand that," said Hanaud, as cordially as a man could speak. "It would take time. The telegram arrives, then, some time after twelve at Goodwood. There were probably many telegrams on the wire to Goodwood, and its neighbourhood, on that day. Shall we say that the telegram written by you and Lydia Flight left Trouville between ten and eleven?"

"Yes! Oh, certainly! Yes."

The Major was re-acquiring assurance. Hanaud added to his sheet of paper, repeating the words as he wrote them. "Between ten and eleven!"

"Now!"

He hitched his chair closer to the table, and laid the sheet of paper on the blotting-pad, and dipped his nib into the inkpot.

"At what hour on that day, did Lydia Flight start out on her return to Caudebec?"

"Start out on her return . . . to Caudebec!"

The repetition came after a pause, and was uttered in a wondering voice.

"But precisely," said Hanaud innocently, looking at the Major. "At what hour? It was certainly before His Highness's telegram asking you both to wait for him at Trouville reached you."

Scott Carruthers had a difficulty in answering at all. His throat was altogether too dry. He had still some of his brandy and soda left; he lifted the glass and drained it. He muttered some words which were quite inaudible.

The reassurance of a minute ago had withered already. Guy Stallard, however, interposed a remark.

"I didn't know until this moment," he said, "that Lydia had returned to Caudebec yesterday."

"No, of course you wouldn't know that," Hanaud returned cheerfully. "But my friend Mr. Ricardo knows. He saw her."

"Oh, he saw her?" said Guy Stallard, turning the oddest glance upon Hanaud's friend. It wasn't friendly. It wasn't actually threatening. It simply made his blood run cold and ice drip down his spine.

"Yes, he saw her, and very graceful and pretty she looked, he tells me. She was on her aquaplane board, tearing down the Seine under the early moon behind Madame Bouchette's fast launch. . . ."

Guy Stallard drew his chair forward. Was it to cover Scott Carruthers, the forceful weakling, Ricardo wondered?

"She was aquaplaning, Monsieur Hanaud. But no! I must have seen her. . . ."

"But yes! I and everyone on the balcony of the hotel saw her," Ricardo cried stoutly.

"I should like to hear more of that aquaplaning," said Stallard, his face now very dark, and his voice dangerously quiet.

"The launch turned before the bend of the river was reached. Mr. Ricardo was alarmed. The swiftness of the current and the speed of the launch made the—shall we say the joy-ride—dangerous."

"Dangerous!" cried Stallard. He was a man in a rage now. "Damnably dangerous! That woman Bouchette's a fool to have let her do it—a ghastly God-forsaken idiot!"

"But—but . . ." Scott Carruthers, hidden behind the stalwart shoulders of his angry friend, seemed to protest. "It can't be . . ."

"It can't be allowed. I agree," Stallard took him up sharply. "It certainly can't. Suppose that she had got herself drowned last night! Where would you be? Oliver Ransom off with Nahendra Nao's rope, and Lydia drowned! The one person who can tell us the truth! That woman Bouchette's off her head!"

Hanaud followed this explosion with the keenest interest. Guy Stallard's anger against Lucrece Bouchette for abetting the risky display whilst he had

no word of condemnation for Lydia, made a new angle from which to regard the affair.

"You speak very strongly, Monsieur Stallard," he said.

"I feel strongly," Stallard returned; but he took a grip upon himself. "It may be that Lydia Flight planned this theft with her friend Oliver Ransom. Harvey says so, and he knows her better than the rest of us. But even so, there are extenuations."

An exclamation of anger broke from Scott Carruthers, but Stallard was not to be denied.

"Yes, and in Lydia's case very special extenuations. Beautiful jewels have their lure for women, and for many men too. It is not a question always of their value in the market. It's not a question of dazzling their friends. They want to look at them, to feel them, to put them on and take them off in front of their mirrors, when they're alone. They want to own them. Do you agree?"

Hanaud nodded his head. Ricardo remembered how Madame de Viard's mouth had seemed to water when she described how she had fondled the Chitipur pearls in Tabateau's back office in the Rue de la Paix.

"Very well. Now consider the special case of this girl. I heard the story to-day. I knew nothing of it yesterday. She has been healing those pearls. For months she has been wearing them. Month by month she has been watching them improve, and at the end, there they are, soft sheen and delicate colour, the world's perfect jewel. She has *made* them. It's a very short step, Monsieur Hanaud, to thinking that she owns them, that really they are hers. Oh, I don't say that it's an honest step. I don't say that she oughtn't to be punished."

"You accept her guilt, then?" Hanaud interrupted him to ask.

Guy Stallard spread out his arms.

"How can I refuse to? I'm not a sentimentalist. I don't say that a girl because she's lovely must be good. High-steppin' dancers commit murders just like Charlie Peace. But here the guilt's forgivable. And Bouchette helping her to risk her life on this damned river—no, sir! If you've got to send the girl up for a year or so—well, that can't be helped, I suppose. I for one shouldn't turn my back upon her afterwards."

Guy Stallard was open and earnest and philosophical, and Mr. Ricardo's heart began to warm to him. Ricardo did not quite like his ready acceptance

of the idea that Lydia must walk the world for life with the stigma of prison upon her, but he had stated the case for her with a discerning sympathy. Ricardo was not yet pro-Stallard, but he was weakening as anti-Stallard. Hanaud was still in his difficulties.

"Of course, if Lydia Flight is a thief, that madcap display last night on the river is intelligible. For it was more than a trifle shameless. Coming on the top of this crime of which she was obviously suspect—yes, a want of tact, eh? A flamboyancy more than a little deplorable. But I can't reconcile it with the distress which she showed to Monsieur Ricardo in the lounge, after the necklace had gone, and to you, Monsieur Stallard, after that."

Scott Carruthers laughed vindictively.

"She's an actress, isn't she?"

"I've always heard, and my own eyes have borne it out, that prima donnas can't act," Mr. Ricardo suggested meekly.

Hanaud continued as though nobody had interrupted him at all.

"Nor can I reconcile it with what I saw of her myself."

For a moment there was silence. Then the same cry broke from two people, but with very different accents.

"You have seen her?" cried Stallard: and the cry was eager. He wanted to hear of Lydia Flight, to know where she was and what she was doing.

"You have seen her?" cried Scott Carruthers, and there were no notes in his voice but notes of consternation and despair.

"Oh, yes. I've seen her," Hanaud answered casually.

"Lydia Flight?"

This from Scott Carruthers was now a whisper of disbelief.

"Yes, Lydia Flight."

"When?"

"This morning."

"And where?"

"At the Restaurant du Sceptre at Havre."

"Oh!"

There was no doubt that Stallard was relieved to hear news of her.

"She came in a little after the luncheon hour, looking for someone, if not expecting someone. Wouldn't you say so?" and Hanaud looked towards Ricardo.

"I should."

"Mr. Ricardo was there, of course," the Major observed, unpleasantly. "I might have known."

"Yes, Mr. Ricardo was kind enough to introduce me to the young lady whilst he entertained her to lunch."

"Oh, she had luncheon with you?"

"She did," Hanaud answered. "Some of Victor's speciality, an omelette, a glass of Haut Brion—not so bad!"

"And I suppose she gave you a very different account of how she lost the necklace from the one she gave to me," Scott Carruthers exclaimed violently.

Hanaud shook his head.

"She gave me no account of it at all, Major. She couldn't very well in that restaurant, where there's excellent food but no privacy. But she was going to. She made an appointment with me in fact for half-past five at the hotel at Caudebec."

"Did she keep it?" and the Major half started from his chair, his face white, his fists clenched.

"No, she didn't," Hanaud answered, and he looked at Guy Stallard. "I am a little troubled by that," he said, quietly and seriously. "Yes, quite a little troubled."

Stallard swung round upon Scott Carruthers, his face dark. Were they going to quarrel, Mr. Ricardo pondered, and led himself on to another question. Was Hanaud trying to make them quarrel? To split any alliance which there might be between them?

"Of course she didn't keep her appointment," Scott Carruthers urged. "She fobbed you off with it. She has bolted—that's what has happened to her."

"Maybe," said Hanaud. "If she has, she won't get far. But she gave me quite a different impression, Major Scott Carruthers." He raised his eyes and fixed them on the Major. "I think that she was startled by Mr. Ricardo's description of her aquaplaning feat last night," and Scott Carruthers sank

back in his chair. He had the look of a man quite baffled. Ricardo's silent comment was that he looked like a man trying to do a difficult cross-word puzzle who had lost his Thesaurus. Hanaud continued.

"Though why she should have been startled because Mr. Ricardo knew of it, since she aquaplaned past the hotel, when the balcony was full of people taking their coffee, I can't understand, can you?"

He waited for an answer and got none. He repeated his question to Guy Stallard.

"I know nothing about it," said Stallard shortly.

"Lydia Flight gave me the impression that she was certainly coming back to Caudebec, because of that odd exhibition on the Seine last night"; Hanaud was choosing his words carefully. "She quoted a motto from a window in the Cathedral: 'Je m'y oblige.' Now what in the world did she mean by that?"

"I haven't one idea," cried Scott Carruthers, in an extreme exasperation.

"Neither have I," said Guy Stallard.

Hanaud looked from one to the other.

"I am sure that neither of you have," he said, and he got up from his chair. "I see that Durasoy has finished his work. I thank you both for the help you have given to me. You will be staying here, both of you, I understand. I shall be as quick as I can, but I may need your help again." He handed the parcel of Lydia Flight's shoes again to the Brigadier and went out into the courtyard. It was still quite empty. Guy Stallard accompanied Hanaud, Parcolet, Ricardo and the Brigadier Durasoy down to the pier where the launch was waiting.

"By the way," said Hanaud, "the Police at Rouen have Ransom's small yellow car in safe keeping."

"Oh, it has been discovered?" cried Stallard. "I am very glad."

"Yes, it was discovered in a small street close by the railway station," Hanaud explained. "It had been abandoned there."

"At what hour?"

"We know that too," said Hanaud, and he stepped on to the launch.

CHAPTER XX
PERRICHET GETS HIS ORDERS

The launch had a tiny cabin with a table swung between the benches, and a large cockpit. The pilot and engineer was at the wheel forward of the cabin, the hand in the bows.

"We shall go into the cabin," said Hanaud with an unusual quiver of eagerness in his voice. "Durasoy has news for us. He came back into the lounge, a placard of headlines. Hanaud knows his brigadiers. But I beg you not to switch on the light"—this as Ricardo bustled into the cabin—"until you have drawn the curtains over the windows. We are within view of the house, and the man Stallard, you may take it all from Hanaud, he has not the bats in his bonnet."

"No, but I am sure he keeps his bees in his belfry," Mr. Ricardo interrupted his work at the windows to put his head out of the door and observe. "It is done." He turned on the lights. Hanaud and Parcolet entered the cabin and sat down at the table. Durasoy the Brigadier stood just within the door.

Mr. Ricardo, who took a seat in the corner by the door, looked out over the stern of the launch. The night was gathering fast on the hills and the river. In the dusk this pleasant and intimate corner of the country was magnified into something vast and wide. The river spread out into a sea, the wooded hills receded and towered into mountains, and with every throb of the propeller the tumbled wake took more and more of the brightness of silver. The small lighted cabin, the darkening and vanishing world without, the lights flashing out in the river-side houses and the swish of the water against the boat's sides remained vividly in Ricardo's memories to mark one of the outstanding moments of this strange and horrible affair.

For Durasoy began to speak.

"Acting upon Monsieur Hanaud's instructions, I went out of the lounge, crossed the dining-room, and using the service door and the hall, let myself out quietly into the courtyard. It was empty. The garage doors were shut, but not locked. I went up the stairs to the living rooms above the garage. In a drawer of the bedroom I found a passport issued this year to Nicholas

Furlong, ostler. I left it there. In a corner of the room I found a cardboard box of cartridges and I brought one away."

Durasoy produced from his pocket a cartridge with a green shell of No. 4 shot and with the name Harris embossed on the metal head. He laid it on the table.

"There was no gun, either in the rooms upstairs or in the garage below. Amongst Furlong's belongings I found these handkerchiefs."

"Ah!" cried Hanaud, pouncing upon them with a little squeal of pleasure.

"I found nothing else of a suspicious character," Durasoy continued. "I looked into the tool shed. There was no gun hidden in it. There were some garden tools, a wheelbarrow, a rake, a couple of spades. I saw a pot of white paint with a brush in it on the brick floor and by the side of the pot a piece of rope newly painted white. The paint was still wet. The key of the door into the forest hung upon a nail; I tried it and put it back. I did not alter the position of anything. I then proceeded to the servants' quarters in the house and went through their clothes and property. I found nothing suspicious."

"You have done very well, Brigadier Durasoy," said Hanaud warmly. "I shall ask Monsieur Parcolet to take note of it," and he beamed at Parcolet, who certainly would bear it in mind, praise from Monsieur Hanaud being something one does not forget. Durasoy, his face one broad and happy smile, saluted and backed out into the cockpit. Hanaud gingerly separated the folded handkerchiefs.

"One, two, three, four."

They were big, coarse, cotton handkerchiefs, woven in parallel strips, coloured alternately crimson and dark yellow. All in that cabin had seen already that afternoon a handkerchief of precisely the same texture and colours. Hanaud had taken it out from the pocket of Octavian's satin coat. Hanaud took it out again now from his own pocket. He laid it carefully open upon the table and by the side of it he spread one of those which Durasoy had brought away from Furlong's lodging above the garage. He bent his head over first one, then the other. He uttered a little hoot of pleasure and looked up at his companions with his eyes very bright.

"More suitable to Furlong's wardrobe than to Mademoiselle's fine coat. No wonder the excellent Major and the beautiful millionaire from Arizona were disturbed when Hanaud lifts it out from the pocket!"

He folded the Lydia Flight handkerchief and replaced it in its envelope and the envelope in his breast pocket. He patted his breast, as though he had done something of which an emperor might be proud.

"One, two, three, four, five," said he, looking round at faces which were only bewildered by his contentment. He handed the remaining four handkerchiefs to Parcolet for safe keeping.

"One, two, three, four, five," he repeated, so perkily that Mr. Ricardo said to himself: "If I had closed my eyes, I should think that I had on board a parrot in a cage."

Hanaud counted the number with the fingers of a hand.

"I set the question now. Where is the sixth?"

The heat, the long day, the difficulty of the problem—had these factors combined been too much for the Inspecteur Principal? Parcolet remonstrated with him gently.

"But, my friend, there isn't a sixth?"

"There is," Hanaud returned, "or there was a sixth. These handkerchiefs—they are strong, they are made in these colours so that they shall not show the dirt, they are cheap, and they are sold by the big cheap outfitting shops, La Samaritaine, le Bon Marché, Au Profit des Pauvres. But they are sold in sets of six or a dozen. We have five here. So I ask where is the sixth?"

Since Parcolet the Commissaire had failed to reduce Hanaud's satisfaction within reasonable limits, Mr. Ricardo felt that the time had come for him to bring some common sense to bear upon the question.

"But, Hanaud," he expostulated, "if those great establishments, with their chains of shops all over France, sell these handkerchiefs in sets of six or a dozen, there will be a sixth anywhere and everywhere. It is certainly curious that one of these handkerchiefs was found in the coat of Mademoiselle Lydia, but it is a coincidence which might happen to anyone that Furlong should also have four. After all, the handkerchiefs of La Samaritaine may get lost, may be picked up and tucked into a pocket, may wear out so that only four are left. No, no, Hanaud, my friend. Let us not lose our heads. Logic is what is needed. Let us be logical!"

Hanaud smiled imperturbably.

"I give you the good mark. Yes! Now I take it away again. No! In general you are right. With regard to these five handkerchiefs, I think you are wrong. What did the fine fellow from Arizona say when I screw my glass

in my eye and look at the handkerchief of Lydia Flight? 'You see something?' 'Yes, I see something very odd.' Look for yourselves!"

He took a handkerchief from Parcolet and once more the handkerchief from his pocket.

"See, I mark the Lydia Flight handkerchief! Those twisted ends would tell us, but to make sure—so"—and with Durasoy's indelible pencil he wrote L.F. on the handkerchief. "Now tell me what little oddity you see?"

He took them both across to Mr. Ricardo, who shot his linen, as the old saying goes, and bent himself to his task.

"Aha!" said Hanaud gleefully. "Je m'y oblige, hein! A mystery? Pouf! In a minute and you are its tumbler!"

Mr. Ricardo, however, did not tumble to it at all. He borrowed the magnifying glass, he scrutinised every portion of those two handkerchiefs, he shut his eyes and opened them again. No! They were two gaudy, cheap common handkerchiefs, and nothing more. No clues, no marks, nothing.

"I am not even one of its wine-glasses," he said with a laugh, and he passed the handkerchiefs on to Parcolet.

Parcolet, however, was no more acute than Mr. Ricardo.

"If I could see what you see, I should no doubt be Inspecteur Principal of the Sûreté Générale. But I am only Parcolet the Commissaire of Caudebec"; and he gave back the Lydia Flight handkerchief to Hanaud, who had now lost all his gaiety.

"Is this the great mistake which all criminals who are caught are supposed to make?" he said slowly. "Certainly the Monsieur Stallard noticed that bulge in the pocket of the coat. Certainly he stayed behind in the bedroom, when we were moving into the dressing-room. Did he guess then that a mistake had been made? Certainly in the lounge he wanted to go with Durasoy. To-morrow we may know. To-night I shall explain to you what is strange in these handkerchiefs, but later. For already we arrive."

The launch slid alongside the hard in front of the hotel.

Hanaud put a question to Parcolet.

"The two men of monsieur's launch—you can answer for them?"

Parcolet knew their fathers and their mothers. They had their faults, very sure, but they were loyal men who could hold their tongues.

"Very well. They should eat now and return. For I think we shall have a busy night," said Hanaud.

Ricardo passed on the order to his engineer. The whole party disembarked and crossed to the hotel. They were followed closely by a young rustic whom Ricardo had never seen in these parts before. Hanaud, however, made no objection. In the doorway they were stopped by the patron of the hotel. The young lady of the house-boat had stopped her car at the door a few moments ago. She would not wait. It was a small car with a purple body. Yes, without a doubt it was the young lady of the house-boat. She begged Monsieur Hanaud to excuse her delay. She would come back.

Hanaud stood for a moment in an indecision. Then he led the way up the stairs; and to Ricardo's astonishment the yokel plodded up at their heels. When they were within Ricardo's sitting-room, Hanaud hung up his hat on the rack.

"It is as well, perhaps," he said thoughtfully. "To-night we have so much to do. . . . Yes, that will do." He turned now briskly to the door, his indecision gone. "Perrichet!" he called, and an old acquaintance of Mr. Ricardo stepped forward into the light.

"Perrichet!" cried Ricardo. That bovine face, that mop of hair so light that its hue was almost silver! The policeman of Aix-les-Bains, who found himself promoted to plain clothes because he was so much more intelligent than his looks! Ricardo shook him by the hand. "The old comrade!" he cried.

Perrichet's face split across in a grin of delight.

"Monsieur remembers me?"

"Of course he remembers the intelligent Perrichet," said Hanaud. "Perrichet, you have eaten?"

"Yes, Monsieur Hanaud."

"Perrichet, you will not sleep to-night."

"No, monsieur."

"And probably not to-morrow."

"It arrives like that."

Hanaud gave his attention to the Commissaire.

"We shall go to your office. There are many messages to be sent, and the telephone here might as well be in the middle of the street. At your office you will oblige me greatly if you write a letter to the charming Madame Bouchette, saying that the foolish Parisian Hanaud is alarmed for the security of herself and her friend, with all the servants except her maid sleeping on shore. Therefore a guard will be set, so that no harm comes to her. Perrichet shall hire a boat and deliver the note and then tie up his boat to the service barge, however much Madame Bouchette may declare such precautions unnecessary at Caudebec-en-Caux. And all night, with an electric torch at his side, Perrichet will watch. At any noise, or movement in the house-boat, he will turn on his torch and drop down to the house-boat and ask if he can help. He will look very stupid. That is done. He will speak very stupidly too, and obstinately. He shall have a pistol as well as a torch," and all the humour died out of Hanaud's face. "For nothing must happen, Perrichet, upon that boat during the hours of darkness."

Perrichet saluted and Hanaud clapped him on the shoulder.

"Aha, he is my Brigadier, the old one! Yes, I took him to Paris. The rascals of Paris think they can roll me the moment they see my Brigadier at my door. You can't imagine the successes we have. Come, and perhaps Monsieur Ricardo will order some food. An hour, we shall be here again."

With Parcolet and followed by an obvious farm labourer in his Sunday suit glowing with pride and pleasure, Hanaud descended the stairs. Whilst Parcolet wrote his letter, Hanaud dispatched telegrams to London, asking for information concerning Oliver Ransom, Major Scott Carruthers, Guy Stallard, Lydia Flight and the little ostler, Nicholas Furlong. Then he telephoned to the Commissaire of Police at Trouville. Would it be possible to find out, for instance, how Major Scott Carruthers, staying at the Hotel des Fontaines, passed the evening of Thursday? Did he stay in the hotel, or visit a cinema or play at the Casino? If so, at what time did he return? The night-porter at the hotel and the manager might be asked discreetly those and a few other questions. Now came the turn of the Sûreté Générale. It would interest Hanaud to know of the recent movements of that celebrated little vulgarian, Elsie Marsh. She might even be asked, and as soon as possible, what she was doing on the house-boat, *Marie-Popette*, at Caudebec. It would not be out of place, perhaps, to shake her up a little. A type like her was on the whole the better for a trifle of alarm. Also there was a question of a cheap line of handkerchiefs. One of the handkerchiefs would reach the Sûreté by the morning post and there should be no delay in making the necessary enquiries. Also all jewellers, known receivers, mountains of

piety and such institutions should be warned, lest the Chitipur pearls be offered to them. Finally, Hanaud got into touch with His Highness the young Rajah at his hotel at Havre. He had no very consoling news to give.

"The affair is of the most serious," he said. "There are very curious circumstances. For instance, does your Highness know that a copy of the rope of pearls was executed with the utmost care by the firm of Tabateau in the month of January?"

"What!" cried His Highness, believing that he heard amiss. "I know nothing of the kind."

"Yet it is true. Major Scott Carruthers had it made."

There was a pause at the other end of the line; and then in quite another voice:

"Wait a moment, Monsieur Hanaud!"

His Highness Nahendra Nao had been wild perhaps and was certainly young. But he was no fool and he had a most excellent memory. It took him a few seconds to recover from the shock of Hanaud's announcement. There had been a good deal of hero worship in his estimate of Scott Carruthers. He knew him for a first-class polo player, an admirable shot, a man of courage and good temper. Above all, Scott Carruthers carried with him the high prestige of his race and his military rank. But as soon as Nahendra Nao had got over his incredulity and horror, he began to remember.

"The morning I brought back to my hotel in Paris the spoilt chaplet—yes, I wanted to show it to Tabateau, but Scott Carruthers found all sorts of reasons against it. He wanted it to go to Crevette in Bond Street. That was in March. I couldn't understand why he was so anxious. I see now. I should have found out about the copy. Yes. . . . I remember something else, too. When I agreed to take the rope to Crevette's he became—well—boisterous. Yes. I thought it curious. He was generally self-contained, you know. Not that that's important— —"

It was now for Hanaud to cry:

"Wait a moment! This is to be considered. I want to know about this Major. I hear of him as calm and authoritative, but I find an hysteric, a girl of the old days in a crinoline. He became a little boisterous when the suspense was ended. Yes? I beg you not to mention to the Major a word about this copy."

His Highness duly promised and Hanaud rang off.

"I do not like this Major who is calm and forceful when all is easy and so shrill and violent when a difficulty lifts itself, who secretly makes copies of jewels which can't be replaced, and is in the depths of misery when the original is lost. No! He is a type, that one."

He might be a type, but Hanaud could only print the faintest of impressions out of him so far.

Parcolet rushed rather excitedly into the room.

"It is a complaint from the forest guard," he said, flourishing a paper on which he had written the message down.

Hanaud took the paper from him, read it and sat back in his chair. It gave him a piece of information which not so long before Guy Stallard had given to Scott Carruthers.

"We shall meet this man before morning?" Parcolet suggested.

"Before people are awake," Hanaud replied. "Let this man watch for us at two o'clock on the bank at some place not too near the village of La Vacquerie, not too near the House of the Pebble, a place where we can land. He can show a light to guide us. So!"

Parcolet telephoned the instruction and with Durasoy at his heels, and Hanaud at his side, returned to Mr. Ricardo's hotel. The three men dined together in Mr. Ricardo's fine sitting-room overlooking the hard and the river. At the end of the dinner Hanaud looked at his watch, and said:

"It is still too early," and Parcolet nodded.

"Yes, the forest guard is not to meet us until two in the morning."

"Good! We have the cigars? Yes. The coffee? Yes. The fine champagne? Yes. And then, the table cleared, Hanaud will amuse you with his parlour tricks."

The coffee, the cigars, the fine champagne were all produced at the order of Monsieur Ricardo, and duly credited to Monsieur Ricardo's account.

"My friend, Monsieur Ricardo, he is a prince," said Hanaud, swirling the brown liqueur brandy round and round in a great goblet. "He is on the top of the holes. I drink to him."

Monsieur Parcolet, not being as yet familiar with Hanaud's version of the English idiom, was no doubt a little baffled, but he gathered that the phrase was complimentary.

"Superior to them all," he said, and stroked his beard and bowed.

Mr. Ricardo, a modest man, was abashed by these praises. He managed some sort of response.

"Whatever my friend Hanaud sees of mine that he wants, he takes. Whatever he does not see, he asks for. I meet him once a year. If I met him twice a year, he would still be welcome."

They bowed and they made little chimes in the room as they clinked their glasses, and Mr. Ricardo was seized with a terrible fear that he would find himself being kissed on both cheeks. And indeed that might well have happened had not Hanaud arrested them all by lifting his hand.

"Listen!"

The glass doors upon the balcony stood open. From the quiet of the night outside the regular beat of a propeller drifted into the room. The noise was still faint. Hanaud ran to one of the open doors and looked upstream. A white light on a low mast and a green starboard light were moving swiftly towards them. A smile spread over the Inspector's face.

"Aha! There has been a conference on the *Marie-Popette*. Yes, yes, my good people, there was need to confer, to ask the explanations and prepare the new plans."

"I turn out the lights," Parcolet suggested, hurrying to the switch on the wall.

"No," cried Hanaud. "Let them see us taking our ease like honest shopkeepers after the day's work is done. It will give them some comfort, poor fellows! And they want it, I think."

He bustled his companions out on to the balcony with their coffee cups and their big goblets, and settled them down in the cushioned wicker chairs and under the baskets of flowers, with the strong light from the room behind lighting up their faces.

"So! We are at our leisures. I am telling you stories of the wonderful brilliancies I have done, and you are gaping in admiration. Let us hope they say: 'He is telling what a whale he is, but he is only a poor fish.' So they get some sleep to-night."

The launch of the Château du Caillou swept past the front of the hotel, the noise of its crew waking the town. It showed none but its navigation lights; but the three men upon the balcony did not doubt that both Guy Stallard and Scott Carruthers were in the cockpit with their eyes fixed

anxiously upon the hotel. Hanaud watched the launch disappear into darkness, only a green line of light tumbling on the water and the dwindling revolutions of the propeller informing him of its course. A few minutes and a red light in place of the green showed him that it had reached the bend of the river and altered its course.

"But I, too, am uneasy," he said suddenly. "There was a conference on the *Marie-Popette* to-night. There must have been. Well then, was Lydia Flight at the conference? Has she been fooling us? Was she holding me off until she and her friends could meet and concoct some fine new plan? If not . . ." He shook himself impatiently, as though he would throw a load from his shoulders, but he remained bowed under it none the less. He stood up and said in a voice of relief: "I show you the handkerchiefs. It will pass the time until we go."

The three men returned to the room. Hanaud once more spread side by side the handkerchief from the pocket of Lydia Flight's coat and one of those taken from Furlong's wardrobe.

"You see the parallel strips of crimson and yellow. Beginning at the border here, there are fourteen threads of crimson, then fourteen threads of yellow. Take the magnifying glass and you can count them. Do you see? There are fourteen threads to each strip."

Mr. Ricardo and Parcolet in turn screwed the glass into an eye and counted.

"Yes," they agreed.

"Then we work across the handkerchiefs. Fourteen threads of crimson, fourteen threads of yellow, fourteen crimson, fourteen yellow. Right! But look here"—and suddenly both of the men who were looking on realised that the next strip, crimson, was slightly broader and the next strip yellow slightly narrower than those which they had already examined.

"You see," cried Hanaud, looking up at them eagerly. "Eighteen threads crimson and ten threads yellow and again eighteen threads crimson and ten yellow. Then the original pattern goes on again fourteen—crimson and fourteen yellow. There's a fault in the weaving. Probably the shuttles carrying the yellow threads were short of their quantity or something was wrong with the working of the loom. But that change half-way across this handkerchief can't be intentional. And it's possible that it only occurs in a certain number of these cheap handkerchiefs. I shall know more about it when our people in Paris have made their enquiries."

Mr. Ricardo held one of the handkerchiefs up to the light. Now that the flaw in the pattern had been pointed out to him, it was evident enough. It caught his eye. He could not but see it. But he was quite sure that if it had not been pointed out to him, he might have contemplated that handkerchief for a twelvemonth and noticed nothing at all.

"And you saw it at once!" he cried, gazing at Hanaud in admiration.

"No! I saw something at once; or almost at once," Hanaud corrected. "As I laid the handkerchief across my knees, after I had taken it out of the pocket of the coat, there was something which seemed wrong. It was just a chance that. But it is my business to use chances. If we speak the truth we must say that so many discoveries come from chance that not to use it is a crime. It is my business if anything strikes me as wrong to find out why it strikes me as wrong, and not to be satisfied until I have found out why. So I take my little glass out of my pocket—oh, I do not examine the pattern too closely before those clever gentlemen. No! I want them anxious and frightened. I want them to say: 'That camel of a Hanaud has discovered something. What is it?' and not to guess what it is—and so to be more nervous and frightened than ever. For once people are nervous and frightened, they are easy. They run here and they run there and they make all the mistakes possible and at last they plunge into your net."

He stood up suddenly.

"Oh," he said, like a man remembering a point which he had forgotten to include in his speech, or discovering a new one. He walked out on to the balcony and stood there, leaning on the balustrade with his back to the room. When he came back it occurred to Ricardo that he looked tired and haggard. His face was noticeably paler and had he been another man, Ricardo would have called the look in his eyes a look of fear.

But he merely folded up his handkerchiefs again and said:

"So I do not look too closely until we are by ourselves upon the launch with the curtains drawn. A little sleep, eh? For an hour. We shall be the fresher. You come with us too?"

He put the question to Mr. Ricardo, who bounced out of his chair in indignation. On what errand they were going he had not the remotest suspicion. But this he knew—if he was left behind, it would be fatal to the expedition.

"Of course I come too," he cried, and Hanaud drew a prodigious breath of relief.

CHAPTER XXI
SCOTT CARRUTHERS PREFERS CHESSMEN

Guy Stallard accompanied Hanaud and—shall we say?—his suite, to the pier of the House of the Pebble. Scott Carruthers remained behind, with his mind bruised and torn from the rack of Hanaud's questions. He rang for another brandy and soda, and lifting himself from his chair with the ungainly heaviness of an old man, he carried his drink out on to the terrace. From that high point he watched the launch slip out into the river, its cabin lights blaze up behind the drawn curtains, its comet tail of tumbled water lengthen and expand as its speed increased. What were they planning and debating in that cabin, those sons of Belial?

It had been a good scheme, he insisted sullenly. He had begun to think it out, actually, on the Maharajah's private railway, whilst the cupolas of Chitipur were still in sight. He had taken his time over its details. There was a man whom he had known at Cambridge—George Brymer—a good-looking fellow with a way with the women who was doing his second term, this time at Dartmoor, for blackmail. He must be coming to the end of his sentence. He knew the subways of the blackmail traffic. He would be very useful. There was Lucrece Bouchette. She was poor and she hated poverty. She was devoted to him, as he to her. She would be invaluable. All the way from Bombay across the Indian Ocean, through the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean, he had polished and dovetailed and snipped off rough edges until his jig-saw puzzle was a thousand times more perfect than the twopenny-halfpenny affair which Nahendra Nao was to upset in a room of the Avenue Matignon. A copy of the Chitipur rope to be made secretly, as indistinguishable from the original as fraud and art could combine to make it. Then the theft—a mere matter of burglary as planned—then the boy Nahendra Nao persuaded to pass off the copy as the original on his return to Chitipur. And after that, blackmail and blackmail and blackmail, plus the rope itself. Well, when you found a pigeon you plucked him, didn't you? That is, if you loathed the sight of Chitipur and wanted to live happily ever afterwards, in Paris, with Lucrece Bouchette.

It was a fine scheme, well constructed, ingenious, flawless. It ought to have succeeded. It would have succeeded—if only he could have worked it with chessmen. But he couldn't. He had to use men and women, and

because they had passions and would sacrifice the finest scheme to gratify them, he had run full tilt on the rocks. Nahendra Nao had lent the chaplet to a miserable little high-kicking vulgar-mouthed blob of mud from a Paris music-hall. And she had reduced the value of the chaplet to precisely nil.

"I'd have been wiser if I had put up the copy proposition at once, that early morning at the Ritz," he said ruefully, "and not bothered about the real thing. After all, the blackmail was really the thing, wasn't it?"

There was no one to answer "Yes" except himself. But he responded favourably.

However, he had coped with this wanton folly of Nahendra Nao's. Scott Carruthers had no words sufficiently red-hot to describe the wickedness of the young Prince in risking so much to satisfy the vanity of a miserable little high-kicking etcetera, etcetera. He certainly deserved the severest censure. However, Scott Carruthers had coped with him. He had secured Lydia Flight to heal the pearls, on the condition that Oliver Ransom was her sentinel. And, in passing, let any thin-skinned censorious person get it firmly into his mind that if anything happened or had happened to Oliver Ransom, the only possible person who could be held to account for it was Nahendra Nao, for lending his chaplet to be spoilt by a miserable little etcetera, etcetera.

Thus he, Scott Carruthers, like the strategist of mark, had been able to adapt his tactics to an emergency. The pearls had healed. They were once more exquisitely beautiful. In fact, they were once more ready and fit to be stolen. The unfortunate complication of Oliver Ransom's presence had been arranged for. And the chaplet had been stolen. And if all the actors in the affair had been chessmen, there would have been no trouble at all.

But there wasn't a chessman amongst them. Nahendra Nao should have hurried to Trouville, he should have been persuaded that although Oliver Ransom and Lydia Flight between them had undoubtedly committed the theft, Ransom had disappeared with the chaplet, and it would be difficult to secure a verdict against Lydia Flight, and there would be publicity and headlines anyway in every rag of a newspaper from Kamchatka to the Antarctic Seas. And that's just what would have happened if Nahendra Nao had been a chessman, and Scott Carruthers had made the moves. But no! Nahendra Nao must get put in touch with a detective, and the detective has a friend in that unspeakable little nonsensical busybody, Julius Ricardo! Oh! Major Scott Carruthers would have dearly loved to have wrung that pedantical patron of the arts' abominable neck! And even so he was not at the end of his troubles.

"Mistakes were made. I couldn't look after everything, could I?" he asked indignantly. "That handkerchief, for instance. Of course we were all a bit flustered, what with—well, one thing and another. And very likely it's not so serious a mistake. These sorts of handkerchiefs are sold by the million. You couldn't fix anything on anybody through one of them. But still, someone ought to have remembered about it. I thought that I couldn't stand the suspense a moment longer when that infernal mountebank began to pull it inch by inch out of the pocket of her coat. There was that shot in the forest, too. . . . I wonder whether Hanaud saw that wisp of smoke curl out above the trees. . . . Furlong, I suppose, but he must have been mad!" Scott Carruthers blew out his breath with a whistling sound. "My heart stopped. . . . My word, I'll have to look after myself a bit. . . . Hindley's the man for that kind of trouble. . . . Wimpole Street. . . . Yes."

For a little while Major Scott Carruthers was occupied with the pathos of his position. A long life of duty and toil in a dusty State of India, and then up and down Wimpole Street at five guineas a time, and no certainty that you won't fall down dead on the steps of the consulting-room. But he came back to the tale of his mischances.

"And this aquaplaning stunt! There's a nice surprise to be sprung on one. What's Lucrece after? If she had some fancy business of her own to put over, she might damned well have let us know. Lydia Flight was aquaplaning last night in front of the hotel, with the unspeakable Ricardo to explain that she did it as a rule in the Bahamas in her best evening frock! And not a word of warning! We had got to pick it up as we went along. The fact is, Lucrece doesn't care a solitary curse whether my scheme succeeds, or what risks she runs."

And that was the truth. Not only of Lucrece Bouchette, but of all the actors in this grim scenario which he had plotted and staged. They weren't chessmen, to be moved from square to square by a master's hand and to wait patiently where they were until the master moved them. No, they were all over the board. Lucrece was throwing herself at the head of George Brymer. She was as full of languish as a girl in a crinoline, when George Brymer appeared. She simpered! Ridiculous! And he himself, her lover, he didn't amount to a row of beans.

On the other side was George Brymer. He wanted publicity. What did Brymer care what happened to Nahendra Nao when he got back to Chitipur? Not a thing. "What he wants is Lydia Flight sentenced to a short term for a first offence, so that he can be at the prison gates when she's released with a fine life for a pair of acknowledged crooks opening out in front of them.

Selfish, that's what that is. But then most people *are* selfish"; and over this peculiar phenomenon, Major Scott Carruthers shook his head.

"Of course Lucrece Bouchette's wild," he admitted. "She hates Lydia Flight. You can't blame her, can you? And what in the world had Elsie Marsh, the high-kicking etcetera, etcetera, got to do with the affair? Elsie Marsh wouldn't be fond of Lydia Flight, would she?" Scott Carruthers asked of the ambient air. "The skin and the quality of the blood in one case had spoilt the pearls. In the other they had restored them. No, a reasonable person couldn't expect that Elsie Marsh should love Lydia Flight. Why, then, had Lucrece Bouchette brought them together on the *Marie-Popette*? For some unknown and unpalatable reason," Scott Carruthers concluded. "A reason inapplicable to the chessmen they all ought to be."

So far Major Scott Carruthers was more or less clear. There remained the problem of Scott Carruthers himself. He was not at all easy about that problem. He was, frankly, disappointed with himself. First-class, absolutely first-class, in devising the scheme, "on the top of the holes," as Hanaud would have described it, he had failed as its executioner.

"I am the power behind the throne," he appeased his pride with this commonplace of the ambitious.

Certain it was that all the forcefulness and mastery which he even arrogantly displayed in the dispositions for a crime, dwindled into fear and hysteria when the crime had been committed.

"I am the man to plan, but not the man to do," he admitted to himself as he stood on the terrace of the House of the Big Pebble, and there was infinite consolation for him in the distinction. Talleyrand, Fouché, Melbourne, Pitt, Cavour, perhaps the most illustrious of them all. He counted them up with a smile. But then Scott Carruthers, like most criminals, was something of a megalomaniac.

Nevertheless he was afraid of himself. He had not stood up to the questions of the Inspecteur Principal of the Sûreté Générale. He had winced. He could not deny it. He was extremely dissatisfied with his behaviour. He had winced.

At this point in his reflections, he heard a step behind him. He turned. The night had fallen. Darkness had hidden the slope of the garden and the river beyond the garden. Behind him the lounge was lighted and Mr. Guy Stallard, or George Brymer, as you prefer, was standing.

"Oh, you're back!" said Scott Carruthers vaguely.

"Yes."

"We ought to see about dinner, what?"

"There's to be no dinner for us yet."

"Oh!" said Scott Carruthers.

These were not pleasant words to hear, even in their simple straightforward meaning, for an orderly man who had spent a lamentably emotional day. But there was a darker and more unpleasant meaning behind them. Major Scott Carruthers braced himself to meet it by ringing the bell for another brandy and soda.

"My third," he said to himself as he began to drink it. "This won't do. I am disappointed. I ought not to have wanted this. But I do."

Inspired by the brandy, he faced Guy Stallard.

"What's the matter?"

"The policeman, Durasoy, found the other four handkerchiefs in Furlong's bedroom and took them away."

Major Scott Carruthers felt his knees give underneath him. He caught at the back of a chair and crumbled into it. Guy Stallard, or George Brymer, whichever name is preferred, ran his eye over him oddly.

"It isn't too good, is it?"

Scott Carruthers wanted reassuring, comforting remarks, not a plain, uncompromising facing of facts.

"But even then"—he was forced to provide his own optimism as best he could—"even then they prove nothing. Those handkerchiefs are turned out and sold by the million. Lydia Flight might own a set just as probably as Furlong. She might use them for wrapping things up in, for keeping them clean. They've got nothing on us there."

"Unless they find the sixth," said Guy Stallard with the most humorless grin which Scott Carruthers had ever seen. If a wolf grinned he would grin like that, Carruthers thought, teeth bared, lips drawn back, and not the hint of a laugh, not a sound of any sort.

"My God!" whispered the Major. He shut his eyes and held his forehead with his hand. "Why didn't Furlong hide the damned things, or burn them?"

"He never thought of it, any more than you or I."

"What did he say? Didn't he object to the policeman taking them?"

"He wasn't there. He's only just back. I made him look through his things, and he found the handkerchiefs gone."

Scott Carruthers thumped the arm of his chair, like a child in a passion.

"Just back, damn the fellow! Back from where, I'd like to know!"

"Back from the forest," said Guy Stallard.

Scott Carruthers stared. He sat with his mouth open, his body still as a paralytic's.

"Then it was he who fired the gun?" he whispered.

"Yes."

An oath exploded in Carruthers's mouth.

"Damn him! What a fool!"

"He had to," said Guy Stallard.

Scott Carruthers sprang up, beating the arms of his chair with the palms of his hands as he rose. All his movements were jerky and grotesque in their violence, just as there was a kind of violence displayed in him, even when he was still.

"Had to! Tell me another. Why did he have to?"

"The forest keeper's dog," said Guy Stallard grimly; and Scott Carruthers uttered a loud cry like a wail and collapsed again into his chair.

"We have got to get away," he stammered, the words tripping each other up. "We've got to go. We can't stay here."

The blood had ebbed even from his lips. The colour of his face was a dirty white, his eyes were never still, his fingers palsied.

"You had better have another drink. I'll get you one," said Stallard, and he left his accomplice muttering to himself: "We have got to go."

Scott Carruthers was in a more pitiable condition than even Guy Stallard guessed. He had a secret reason for wishing to make a quick end of the affair at any cost—a reason which he did not dare to reveal. Something had happened last night at Trouville. Something would happen again if he didn't make haste—something which would show them all up like a glare of lightning. He might be the man to plan, he wasn't the man to do. Stallard was marked out for that job. He himself should have kept away, should have gone to Goodwood with Nahendra Nao and left the conduct of the scheme to Stallard.

Stallard brought him a brandy and soda, and while he drank it, explained:

"We can't go yet. If we tried to, we should be followed, we should be accusing ourselves. I propose that you should go over to Havre to-morrow and see the young Rajah. He doesn't know anything about Tabateau's imitation necklace, does he?"

"Not yet," Scott Carruthers agreed, being, of course, unaware that Hanaud was conversing with the Prince at that moment over the telephone.

"Very well, then. Tell him about it. How you had it made to save the real one being risked, and how perfect a copy it is. Tell him Hanaud's all out for a fine advertisement, that it'll have to be known that Ransom and Lydia Flight stole it between them. We can't avoid that now. Then later on, he can pretend that he has recovered the chaplet, and let you produce your imitation. We save everything that way."

"It'd be better still if the Rajah called off Hanaud altogether, and said that the rope had never been lost, wouldn't it?"

Stallard shook his head decidedly.

"Too late for that, old man!"

Scott Carruthers could not see at all that it was too late. But Stallard wanted Lydia Flight to be driven out of her world and banned from her career and her friends by the public stigma of a crime. "Lydia and I together"—Stallard saw a brilliant future for them working together the South of France and the capitals of Europe. But his only chance of securing her lay in her condemnation for theft at a Court of Assize. She would have no future left to her except this gay and dashing combination with him.

"What we have got to do now," he continued, "is to run up the river to the house-boat, and pronto. Lucrece is doing some funny business, and we've got to find out what she's up to. Lydia aquaplaning last night! What next? We'll get off now and have some supper when we get back."

Scott Carruthers agreed.

"Yes, we can't have surprises sprung upon us like that again," he said. "Of course Lydia Flight wasn't here last night. She was at Trouville."

"What!"

"Of course she was. She dined with me at the Hotel des Fontaines and slept there."

Guy Stallard laughed in his relief.

"I was furious with Lucrece, because Lydia might have been drowned. She wouldn't have had much chance with that stream running, however well she swam. And I don't want her drowned." He caught himself up. "But what in the world was Lucrece up to? What's she playing at? Let's go."

They went down to the pier, rowed out to the launch, slipped her moorings and ran upstream to the *Marie-Popette*, whilst Hanaud was still busy in the office of the Commissaire Parcolet.

As they approached the *Marie-Popette*, a hand torch from a dinghy astern by the service barge was turned on to them. As they made the launch fast to, the dinghy slid down to them.

"Can I help Monsieur?" a voice from the dinghy meekly asked.

"No, you can't!" shouted Scott Carruthers. "And who the devil are you, anyway?"

"Monsieur the Commissaire sent me to keep a watch on the *Marie-Popette* to-night, since Madame was alone on board, with only her maid to look after her."

"A policeman?"

"Yes, monsieur. It is not so safe, my gentlemen, for a lady alone with her maid to look after her on a house-boat on the Seine."

"I suppose not," said Scott Carruthers, sarcastically. "If the underworld of Caudebec heard of it, there would be throats cut before the morning."

"Very sure, monsieur. But since I am here, Madame will be able to sleep in peace."

Lucrece Bouchette, who had been playing Patience in the saloon, came out on to the open space of deck aft. She was dressed in an informal evening gown of grey chiffon, but she uttered no word of welcome to her visitors.

"I am sure it's very kind and thoughtful of Monsieur Parcolet," said Guy Stallard. "All Madame's friends will thank him for his consideration."

"Thank you, monsieur," said Perrichet.

The visitors stepped over the bulwarks on to the carpeted deck of the *Marie-Popette*.

"We had better go into the saloon," said Scott Carruthers, and he went in. Lucrece Bouchette laid a hand on the arm of Guy Stallard.

"I am glad that you came," she said, in a low and thrilling voice. There was an appeal in her eyes, an expectation in her smile, to which Guy Stallard avoided any response.

"It was probably a mistake that we came at all," he answered.

"I don't care," she said passionately. "I am glad that you came."

She stood for a moment, her head flung back, her body erect, her eyes liquid and starry, offering herself to him. Guy Stallard took her by the elbow.

"We have things to talk over, Lucrece," he said in a quiet, unyielding voice. He moved into the saloon. Lucrece Bouchette threw a glance about the river. It was warm, it was dark, the sky was patterned with innumerable stars, the tide tinkled against the sides of the boat. It was the hour and the place for lovers; and in Lucrece Bouchette passion had never run so high as it was doing now. It seemed that danger gave an edge to it, and fired her with excitement.

She followed Guy Stallard into the saloon. She sat beside Scott Carruthers, hardly aware that he was present. Guy Stallard was opposite to her and her eyes coveted him.

"The idea isn't working out properly," said Stallard, and suddenly looked round. "Where's Parcolet's golliwog policeman? Can he hear us?"

Perrichet had once more fallen astern. He could keep better watch upon the house-boat from the service barge aft. He was at this moment lighting a pipe, and Guy Stallard could see his rustical countenance red in the light of the match.

"No, he can't hear us, and he wouldn't understand if he did."

Stallard left the door of the saloon open to the warm and fragrant air. He returned to his seat.

"Things are not quite going according to plan," he said smoothly. "The young Rajah has called in Hanaud, and when Hanaud is called in, I understand that one has to be careful." He suddenly turned upon Lucrece Bouchette. "You didn't raise an eyebrow when I mentioned Hanaud. How did you know that he was here?"

"Lydia Flight told me."

"Then Lydia's here?" Stallard asked eagerly, and looked round the saloon, as though he would find her behind a basket of roses.

"She was here," Lucrece answered. "She arrived late this evening, when it was growing dark. She packed up a few clothes and went ashore again. She had kept her car waiting."

"And where did she go?"

"I understood Paris," said Lucrece Bouchette.

"And you let her go?" Stallard cried angrily.

The blood rushed into the face of Lucrece, as she answered:

"How could I keep her? She meant to go. She was in despair. She had searched Havre, and had travelled to Trouville, she only came back here in the hope that Oliver Ransom had returned. She had a hope that she might hear of him in Paris. She meant to go. Besides, it was better for all of us that she should go."

"Why?"

Stallard put his question with an abrupt truculence.

"Because she had an appointment with Hanaud, which she didn't keep," Lucrece answered with an unpleasant smile of triumph. "What's your Hanaud going to think now?"

Guy Stallard flung himself back discontentedly.

"Oh, she had an appointment with Hanaud?"

"Yes."

"And she didn't keep it?"

"No."

"She made the appointment when she lunched with him?"

"Yes. At the Restaurant du Sceptre at Havre."

"Lucrece"—and Guy Stallard leaned suddenly forward over the table, his eyes boring into hers. "Are you sure that Lydia Flight has gone? It isn't like her. I can't see her doing it. Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" cried Lucrece furiously. "She left her car at the end of the little footpath, came on board, packed up her clothes, and was off. My belief is," and Lucrece's mouth smiled with the pleasure of the knowledge that she was going to hurt, as she herself was hurt, "that she hated the sight of the lot of us, of you like the rest. That she was mad to be rid of us all, of

you like the rest. That there's just one person she'd tramp barefoot to find, not you, nor any of us. But Oliver Ransom."

Stallard did not answer her. He sat watching her with a sullen face and smouldering eyes.

"I don't trust you, Lucrece," he said. "You're a vindictive little devil. It would amuse you to be cruel, eh? You'd get some real pleasure out of cruelty, wouldn't you?"

He sprang up suddenly and made for the inner door of the saloon. Lucrece Bouchette never stirred a finger. Yet she suffered an extraordinary metamorphosis. Her face became a mask, the delicate skin and tender flesh hardened to smooth wax; and now that there was no play of lip or nostril or jaw, the East and the West were divided in her features as unmistakable as two countries by a coloured frontier line in an atlas; the round forehead and the long almond liquid eyes slightly upslanting at the outer ends, and the flattish cheek-bones of the East, the straight nose, the short upper lip, the full red mouth and the oval jaw of the West, made an effect so bizarre that even Scott Carruthers at her side, who had seen her in moods so multitudinous, was astonished. A stranger had appeared. There was no expression whatever upon her face, her eyes glittered, but there was neither fear nor hate nor anger nor any emotion in the glitter.

At the door Guy Stallard flung back towards her. If he had hoped for some revelation in her face, he was to be disappointed. He met the silent indifference of an idol.

"I am going to see for myself!" he shouted, and flung the door open. It gaped upon a black and empty passage stretching forward towards the bows.

"Where's the switch?" he asked, as he disappeared from the view of the saloon. Scott Carruthers heard his hand flapping on the panels of the walls. From a distance came the sound of a door closing, the snap of a switch, and the voice of Marie, Lucrece's Javanese maid.

"Does monsieur want anything?"

"Yes. The cabin of Mademoiselle Flight."

"This one, monsieur. I have not had the time to set it right."

"So I see."

A few moments' silence followed. Scott Carruthers pictured Stallard standing in the doorway looking into a cabin where clothes had been chosen and packed in a hurry and the rest left in disorder. Another voice became

audible, but a much more distant voice. It came, indeed, from the intelligent Perrichet, who found himself in his dinghy just under the window where there seemed to be some commotion.

"Can I help you, monsieur? Monsieur le Commissaire told me to help if there was any need."

"Well, there isn't any need," cried Stallard angrily.

A door was slammed, the door of Lydia's cabin. Stallard was in the passage again.

"For a fool, that policeman's pretty slippy," he said shrewdly. "No high jinks on the *Marie-Popette* to-night without that fellow doing some of the jinking, what?"

He turned back into the saloon. A click, and the passage was in darkness again. A sound of a door closing away forward towards the bows. Marie had gone again into her room. Stallard flung the door of the saloon to and the latch snapped into its socket in the jamb with a sharp crack.

"Well, you're right," he said roughly to Lucrece.

"She's gone. But look you here, Lucrece! You're playing tricks, and tricks are not to be. We can't afford 'em. That detective Hanaud's a little too bright. He has picked over all that his Mickey Mouse has told him"—oh, what a godsend that Mr. Ricardo was not present to hear himself so ignominiously described!—"and he has guessed a thing or two. He put us both through the mangle this afternoon, I can tell you. What was the meaning of that stunt of yours last night?"

"Stunt?" Lucrece asked.

She was taking life again now. The frontier line was fading. East and West were melting again into one oddly attractive face. The immobility of an idol was passing from her.

"Stunt, Guy? I don't understand."

"You understand very well," he contradicted bluntly. "This staging of Lydia Flight on an aquaplane board last night."

Lucrece knotted her forehead in bewilderment.

"Lydia wasn't aquaplaning last night," she said.

"I know that now as well as you do. She was at Trouville. But why were you pretending that she was here? Why were you showing her off to

everybody in the hotel? Because that's what you were doing, wasn't it?"

"No," Lucrece returned without any discomposure. "I never said it was Lydia. I never pretended that it was."

"Who was it, then?"

"Elsie Marsh."

A cry of surprise broke from Scott Carruthers. Guy Stallard himself was in an angry perplexity.

"Why in God's name did you send for Elsie Marsh?"

"I didn't," Lucrece Bouchette replied. "She came without warning. She asked if she could stay the night. I had room. I let her stay."

"Why did she come?"

"I didn't ask her. I supposed that she came for the same reason that brought her before. She hoped to find the young Rajah here and get hold of him again."

Lucrece certainly had an answer ready for every question which Stallard put to her.

"Where is Elsie Marsh now?"

"She went back this morning."

"How?"

"By the charabanc to Rouen."

"A short visit, what?"

"No doubt. But Nahendra Nao wasn't here."

And there she might have left the discussion. Stallard was mystified still, and still uneasy, but he had come to the end of his questions. Lucrece, however, was not content.

"It's not my fault, if some people in the hotel mistook Elsie Marsh for Lydia, is it?"

And at once Stallard came back at her.

"But you meant them to make that mistake," he said sharply, and for the first time Lucrece flinched.

"I didn't! I didn't!" she cried. "I never gave a thought to it."

"I don't believe you," said Guy Stallard.

She had another challenging question on the tip of her tongue. But some remnant of prudence stopped her from asking it. Guy Stallard, however, in his next words implied her question, and gave the best answer which he had to give.

"Though why you should want them to make that mistake, I am damned if I know yet," he said gloomily. He got to his feet. "Harvey Carruthers there is about dead, and we've had no dinner. So we'll go, but remember this, Lucrece, we're not out of the wood yet. Hanaud'll put you through the hoops to-morrow and you're not to get fresh with him. I know a dangerous man when I see him, and he's one. Stick to your simple tale—the tale you've given us to-night. Harvey's going to see Nahendra Nao to-morrow morning. And by to-morrow night we may trot out our bugles and blow the All's Clear. But till then, watch it, and no fancy poodle-tricks!"

The blood mounted into the face of Lucrece Bouchette, and spread over her throat. Scott Carruthers saw that flush of anger and resented the words which provoked it as deeply as she did herself.

"Lucrece doesn't indulge in poodle-tricks," he said sharply.

"Oh?" Stallard replied. "You give me news."

He strolled out of the saloon. Scott Carruthers stayed for a few moments after he had gone.

"You mustn't mind him, Lucrece. He's a bully, you know. He hasn't been used to people like you, my dear. If you're king of a dung-heap on Dartmoor, you can't help bringing a whiff of the midden along with you, when you're king of the castle."

"Especially if it's the Castle of the Big Pebble," said Lucrece.

She tried to smile. She tried to recapture some shadow of the passion which had once made this man the pivot of her heart. But it could not be done. He was broken. He had no confidence in himself any longer, and that distrust reacted inevitably upon her. She had begun to despise him. She wondered that she had ever thought him the star to which her chariot might be harnessed.

"All right, dear. Good night! You look as if you hadn't slept for a week," and her voice was the soothing, indulgent voice which one uses to a child.

Perrichet helped them to cast off.

"Monsieur need not fear for the house-boat," he cried in a loud voice so that Lucrece Bouchette might hear it clearly. "I shall watch. A splash in the water of a fish jumping, I shall investigate it."

The launch moved away down the river. Perrichet retired to the side of the service barge. Lucrece was left alone in the lighted saloon, her slim body shaking, her face stormy. She sat down in the seat where she had sat before. Opposite to her Guy Stallard had sat. She reached out a hand and turned out the light. For a little while the darkness about her was absolute. Then at one point it thinned. An oblong of it, the doorway, shaped itself. Beyond the oblong a man cupped a lighted match in his hands and lit a pipe; Perrichet in his dinghy.

Lucrece was still sitting in her place when the grey of the morning crept over the water and into the saloon. Her maid Marie found her in it when the day was broad. She had turned idol once more. Only the glitter of her eyes and the slight lift and fall of her breast showed that she lived and was awake.

Perrichet in his dinghy was chatteringly awake, too. The patience of the East on this night had met its match.

Half an hour later Marie rushed again into the saloon.

"They are coming, madame! What shall I do?"

There was no time to do anything at all.

CHAPTER XXII
A NIGHT IN THE FOREST OF BROTONNE

The launch slid quite silently away from the hard at half-past one in the morning. It showed neither its white light on the mast nor its navigation lights at the sides, nor any lamp in its cabin. Yet there were passengers in the cockpit, Hanaud, Parcolet and Ricardo, and on the roof of the cabin and in the bows, Durasoy and two other gendarmes, armed and in uniform. Orders had been given that none should speak.

All Caudebec was long since in bed; the ferry had ceased to ply; and only the stars wheeling overhead mitigated with their glimmer the darkness of that hour. On the black river between the forest-covered hills, the launch was lost at once. The tide was running down to the sea, and the engine was put at slow. The pilot kept to the right bank even at the elbow where the river bent in a wide sweep to the left. Somewhere now on the opposite side the House of the Pebble stood within its park walls, but it must be taken on trust. For not a window shone.

The pilot edged the launch across the midstream towards the opposite bank. Mr. Ricardo was in a ferment lest the pulsation of the screw should wake some light sleeper in the dark house. At every moment he expected a line of windows to leap into a blaze and voices to hail them from the shore. The purpose of this expedition he did not know and he did not care to know. It was secret, it was undertaken in the dead of night, it was a step in the solution of a mysterious crime. That was enough. He thought of his friends asleep in their distant homes, and pitied them for their dull lives. He and the agents of the Law were awake, doing the World's work. Almost he tittered aloud in his excitement. "Mincing Lane has come to the forest of Brotonne," he was thinking, "just as once Birnam Wood had come to Dunsinane"; and whilst he was putting that witticism into a pigeon-hole of his memory for future use, a light, very low down, flashed and went out and flashed again.

The launch headed towards it, its engine was silenced—a splash no louder than is made by the leap of a big fish, and the launch swung round upon its anchor until its nose met the stream. The dinghy had been towed along behind it. Its painter was drawn in, and the whole party went ashore. The forest guard, in a velveteen coat and leather gaiters, carried a gun under his arm.

"How did you discover that your dog had been shot?" Hanaud asked in a quiet voice.

"I missed him this evening," the man answered. "I searched and found him. I left the body where I found it. It is near here. There may be better places for you gentlemen to land, but none so close."

"We'll follow you."

Behind the forest guard they climbed the bank, crossed the road, and then in single file followed a narrow path between the trees. No one talked; the path itself was rough and steep enough to keep them silent. The forester's lantern lit up the great smooth boles of the beech trees and the undergrowth, and threw a bright gloss upon the roof of leaves above their heads. After they had climbed for some twenty minutes, the forester turned off from the path to his right. He scrambled up a bank and stopped. The retriever lay stretched upon its side. There was dried blood upon the body, none upon the ground.

"It was not shot here, messieurs," said the guard. "It was dragged, the poor beast, in a sack. Look!"

He moved a step or two away and held his lantern low. A strip of yellow plaited sacking shone in the light, and the brushwood itself was broken down, as though something heavy had been pulled across it.

"Are we near the Château du Caillou?" Hanaud asked.

"It is a little below us and in front of us."

"Your retriever, my friend, was killed on the other side of the house, and at a spot still deeper in the wood. I saw a wisp of smoke float out above the trees. If you lead us to the big rock, I think that I can find the place. In half an hour we shall have some light."

The forester led them back to the path and stalked on. At the landing place in the open, there had been a freshness in the air which told of morning near at hand. Here under the trees it was as hot as a sultry day. Mr. Ricardo began to feel oppressed, and his chest to labour, as they moved over the uneven ground. Happily, however, Parcolet the Commissaire was in no better case, and a whispered message was passed up the file. The woodman's long, swift stride slackened, and in a little while Mr. Ricardo could see his hand as something pale, and that people were moving in front of him. The guard stopped, opened the door of the lantern, and blew out the candle. A grey and misty light was invading the aisles of the forest like a tranquil sea. The trees thinned; ahead the forest guard lifted a warning hand. They were

at the back of the corner of the park wall now. Looking down, Mr. Ricardo could see it and the dark patch of the postern gates breaking the level of the brick wall.

And suddenly they all stopped as one man. For from the courtyard on the other side of the wall a small harsh sound was borne to their ears. It was a grating sound, the sound of a key turning in a rusty lock.

"Down, all," Hanaud whispered; and he pressed Mr. Ricardo down beside him. "Don't show your faces, and not a sound!"

The little party crouched low among the tangle of the undergrowth. They drew their hats low upon their foreheads, and hid the flesh of their faces behind their coat sleeves. Mr. Ricardo was certain that his heart was making as much noise as the propeller of his launch. Whoever was moving in the courtyard must hear it, and be warned. He pressed his hand upon it as he lay on his chest; he felt himself choking; and as he began to breathe again he noticed a surprising thing. He should have observed it before as surely Hanaud had. He had enjoyed more opportunities than Hanaud. He was much to blame. There was a slit in the brick wall by the side of the postern door, a long slit like a perpendicular letter slot in a giant's pillar box; or like the opening of a scene-dock at the back of a theatre.

Hanaud's hand tightened upon his shoulders.

"Do you see? Do you see?" He hardly breathed the words. "Watch! Watch!"

Even Hanaud was shaking in his excitement. And suddenly the slit in the brick wall was wider—oh, ever so little, but without doubt wider. And Ricardo understood Hanaud's excitement and his own delusion. In the grey and eerie light of the dawning the door of the courtyard was opening upon the forest of Brotonne. But so slowly that one could hardly endure it. Mr. Ricardo felt an almost overwhelming impulse to spring to his feet and charge out of the trees down the slope with a cry. He had to dig his fingers into the ground to hold himself in check. But just when his flesh and blood were finding the suspense quite beyond bearing, when he must know at all costs, who stood behind that door and so silently pushed it out—what prisoner they had overlooked in their examination of the house, the weight of the door quickened its movement. It swung open wide as swiftly as if a strong wind had caught it and with a slight thud lay back against the wall. Mr. Ricardo felt that thud like a blow on the head.

Hanaud turned quickly to Durasoy. He nodded to him with a smile of commendation and pointed towards the doorway. Then his eyes were back

again. Across the open doorway, at the level of a man's thighs, a piece of rope was stretched—a piece of rope which in the colourless grey dawn gleamed strangely white. Ricardo remembered. Durasoy had noticed in the tool shed by the side of the gate a pot of white paint with its brush in the pot, and a rope with the white paint fresh and wet upon it.

But what purpose could it serve, Ricardo asked himself, and a little petulantly. Things really ought to have a reason for being so, however they were. One could stoop under that rope, couldn't one? It wouldn't hinder anyone going out or coming in. It would only make a mess of them. Then why fix it up at all? But Ricardo's questions were shocked the next moment out of his thoughts altogether. For in the doorway a man was standing. He was wearing a pair of white tennis shoes, flannel trousers, and a flannel jacket. The jacket was open, and it looked as if he had just slipped these clothes over his pyjamas. There was light enough now to recognise him. The man was Scott Carruthers and he carried in his hand a spade.

He took a step forward and was checked by the rope and stopped. But he pressed forward again, the rope was seen to strain and stretch, but it held, cutting across his thighs and bringing him sharply up. "He'll have to stoop," said Ricardo to himself, "or break the rope." But Scott Carruthers did neither. He stood where he was. He passed his hand over his forehead like a man dazed. He lifted the spade and looked at it in a dull way as though he had never seen a spade in his life before. Then, more alertly, he stared at the rope and at the streak of white across his thighs. He looked back at the house; and at once he became active and purposeful. He disappeared and returned with his hands empty. He unfastened the piece of rope at both ends and took that away. He came back a second time and his eyes searched the forest. But every face of those who watched was pressed now to the ground and though they looked upon daylight, he was gazing into the darkness and looked still upon night. He took a step out of the doorway. There was no rope now to hold him back; and carefully, so that no hinge creaked, he drew the door towards him. Once more they heard the tiny grating of a key in a rusty lock; and after that nothing.

"Wait!" whispered Hanaud. "There are the windows of the corridor. Give him time!"

Hanaud gave him so much time to return to his room that Mr. Ricardo suffered an agony of cramp and emerged from that distress to endure such an attack of pins and needles as he had never known. But he did not flinch. He foresaw a time when sitting in his club he would say: "Ah, my dear fellow, no doubt your operation gave you some uncomfortable moments.

But if you want to know what real pain is, let me tell you of the night when Hanaud and I lay perdu in the forest of Brotonne."

"Now, I think," said Hanaud after æons had passed—in fact the sun was rising and here and there a shaft of pale gold slanted through a break in the leaves. They rose and crept quietly along until they were opposite to the middle of the park wall. Here the forest guard stopped and said:

"We must climb a little here. There is an open space ahead of us."

It was the space where Guy Stallard had stood out against the green three days ago and beckoned the birds of the air to come and make friends with him. The trees indeed were already thinning in front of them, and they mounted deeper into the secrecy of the forest. They made the circuit of the house, and when Mr. Ricardo was bedewed with perspiration, and he could not lift his feet high enough above the roots to keep himself from stumbling at every other step and he was beginning to feel that really, really, he had taken enough exercise to justify some days of session in a deep arm-chair with a cushioned leg-rest, right in front of his nose stood the huge smooth pebble of rock from which the house below him took its name.

They halted at its side and Hanaud took a little compass from his pocket and made out a direction.

"It is a rough and ready calculation," he explained. "For I was standing at a window of the corridor to the west of us, and I dared only have a hasty glance at this." In fact Ricardo had never seen him palm the compass and look at it at all. "But I think this line should take us to where we want to go."

Hanaud took the lead now, walking upwards and westwards in a diagonal from the rock. The forest became darker, but the boles of the beech trees were free of low branches. They seemed to be walking in an underground cavern with the blackness of midnight just ahead of them, but always receding as they advanced, and leaving them a curiously clear brown twilight, through which to move and see. They reached the foot of a knoll and Hanaud uttered a low cry of satisfaction.

"We are close," he said. "Where the shot was fired the trees rose above their neighbours."

One after the other, they scrambled up the knoll. The trunks of the beeches were clustered on the summit in a thicker coppice than any they had yet encountered. Again Hanaud exclaimed in delight. He stooped and picked up a cartridge case from the ground. He held it up so that all could see it. It

had a green shell, on the brass head of it was embossed the name Harris and on the pink end the number of the shot.

"Number four," Hanaud read aloud and again he inclined his head in praise to Durasoy the Brigadier.

Then he looked round; and the picture was one which none of them forgot. They were standing from three to four feet above the floor of the forest. Ahead of them the ground was a dark red from its vast litter of dead leaves, but there was hardly any undergrowth and it was, for a wonder, flat. Ricardo counted three little clumps of scrub and there were no more. It was a plain set with high tree trunks like pillars, surrounded with darkness, and itself filled with a clear subdued light warmer than the light of a cathedral. None of them knew what they were out to find, none of them knew whether there was anything to find at all. But here a forest watchman's dog had been shot, and hence its body had been dragged in a sack for at least a couple of miles. Why?

Mr. Ricardo couldn't answer; Hanaud didn't want to answer, but a horrible fear possessed him. He turned to Ricardo with an odd savagery in his voice.

"What did I say to you in Havre. When you and I found ourselves in an alliance, there was always a horror that was fantastic, a cruelty beyond endurance." He stood for a moment, thereafter, with his eyes upon the ground, as though he did not wish to see any foot of that forest floor except that on which he stood. What Ricardo could see of his face was heavy with distress and his big frame was hunched.

"The dog wouldn't have been more than fifty or sixty yards away," he said as he raised his head. "Let's work forward in a line."

They descended the knoll and spread out into open order, each one examining his share of the ground as he advanced. They had covered about forty yards, the dead leaves crackling underfoot, when Durasoy shouted. He was standing by one of the clumps of scrub; and the rest of the party ran to him.

"Look, sir," he said to Hanaud.

There was a mess of blood upon the litter of fallen leaves and from that spot a rough track where the leaves had been overturned and brushed aside, led away to the west.

"This is where the dog was shot. That's the way it was dragged to where we found it," said Durasoy.

"Yes."

Hanaud spoke absently; and his eyes were not on the patch of stained leaves but on the clump of brushwood beside it. He stooped and pulled some of it aside. It had been bent over and broken to hide a strip of ground which its roots did not cover; and the soil of that strip was disturbed and humped. Leaves had been heaped upon it to make a show that it had long lain undisturbed. But here and there these leaves had been scattered and the soil beneath scraped up into holes as though an animal had been digging there.

Hanaud stood up again. The agitation had gone now from his manner and his voice. But his face was pale and his eyes hard as pebbles.

"We must dig too, like the dog," he said.

He sent the forest guard back to his village to fetch a spade, and bade him if he could to bring it secretly and quickly.

"For us, we must wait."

He looked above his head. The canopy of leaves looked as solid as a roof of slate.

"We may smoke whilst we wait."

He drew his blue packet of cigarettes from his pocket and lit one. Parcolet lit another. Durasoy started a pipe. Ricardo dropped upon the ground. There were no birds in this underworld of green and such a hush reigned as deserts and high mountains know. Ricardo spoke on a low note.

"Scott Carruthers must have seen us."

"Why?"

"He was coming to smooth down that mound."

"Then why the white rope across the doorway? It is not so simple as all that."

Again silence held and enthralled them until, a long time afterwards, they heard the boots of the forest guard brushing through the leaves. He carried a spade.

"It is my own," he said. "No one is yet awake. I wasn't seen."

Hanaud set the lustiest of the gendarmes to work and Mr. Ricardo turned away. The thrill of the darkness and the night had gone from him. He was conscious of a void in the pit of his stomach, which owed nothing to hunger. He heard Hanaud's voice:

“Gently now! Gently,” and he shivered, as though this was the month of December and the snow upon the ground. Other words were spoken. “We should have had some ropes.”

“Now up!”

And then Hanaud touched him upon the arm. Mr. Ricardo felt very sick, but he turned obediently.

“We none of us know,” said Hanaud. “You must tell us who he is.”

He spoke quietly, but very firmly. Mr. Ricardo suffered himself to be led. He saw a shallow trench in the ground, and on the surface at the side of it the form of a man, outstretched and quiet in the dress of a chauffeur. A handkerchief, woven in the two colours of crimson and yellow, hid his face, his dress was stained with clay. Hanaud led Mr. Ricardo to the side of this still and lifeless body. He gave an order to Durasoy and at the same time tightened upon Ricardo’s arm the grasp of his sleeve.

“You shall tell us who this man is,” said Hanaud.

Very carefully, Durasoy, kneeling by the side of the open trench, untied the handkerchief from the dead man’s face, removed a pad from his mouth and stood aside, leaving the face open for all who were there to see, with its jaw dropped and its eyes staring blindly up to the canopy of leaves.

“Who is it?” Hanaud asked. “Tell us!”

“Oliver Ransom,” answered Mr. Ricardo. He went apart and was very sick.

CHAPTER XXIII
MR. RICARDO ASKS A SUBTLE QUESTION

Hanaud sat on the ground and called Ricardo to his side. He spread out the handkerchief and examined it.

"Do you see?" he asked, looking up into Ricardo's face; Ricardo knew now what to look for and where in the texture of the handkerchief. He recognised the broader stripe of crimson, the narrower ones of yellow.

"The sixth," said Mr. Ricardo.

Hanaud took out of his pocket again the indelible pencil, and summoning Parcolet and Durasoy to witness what he did, he marked the handkerchief with the letters O.R. and put it away in his pocket.

"Now we go. For we have much to do. Monsieur le Commissaire, you will leave Durasoy on the watch here? Perhaps the forest guard will keep him company. It will be necessary for the Doctor to ascertain the cause of death. There are no wounds." He picked up the pad and smelt it.

"Chloroform," he said. "Let us hope that the poor man——" He broke off and gazed down upon the body at their feet. "But it must have been. There is no sign of a struggle, no contortion of the face, as there would have been had he waked up with the clay upon his face. Not that the gentlemen who did this thing cared!" He was very suave and smooth as he spoke of these gentlemen, but Mr. Ricardo was very glad that he was not one of them. "No, they would not care. We will remember that. Come!"

He started off by the path along which they had come, and at an uncomfortable speed for the short-legged Commissaire as well as for Ricardo. But Ricardo was not going to be left behind in the forest of Brotonne. It was a place of ghosts. Since he must trot, he trotted. But the return journey was not so difficult. There was light, the kind of greenish light he remembered in the tanks of an aquarium, and the roots no longer caught malignantly at his feet. He was nevertheless very glad to drop into a chair in the stern of his launch.

"And we do not mind the noise," said Hanaud. "We go at the maximum."

In the fields along the river's banks peasants were moving and smoke was rising from the cottage chimneys. But the blinds in the House of the Pebble were still drawn and the town of Caudebec still asleep. One man, however, was waiting on the hard, and as the launch drew in Parcolet pointed to him.

"My secretary, Lestrelin."

Lestrelin, a young man in civilian clothes, stooped at the side of the launch and handed a paper to Hanaud.

"It arrived from Paris an hour ago."

Hanaud read it, passed on the paper to Parcolet, and taking out a little pocket-book from his pocket, found a page and compared it with the paper. He looked at Mr. Ricardo.

"You are not tired? A few minutes more and you sleep. But we must move now."

There was a great anxiety in Hanaud's expression, an urgency in his voice which Ricardo was not the man to resist.

"To where you will," he replied.

Hanaud held a little conference with Parcolet in so low a voice that only a few words reached Ricardo's ears. It was obvious, however, that Parcolet was being reluctantly driven into imprudencies.

"It is for you, yes, the Commissaire, the Magistrate," Hanaud said. "You have the authority to-day. To-morrow you have the great name too."

"No, no," began Monsieur Parcolet, but something was wrong with Hanaud's hearing. For he cried:

"That is magnificent! The strong hand, what! Precisely. We insist. I congratulate you on your decision. Where my function ends, Monsieur le Commissaire takes command in a twinkling. That is great character, Monsieur le Commissaire."

While that man of great character was doubtfully stroking his small beard and wondering how in the world he was to avoid his responsibility and retain this reputation which had been thrust upon him, Hanaud was on his way to the steps leading up to the little forward deck. He had to pass Ricardo, and he cried:

"You will see, I think, something. There is nothing polite about this case. So we too—we fit ourselves to it. Our manners to-day are not of the

nobility."

"Though I have known you for a long time, my dear Hanaud," Mr. Ricardo answered languidly. "I cannot remember when they ever were."

But he moved his chair hurriedly when he had spoken, for Hanaud dropped upon the step beside him, with a broad grin upon his face and an elbow which menaced his ribs.

"Oho!" said the Inspecteur Principal, "you make an amusement with your poor friend. Very well! Now he punish you. He will not tell the news which was telephoned from Paris at five this morning."

Mr. Ricardo smiled acidly, and declined to answer. It was not at all to punish him that Hanaud kept his news to himself. It was so that at a suitable moment he might make a cheap effect of the theatre. Hanaud went forward to the pilot, and the nose of the launch was pushed off into the stream. Hanaud dropped once more into the stern of the launch. The banter and the raillery were no more than signs of his anxiety. He was desperately nervous.

"We go—yes, we go," he said, and he was talking to reassure himself. The engine roared, driving the boat upstream and setting the water surging up the bank. "Perrichet is watching," he went on. "The intelligent Perrichet," and now Mr. Ricardo knew whither they were bound. They flew past the front of Caudebec, past the ferry pier, and with a startling cessation of clatter and noise they slid up to the side of the *Marie-Popette*.

Hanaud was over the side and into the house-boat whilst Mr. Ricardo was still hoisting himself out of his chair. The two gendarmes followed Hanaud, but waited to assist Mr. Ricardo, whose joints were growing rapidly stiff from his unusual exertions. Then the four of them crowded into the saloon and filled it. Lucrece Bouchette was sitting on her bench in front of the table without so much as a look of surprise upon her face. Marie was standing, her features distorted by terror, and her muscles for the moment paralysed by the irruption of the men in uniform. When she turned to the door leading forward, she was already too late. For before she could grasp the handle, one of the gendarmes took her by the shoulders and swung her aside.

Parcolet the Commissaire remained upon the launch, which was now hauled ahead until only the stern was visible from the saloon windows. "I shall open a window," said Hanaud. "Madame permits? One stifles in this cabin. Also Monsieur le Commissaire will be able to hear." As Hanaud suited his action to his words, Ricardo saw the intelligent Perrichet climb from his dinghy to Parcolet's side.

"So! This is more commodious," said Hanaud, and he turned back into the room. "Madame Lucrece Bouchette."

She has been up all night, Mr. Ricardo reflected with disgust. It was against his code that women should be seen even in a demi-toilette after the sun was up.

"Madame Lucrece Bouchette," Hanaud repeated.

"That is my name," she answered. "And this is my house-boat on which you are trespassing. Be off!"

"Come, come, come, Madame Bouchette, this is no way to talk to Monsieur le Commissaire de Police of Caudebec," said Hanaud chidingly.

"I am talking to you," said Lucrece Bouchette.

"Good," said Hanaud, and he sat himself down in front of her. "We can spare Monsieur Parcolet the necessity of waiting. That is a kindness, for no man is more busy."

To Mr. Ricardo's surprise, his launch was again warped forward and disappeared altogether from the windows of the saloon. But this, no doubt, Ricardo reflected, was the moment when the Commissaire was to exercise his authority and display the greatness of his character.

"We can talk then, you and I, madame," Hanaud continued. "Where is Miss Lydia Flight?"

Marie interrupted sullenly.

"She has gone."

Hanaud turned on her a pair of baleful eyes.

"I invite you, the yellow one, to hold your tongue, else I put the gag on it. I repeat to Madame. Where is Miss Lydia Flight?"

"Marie has told you."

"She has told me nothing. Listen, madame, this affair is of the most serious. Yesterday, Miss Lydia Flight, in the Restaurant of the Sceptre at Havre, made an appointment with me at the hotel of Caudebec. She did not keep that appointment at the hour she gave. But she stopped her car at the hotel and asked for me as it was getting dark."

A smile of contempt glimmered on the mouth of Lucrece. She could not have said more clearly in words: "You simpleton!"

"She left a message that she would return. She did not return."

"You, I believe, are Monsieur Hanaud?"

"I am."

"Of the Sûreté Générale?"

"Yes."

"To be sure."

Lucrece Bouchette nodded her head. No wonder crimes went unpunished. Nothing impolite was said. But that was obviously what she would have said, if her good manners had not forbidden it.

"You mean, madame, that she made a fool of me?" Hanaud asked sweetly.

"Oh, Monsieur Hanaud, would that be possible?" Lucrece asked in reply, and with so nasty an intonation that it was indicated that Hanaud could not possibly be made more of a fool than he actually was. Mr. Ricardo, indeed, regretted that his friend should be cutting a figure so unimposing, but Hanaud himself was undisturbed.

"After leaving the message for me at the hotel, Lydia Flight drove along to the house-boat," he said.

Lucrece Bouchette hesitated. But her maid Marie had declared that she had gone. Therefore she had arrived. Yes, that was arranged. It was, perhaps, a weakness in the story of Lucrece. She saw that now. It would have been better could she have declared that Lydia had never come to the house-boat at all. But it was too late for her to take that line. She answered:

"For a moment. She came to pack up a suit-case."

It occurred to Mr. Ricardo that Lydia seemed to have spent the greater part of her days lately in packing up suit-cases.

"And then?" asked Hanaud.

Lucrece shrugged her shoulders.

"She went on."

"Where to?"

"Monsieur, I think you did not know Lydia Flight very well. She did not welcome questions. She was independent. She had not forgotten that she had sung the big rôles in the great Opera Houses of Europe. She was not to be cross-examined. She did not tell me where she was going."

"Yes, yes," Hanaud agreed. "These ladies of the Opera, they have crochets. It is understood."

And Lucrece Bouchette inclined her head.

"But I am wondering, madame," said Hanaud pleasantly, "whether when she came on board to pack her suit-case, she got her quavers too."

Lucrece smiled indulgently.

"I thought we were serious," she murmured, and Mr. Ricardo commended her. Hanaud's jest was one to be ashamed of, even in one's lighter moments.

"Madame, I am as serious as an agent of the law in the presence of crime can be," said Hanaud, suddenly direct. "You do not know whither Miss Lydia Flight went when she left this house-boat with her suit-case?"

"No, Monsieur Hanaud, I do not, although——"

"Yes?"

"I can guess."

"Madame, you shall tell me your guess."

Lucrece Bouchette explained with a sneer.

"Lydia Flight hurried off to join her accomplice, Oliver Ransom."

"I hope not, madame," said Hanaud slowly, and for the first time during this interview a look of disquietude crept into Madame Bouchette's eyes. Her cheeks were suddenly tinged with colour, and suddenly pale again. She did not answer for a little while, and in the silence Mr. Ricardo heard the engine of his launch throb and the lash of its propeller in the water. They seemed to do what they liked with his launch. First Hanaud owned it, now Parcolet annexed it. "All that I do is to pay for it," he reflected ruefully.

Meanwhile Lucrece got a word or two together to answer Hanaud.

"We must all hope not, monsieur. We must hope, however improbable it looks to be, that Lydia Flight is innocent of this theft."

"Who rowed her ashore when she had packed her suit-case?" asked Hanaud abruptly.

"Marie."

"The other servants had gone?"

"Yes."

"The cook too?"

"I had dined. I did not expect Lydia."

"Quite so. Then Marie will know how she went away," he said, turning to the maid.

"But in her car, monsieur."

"The small car with the purple body?"

Marie shrugged her shoulders.

"It was dark, monsieur."

"The car with the number 7964R.F.6?" said Hanaud, consulting his pocket-book.

"I don't know," Lucrece returned. But the mention of the colour of the car and of its number had increased her anxiety. Her voice even shook a little. Her hands were clasped together on the table in front of her, and Mr. Ricardo noticed her fingers tighten so that the flesh on which they pressed was white. She must have seen the direction of Ricardo's eyes, for she took her hands from the table with a jerk and hid them in her lap.

"Madame, I have asked you many questions," Hanaud continued. "I shall now have the honour to give you some news."

"Yes, Monsieur Hanaud."

"The small purple car 7964R.F.6 is a Citroën car, which was lent to Lydia Flight early on the morning of his ball by Guy Stallard. . . ." Bouchette's face flushed a dark and stormy red at the mention of that name, but she did not interrupt.

"Lydia Flight drove it to the Restaurant of the Sceptre yesterday morning when she lunched with Mr. Ricardo and myself."

"I heard that she had lunched with you," said Lucrece.

"She drove away in it after luncheon. She stopped it at the door of the hotel in Caudebec when she asked for me in the evening. And it arrived in Paris at one o'clock in the morning."

Mr. Ricardo leaned forward. So this was the message which Parcolet's secretary, Lestrelin, had brought down to the quay. After all, then, Lydia Flight had run away. Ricardo was distressed. He was disappointed. The radiant vision of the cathedral was, after all, a criminal. He began to be sorry that he had ever come to Caudebec at all. The odd circumstance to him was

that Lucrece Bouchette seemed to be as distressed and disappointed as he was himself, and he could not reconcile that solicitude with the murderous glances he remembered her to have directed towards Lydia from the lounge of the House of the Pebble.

"Now one o'clock in the morning at Paris would fit in very well with the time the car left the quay here."

"Very likely. I have never driven from Caudebec to Paris," said Lucrece.

"Yes," said Hanaud, making a calculation. "One o'clock from here to the Avenue Matignon."

Some comment was expected from Lucrece, and she made it. She had her voice now under consummate control. Curiosity and a little bewilderment were audible, but nothing more.

"The Avenue Matignon?"

"Yes."

"So Lydia drove to the Avenue Matignon?"

"No, madame."

"But you said——"

"That the car was driven to the Avenue Matignon."

Lucrece Bouchette threw up her hands. If this man Hanaud liked to talk in conundrums, that was his affair. For herself, she was not amused.

"I don't understand. And my bath is waiting. Monsieur will excuse me."

She stood up, but not so lightly as she would have liked it to appear; and once upon her feet, she held the edge of the table with both her hands to keep herself from swaying.

"But Lydia Flight did not drive it," continued Hanaud. "No! It was driven by Elsie Marsh, of the Casino de Paris, who still has a month or two of her apartment in the Avenue Matignon, before her tenancy runs out."

He waited for any observation which Lucrece Bouchette might care to make. But Lucrece was occupied in standing on her feet, and Hanaud had to speak his piece without a cue to help him.

"Elsie Marsh seemed to have driven a long way, madame. She was covered with dust, and very tired. So tired, indeed, that she did not give our people the slightest trouble."

Elsie Marsh in the car! Then Lydia Flight had not run away. But then, if so, why had she not kept her appointment with Hanaud? Mr. Ricardo was in a quandary, and he objected to being in a quandary. He must get this matter settled up. Some subtle and probing question was needed. A moment's thought, and he had it ready.

"Madame Bouchette," he cried sternly. "I beg you to answer me a question."

Lucrece Bouchette gazed at him with amazement, blinking her eyes in the most disconcerting fashion.

"You ask me a question!"

Surely she could not have heard aright. But Mr. Ricardo was not to be bluffed so easily.

"Yes, madame. I ask you how many suit-cases did Miss Lydia Flight possess!"

Lucrece Bouchette opened her mouth and closed it. She wrinkled her forehead in an effort to comprehend. She was in a saloon full of lunatics. Hanaud, on the other hand, was delighted with the question. He chuckled over it. He repeated it. He turned it backwards and forwards, as it were, to have a close look at it.

"Aha! There is a question! It has its points, that question. Would Hanaud have thought of it? Madame, he would not. But it is an admirable question, for it brings us back to the beginning of our conversation." He launched his enquiry now in a voice authoritative and hard as steel.

"Where, Lucrece Bouchette, is Lydia Flight?"

But an interruption occurred which seemed to drive it altogether out of Hanaud's head. Parcolet the Commissaire walked in by the forward door, and closed it behind him. Did he make a sign to Hanaud? Lift his cigar, as it were, with his left hand or his right? Ricardo did not notice. He was suddenly boiling with indignation for a reason of his own.

"There, madame," said Hanaud, "I leave you to Monsieur the Commissary. And these good fellows"—he indicated the two gendarmes —"who have used a spade so successfully this night in the forest of Brotonne that they will be obliged no doubt if your maid would brush a little of the clay off their clothes."

Lucrece Bouchette slipped down again upon her seat, her face as haggard as an old woman's, her body shaking. Hanaud turned to Ricardo.

"I will row you ashore in the dinghy. The launch will come back for Monsieur Parcolet."

"Oh, will it?" said Mr. Ricardo, as he stepped down after Hanaud into the stern of the dinghy. "I am glad to know that. And might I ask who is in control of it now?"

"The admirable Perrichet," said Hanaud, and Mr. Ricardo came as near to an explosion as he could.

"Really, really," he cried. "This is excellent! Hanaud lends my launch to Parcolet, when he has done with it. Parcolet when *he* has done with it lends it to Perrichet, and Perrichet, after a trip on the river, lends it back to Parcolet. I find this a little bizarre."

"Yes, it is amusing," Hanaud replied placidly as he drove the sculls through the water. Then he began to gurgle, and the gurgle rose into a roar of laughter loud enough to wake the town, and was accompanied by such a shaking of the shoulders as threatened to upset the boat.

"But it is not as amusing as your question. Oho! That was a stinger! And how many suit-cases does Miss Lydia Flight possess?" He gave the most ridiculous imitation of Mr. Ricardo with his nose in the air. "Oh, the poor woman! The stroke of the hammer! How many suit-cases? Oho! That was a ring in the bread-basket, I can tell you."

Mr. Ricardo declined to untwist the convolutions of that tangled phrase. A man might ring the bell; another might get one in the bread-basket. He was offended, and he was very tired. He sat in the stern of the dinghy, quite silent. They landed at the steps on the embankment, and Hanaud made the boat fast to a ring. They had still half a mile or so to walk before they could reach the hotel, and the sun was hot, although the morning was young. They walked slowly, Hanaud a little concerned about his friend's fatigues and shortening his great stride to conform with his step. When they arrived at the door of the hotel, a tall, well-set-up man of certainly no more than thirty-five years, with a brown spade beard which had obviously never been shaved, was coming out.

"Ah! Monsieur de Viard!" exclaimed Hanaud, and he darted forward.

"All goes well," cried Monsieur de Viard. "But my friend, the forest of Brotonne is not my affair. No, no! The affair of Pont Audemer, yes; of Trouville, perhaps. But you may dig up as many corpses as there are trees, I shall remain calm."

So that was Monsieur de Viard, the Doctor of the Department. Mr. Ricardo, as a student of humanity, smiled. Madame de Viard *née* Tabateau was now as easy to read as a printed book. A fine, youngish, upstanding man with a beautiful brown beard, and an official position. She and the Tabateau money between them would send him bowling along from department to department like a hoop. But the basilisk had not reckoned how completely she, *née* Tabateau, would counterbalance the Tabateau money. The Doctor, André de Viard, marched on to that fine house of yellow stone a few yards away. Mr. Ricardo and Hanaud mounted the stairs of the hotel.

"I shall order some coffee, I shall take a hot bath, and I shall go to bed until the hour of luncheon," said Mr. Ricardo a little stiffly. His question might not have been perhaps quite so devastating as he had thought it to be, but Hanaud had been forced to admit that there were points in it. It was not to be ridiculed.

"You are annoyed with me?" said Hanaud. "Yes, I take the liberties with the launch, and I laugh at the wrong places. . . ."

Ricardo cut short these apologies. He was on the landing leading to his bedroom and his sitting-room and his bathroom. He wanted with as little discussion as possible to enter into the full use of them; and he had on the tip of his tongue a question so crushing that Hanaud must quit the field.

"You are greatly amused by my questions," he said with dignity. "So I put to you one of your own, and I challenge you to answer it if you can. Where is Lydia Flight?"

For answer, Hanaud put a finger to his lips. He turned the handle of a door, opposite to the suite of Mr. Ricardo, and turned it very gently, and looked in. He faced Ricardo with a real smile of pleasure on his face. He winked, and made a gesture that Ricardo should take his place. Ricardo did. He looked into a pleasant bedroom with its window open and birds piping on the branches of the trees, and in the bed with her gold curls tossed upon the pillow, Lydia Flight was asleep.

"She will not wake for some hours," Hanaud whispered. "De Viard has given her a sleeping-draught."

He suddenly pointed to the floor.

"You see, she has one of them here. Oh, what a question you asked, and how right you were to ask it."

He was pointing to a leather suit-case. Mr. Ricardo in a queer revulsion of feeling began to twitter. In a moment he would laugh aloud. Hanaud drew

him back out of the room and ever so gently latched the door.

"We laugh," he said, "over our foolish little jokes. As I once said to you, we have got to laugh if we are to keep our souls alive. But that poor girl, she will have a grim story of cruelties and terrors to tell us when she wakes, and we, my friend, shall have one more cruel still to tell to her." He broke off. "You to your bath and your coffee, I to my telephone. We lunch together here at the hour of one."

And he ran down the stairs.

CHAPTER XXIV
HANAUD ANALYSES

Hanaud spent a long and tiresome morning. He rang up the Prefect of Police at Havre. The affair extended far beyond the point at which it could be strangled. To the theft of the great chaplet were now to be added murder and attempted murder. "They are bad cases, and cannot be suffocated," he said. "They have reached a stage where the Examining Magistrate is demanded. And I put myself at his disposal." A draft of extra police was required; a guard must be set at once on the Château du Caillou, and its inhabitants warned that they must stay where they were. As soon as possible, the enquiry should be transferred to Havre, since there were no facilities in Caudebec. From the Prefect of Police Hanaud switched on to Nahendra Nao. He begged His Highness to come to Caudebec. It was impossible now to avoid publicity. Whatever consideration could be exercised, certainly would be. But murder could not be a crime which one suppressed. Nahendra Nao took the bad news with a quiet dignity which won Hanaud's heart.

"That young Prince has learned something from his tribulations which will be of more value to him than his necklace, even if we didn't get it back for him," he said to Parcolet.

Followed conversations with Trouville, which gave Hanaud a good deal of satisfaction, and others with Paris which caused him a good deal of annoyance. "So she will not talk, that little one. She is stubborn. Very well, she shall come to Havre, and I will persuade my friend Mr. Ricardo to put some probing questions to her and ask her how many suit-cases she possesses."

The part which Elsie Marsh had played in this business intrigued and puzzled the Inspecteur Principal as much as any feature of it. He carried the problem of Elsie Marsh back with him to the hotel at the luncheon hour. "A great deal is clear," he said to Ricardo. "I do not say that it can yet all be proved to a jury, but to us, I think, yes. Here is a plan to steal a great jewel, and blackmail the owner of the jewel in addition. Yes, a quite simple, ruthless, devastatingly wicked plan. One man is to disappear—we do not talk of murder, no, that is bad taste—we say he disappear, until, by repeating it, we come to forget that grave in the forest of Brotonne and content ourselves with the knowledge that he has disappeared. A girl is mixed up in

the theft. She may protest as much as she likes that she is innocent—we who invent this pretty plan, we know that she is not guilty, but no one will believe her. However, she goes scot-free. For according to our plan, the young Prince is persuaded to palm off the copy as the original, and pretend that he has never been robbed at all.

"But then—and this is what interests me, for it lifts the crime out of the common straightforward everyday affairs with which I live—the passions of the undisciplined people, who must carry out this plan, begin to play upon it, to warp it, to alter its pattern, as the pattern of those handkerchiefs was altered, until the fine and clear plan becomes of no consequence at all to those undisciplined ones compared with the gratification of their passions. It is a soldier who prepares the plan, but they are not soldiers at all, those who carry it out. They are people who take their orders from their lusts and hates. There are people who are not so strong as they thought themselves. There are others who are stronger than we thought them. Thus, Nahendra Nao. He does not, as he is expected to do, run crying to his good Major: 'I am finished! Save me!' No. He goes quietly—to whom? Why, to Hanaud," and Hanaud struck his breast a proud, resounding thump.

"The wise man!" said Mr. Ricardo.

"Then Stallard is not content to do his work. We shall find out more about the millionaire from Arizona. I think myself his mine is in Chitipur. He wants Lydia Flight in prison—for a little while, as a first offender. He wants her for himself, and that's the way for him to get her. Then the woman Bouchette sets what heart she has on Stallard. The necklace? The money to burn? To the devil with it! She wants her man. Yes, but the man wants the singer. Very well, the singer must disappear like the poor Oliver Ransom, and she'll see to it. Yes, and she'll see that the way of disappearance is unpleasant. Aha! That woman Bouchette—a bad one, my friend!"

Ricardo was staring at his companion.

"You mean to say that Lucrece Bouchette meant to—oh!"

"Reflect!" Hanaud recommended. "It was not Lydia Flight who went down the Seine past this Caudebec hotel on the aquaplane board. That was obvious, when you spoke to her about it at the Restaurant du Sceptre."

"Was it?" Mr. Ricardo asked weakly.

"Quite! It was still more obvious when I mentioned it to Stallard and the Major. They knew very well that Lydia Flight had slept that night at Trouville. Yet they did not dare to contradict me. For they didn't know what

the Bouchette woman was up to. They were"—and Hanaud chuckled over his recollection of his witticism—"they were like me and Moses."

"I am glad that you put yourself first," said Ricardo cordially. "Otherwise I should have had to correct you."

Again Hanaud took no notice of these sarcasms.

"So you see, it was not Lydia Flight who aquaplaned yesterday on the Seine. . . ."

"Lucrece Bouchette meant to murder her? No! I'm hanged if I see it at all," said Mr. Ricardo in exasperation.

"Well, Mademoiselle herself will tell me her story to-night, and it will not be a pretty one," Hanaud replied. "She is brave, that young lady"; and he spoke with so sincere an accent of sympathy and regret that Ricardo could not doubt that she knew of that grave in the forest.

"You have told her, then?"

"Yes. All this morning it has been troubling me that she did not know. It wasn't fair. She might hear abruptly from someone too rough to convey such news. I thought of passing the deer on to you."

"The buck," Ricardo corrected.

"The deer or the buck. Both phrases are in use," said Hanaud shamelessly. "But I thought to myself: 'Mr. Ricardo will ask her about her suit-cases instead. So I shall tell her myself.' I found that she was awake just before luncheon, and willing to receive me." He flung up his hands in a gesture of distress. "She was sitting up against her pillows in a little pale blue jacket edged with white fur. As pretty as a picture, and her face full of hope. It was your great Shakespeare who said the policeman's lot is not a happy one."

"Was it?" Mr. Ricardo asked innocently.

"Yes. He knew. So I told her, and saw the hope vanish from her face, and heard her ask very gently if I would see that for a few hours she was left alone. Oh, well"—and he shook his shoulders in discomfort—"let us get back to the fine plot and the finer mess they all made of it—even the Major, who thought it out. You saw him last night. Aha, he is not the man for the great crimes. Listen! Here is a report from the police at Trouville."

He took a sheet of typewritten paper from a pocket, and read.

"'The night-porter at the Hotel des Fontaines reports that at three o'clock on Saturday morning——'" Hanaud broke off his reading to make his dates and times clear. "That was the next early morning after the ball. The ball at the Château du Caillou took place on the Thursday evening."

"Yes," Ricardo agreed.

"Well, 'at three o'clock on the Saturday morning, the night-porter, being on duty in the hall, was astonished to see Major Scott Carruthers descending the staircase, half dressed, with a walking-stick which he used both hands to carry, as if it was heavy. He crossed the hall to the front door. He did not see the porter. When the porter spoke he did not answer. He fumbled with the key of the door, and the porter went to ask him if he wanted anything. Major Scott Carruthers then waked up. He was very troubled. He said that it had never happened before. He was frightened.' The nightmares, the bad dreams! He was not the man for the great crimes. So last night at the Château du Caillou he stretches the painted rope across the doorway in the wall, to wake him up if he should walk again."

A queer little smile played for a moment or two over Hanaud's face.

"That weak one who thought himself so strong! I see him going to bed last night in the house where the murder was committed, shaking with fear. He dare not confess to the man from Arizona that since the murder he walks in his sleep. No. He is not going to be despised. No one must know that he is a feeble one. But he takes his precautions. And so we see him with the spade in his hands and the rope across the doorway to wake him up, or if he does not wake up, to show him the next morning by the white paint across his thighs what he was doing whilst he slept. Aha, he is not enjoying these fine days of summer, our Major. I'll make a bet with you. The first night he sleeps peacefully and restfully will be the first night he sleeps in prison."

He lit a cigar and leaned back in his chair. He had made his analysis aloud, the better to review it, and he now sat seeking for its weak links.

"Who, then, was the chauffeur who drove the yellow car away from the courtyard towards Rouen? The man I saw whilst the tight-rope performance was going on?" Ricardo asked.

"Scott Carruthers," Hanaud replied. "It must have been. He was not at the ball, it is true, but he was not in his hotel either." He took the typewritten page again from his pocket and glanced at it.

"Scott Carruthers left the Hotel des Fontaines in a blue car numbered 4312 C.T.4 at five o'clock on Thursday afternoon. He was dressed in a grey

lounge suit. Three hours afterwards, a man in a chauffeur's uniform left that car in a garage in Rouen which stays open all night, saying that he would call for it late, since he had business in the town. From that hour we have a blank. I think he must have hired a car from another garage and driven to some point near the Château. Sooner or later we shall know. It is routine. But we do know that soon after two o'clock that morning the chauffeur called for the car number 4312C.T.4, and that at half-past four in the morning, Major Scott Carruthers, in his grey lounge suit, brought back his car number 4312C.T.4 to the Hotel des Fontaines and was admitted by the night-porter."

"Was the chauffeur's kit found in the car?" Ricardo asked.

"Not a button of it. But then, the road skirts the river, and the river runs fast and a bundle with a weight in it—how shall we find it? Also—oh, a little thing, but perhaps of significance. Lydia Flight was very anxious to drive off to Trouville the moment the rope of pearls had been stolen. Who dissuades her? Stallard, the sympathetic Stallard. She must wait until morning. Then, with the first of the dawn, she shall go. Meanwhile he will get her a cup of tea, the thoughtful man, and she drinks it, and she, half out of her mind with distress, she falls asleep and sleeps till seven. My friend, there is only one explanation of that long deep sleep on the couch in the lounge."

"Drugs?"

"Yes. If she starts from the Château at the first of the dawn, she is like to arrive at the Hotel des Fontaines at exactly the same time as the Major. And that would not do. No, no! The Major must be in his bed, having the good night's rest. Ten francs to the night-porter and he will tell no tales to inquisitive young ladies. With the police, however, it is another matter."

He replaced the paper in his pocket and stretched his arms out above his head.

"But to prove it all to a jury—not so easy. Possibly Scott Carruthers will snap. Perhaps Miss Lydia Flight's story will help us. Perhaps Scotland Yard may give us a lead. Perhaps Elsie Marsh may condescend to tell us what she was doing on the *Marie-Popette*. And perhaps those handkerchiefs may serve us better than some of us expect. The Bouchette woman we have, but the others—clever counsel and alternative explanations—not so easy, my friend."

CHAPTER XXV
WHAT HAPPENED TO LYDIA

That evening Lydia Flight told the stories of her last three days to Hanaud and Mr. Ricardo in the quiet room above the river. The night was warm and still, and the windows opening on to the balcony were thrown wide. A young crescent of moon, silver-washed and sharp, decorated rather than lit the sky. From time to time a great cargo-ship, invisible but for its red side-light and the white lantern on its mast, glided up the dark river, the steady beat of its propeller dwindling in the distance to a pleasant message of farewell. Three days, but they had dimmed the radiance and altogether extinguished the sparkle of gaiety which had made Lydia so lovely a companion. It would need months, and all her youth, to get them back. She told her story quietly and simply; and if now and again her eyes filled with tears, she held them there; and when once or twice she shivered with terror and her voice failed her, as though the horrid cruelties she was relating were happening in this friendly room, she recovered spirit enough to continue after the smallest pause.

She told them of the uneasiness which had been growing in the minds of both Oliver and herself, of their anxiety that the month should end, of that one last day when they drove together through the forests from Caudebec to Rouen, and then on to the House of the Pebble. She put a stress upon that odd moment when they had gazed from the window of the corridor on the second floor and had seen Guy Stallard in the little open space amidst the trees with the birds settling and strutting on his shoulders and clustering about his feet.

"That was the first time Oliver was sure there was something evil and dangerous prepared. Before we had suspected. But now he knew. I don't know to-day what it was that he knew. He wouldn't tell me, because he didn't want to frighten me, just when all my courage would be needed. But it was something quite unexpected. I remember that Oliver stood in the window utterly disconcerted. He had recalled a memory—words that he had heard, or something which he had seen."

They had got to go, and to go secretly. Oliver Ransom had not had the time to explain to her why the spectacle had so disturbed him. They had to

arrange the best plan of escape they could and be down, at their ease, in the lounge, when Guy Stallard came hurrying back to the house.

"Did Guy Stallard see you at the window?" Hanaud asked.

"I am sure that he saw Oliver," Lydia replied. "But I was standing behind Oliver, and against the dark walls of that passage. He may not have seen me."

They had to go. If they could have gone then, they would have gone. But the gates of the courtyard were closed. They had no excuse for their departure, and even if they had had a whole basketful of the most perfect excuses which a reluctant guest could invent, they would never have been allowed to go.

"We arranged that at supper, just before the tight-rope dancer began his performance, Oliver should upset a bottle of champagne over my costume," she said. "I was to run up to my rooms to change. Oliver was to wait outside my door whilst I did change, for fear lest we should be trapped inside of it. We were to slip down whilst the entertainment was going on. Oliver was to get out the car, and we should be miles away on the road to Pont Audemer and Trouville whilst the rope-dancer was still doing his tricks above the heads of the people in the garden."

That they were playing straight into the hands of their enemies, they had not one idea. Mr. Ricardo remembered well enough the anger and discontent which Lucrece Bouchette had betrayed when Oliver Ransom had snatched up the bottle, instead of herself; and her laugh of stupefaction when Oliver Ransom did the very thing which it was her allotted business to see done. But it was still a mystery to Lydia Flight that they should have been so quickly outwitted.

She did remember that they had been held up in the supper-room by the hustle of people crowding past them on to the terrace; and she remembered too that Lucrece Bouchette had slipped across the room and out by the service door. But she had attached no importance to that at the time; she had merely blamed herself for not noticing before that across the room and out by that uncrowded door would have been the quickest way upstairs.

However, they pushed their way at last into the lounge and moved as carelessly as they could manage it up the first flight of the broad staircase. Once they were out of sight, they ran. There was no one in the first passage outside the gallery. Inside the gallery, whence the tight-rope dancer emerged upon his rope and the great lights were projected, there was noise and movement. Oliver Ransom and Lydia ran the length of the passage on tiptoe,

and up the spiral staircase, at the other end. The second floor, where their bedrooms were located, was in darkness. But on the left-hand side in the pillar at the head of the stairs there was a switch. Oliver pulled it down, and the lights went on, showing them the windows on the right, the line of doors upon the left, and the door to Lydia's set of rooms opposite to them. The corridor was quite empty. There was not a movement there anywhere, and the only sound was the faint far-away moan of the violins from the orchestra upon the terrace. They ran across to Lydia's room.

"I'll wait for you here. Outside I can keep better guard. Both inside, we might be caught in a trap. Be quick!" Oliver whispered.

She opened her door and went in. He saw—he must have seen the darkness of the little passage beyond the door. He must have seen the door close behind her; and then all the lights in the corridor suddenly went out.

Lydia had not closed the door behind her. She had meant to leave it open. But none the less it closed silently behind her; and she was in the dark; utterly in the dark. Not a thread of light gleamed at any of the edges of the door, and there was no window in this tiny passage. She raised her hand and she could not see it. The white dress she wore might have been a suit of black. She took a step and not even a glint struck up from the buckles of her shoes. She was in the darkness of a cavern underground.

But as yet she had not one qualm of apprehension. She had noticed that afternoon a bracket light and a switch beneath it, on the wall by the side of the door. The step she took was in the direction of that switch, and the hand she raised was lifted in search of it. For a moment or two Lydia couldn't find it. Her fingers slid up and down the wall, reached out and drew in. She had not gauged its height on the wall. It was whilst she was seeking for the switch that she became conscious first of a misgiving. It occurred to her sharply as odd that she had not heard the door latch as it swung to. It had shut fast without a sound—just as if someone in the darkness just behind her had closed it very carefully. The conjecture flung her at once into a panic. She had been on the very brink and lip of panic, ever since Oliver had betrayed his consternation that afternoon at the window of the corridor. But in the daylight, and with him at her side, she had fought it down, and kept it under.

Now, however, she was in darkness and alone, and fear welled up in her. She heard sounds which shamed her—a wild fluttering of her hand against the wall, a babble of broken words from her mouth. Then, with a relief so intense that her muscles turned weak, her fingers found the switch. With a

low gasp, she pulled it down; she heard the snap as it made its connection. And no light came.

The fuse had gone, she argued. No doubt the lights were out in the corridor too. That was why the darkness was so complete. But she didn't believe a word of her argument. She stretched her arm upwards to the bracket. She touched the coloured glass shade which screened the lamp. She fumbled with it. The globe had been removed.

They had been outreached, she and Oliver. She must keep her head—if she could. In that order the two thoughts flashed into her mind. The door was now just behind her—if she could find it. She had reached up to the bracket with her right hand. So the door must be behind her and a little to her left. She turned in a flurry of terror, and at once something happened which drove the last possible doubt from her mind, and herself out of her wits. For as she groped for the door, the fingers of a hand tentatively and ever so lightly touched her face. The touch was so light that it might have been the wings of a butterfly grazing her cheek. But it frightened Lydia like the clap of doom. She gasped, and then for a second she stood unable to move, unable to utter even a whisper, her heart choking her.

But that second was enough. The fingers felt for and found her mouth and clamped themselves tightly over her lips. She was dragged back, and there were other hands at work now, holding her in a clasp of iron. They were women who were holding her, but one had the strength of a man, the one who was in front of her and who held her close with her arms pinioned to her sides. Lydia struggled in a frenzy, she twisted her head to right and to left in an effort to free her mouth. But she couldn't; and then, so swiftly and suddenly that she had not the time to gather breath for a cry, a thick bandage took the place of the hand, and was knotted roughly and securely behind her head. A moment later, her arms were drawn back and the ruffles of her sleeves were pushed up. She felt a band, like a silk scarf, being fitted about her wrists. She could not prevent or resist it. The gag stifled her, the arms about her body crushed the breath out of her, she was as helpless as a doll. Her hands were bound fast behind her back, and when that was done a cloth of some coarse strong fabric was knotted over her face. It was done in the dark, but methodically, and with the certainty that comes from practice and rehearsal.

Lydia Flight writhed in disgust and a vain revolt under the touch of those sedulous and nimble fingers. She herself didn't matter; what she felt, her terror, her abasement at her captivity, the bitterness of failure, they meant less than nothing to the two women who had surprised her. They had their

job to do, and not an excess of time in which to do it. The cloth was tucked tightly back under her chin to her neck and drawn up over her face and forehead and the top of her hair, and then tied in a tight knot behind her head. The hands travelled over her muffled face to make sure that it was covered; and there was one appalling moment for Lydia, when the tips of the fingers stopped at her eyes, and tapped very gently upon the eyeballs, and it seemed to her, longingly.

Lydia shivered, and held though she was, sagged and felt sick almost to the point of swooning.

"I'd sooner die," she thought. But it was a prayer that she should, rather than a thought.

Just outside the door Oliver was waiting for her—a couple of yards away. She could not call out to him, she could not open the door and go to him, she was a prisoner in the darkness here, and of the women who held her prisoner, one yearned to inflict upon her the very abomination of cruelty. The fingers slipped away along the sides of her face, and as Lydia drew a breath, returned swiftly. They were not to be baulked.

Lydia heard a little giggle, and it seemed to her that she had never heard a sound so horrible. A quiet little giggle in the darkness, as if someone had waked up and remembered an amusing quip, or suddenly thought of some small, harmless and diverting joke to be played upon a friend in the morning. "What fun!" From the sound of the giggle, it seemed to mean no more than that. "What fun! I must! I must!"

But all the while the tips of the fingers were feeling delicately, delicately, with little probing touches, round the sockets of Lydia's eyes.

"It's going to happen."

Lydia was sure of it. She wrenched at her wrists, and the wrists remained tied. She screamed, and the scream was never uttered, though her throat ached with the strain of it. The ghastly abominable thing was going to happen, would assuredly have happened, but for a gentle monitory rapping on the corridor door. There were three or four raps, that was all, none of them loud, and the hands fell away sharply from Lydia's face. For a moment Lydia's heart leaped in hope. It was Oliver on guard, bidding her hurry. But the rapping was not repeated, and her heart fluttered down again and fainted within her breast. If it had been Oliver, Oliver thinking that she was changing her dress too slowly, or Oliver dreading a mischance, in either case Oliver would have turned the handle of the door and broken in upon her. No,

it was a signal to the two women that what was to be done outside the door had been done.

Lydia heard a long sigh of disappointment behind her. A door was opened, again behind her, on her right, the door of the bathroom. A few moments afterwards there was a rattle of glass upon her left. The globe was being fitted once more into the socket of the bracket lamp. The switch was still pulled down, and the little passage was immediately lit up. Lydia could see that it was lit but she could see no more. The cloth over her face was too thick, too securely tied for her to distinguish more than the bare fact that where there had been darkness, there was now light.

The woman who had hold of her let her go and pushed her sharply along the passage to her bedroom. Lydia ran with a faltering step. She had to run, or she would have fallen. But she would have run could she have walked, so completely the horror and dread of the woman behind her had mastered her. She was as obedient as a child. Any ignominy, any defeat, so long as she was spared the agony of having her eyes thumbed out of their sockets.

"I was a coward. I would have gone on my knees to be spared," she said contritely to Hanaud and Mr. Ricardo as she told them her story. Hanaud smiled at her.

"Mademoiselle, I did not see you at that moment, but I did see you yesterday. I remember you quoted a motto from that old Church: 'Je m'y oblige.' I shall not forget the look of fear in your eyes when you quoted it, or the determination in your voice which contradicted the fear. And I tell you frankly that had I been in the passage and in your predicament, I should have been already on the marrow, whilst you were thinking of it."

A wan little smile parted Lydia's lips for a second.

"You are very kind, monsieur."

"Bones," said Mr. Ricardo. "Marrow-bones, in the future, if you must use these antiquated vulgarities."

"Mademoiselle," Hanaud observed, "I beg you to pay no heed to the chatter-back of my friend. He has the dictionary complex, and the doctors believe it to be incurable. I am on my knees—see how I humour him—you are ready to go on yours. I pray you to proceed."

The two women forced Lydia into her bedroom at the end of the passage. Whilst one of them closed the door and switched on the light, the other flung her roughly into a deep arm-chair on the far side of the room. The windows were high above the terrace, but they stood open and the violins and the

horns of the orchestra in the garden, the music of a waltz of Old Vienna blending gaiety with a passionate languor, rose through the summer night and floated into this place of silence and terror. The strong arms from behind the chair took Lydia by the shoulders and held her straight. The deft and nimble fingers in front detached the coils of the rope of pearls from the folds of her cravat, drew up the rest of the rope from within her shirt, and lifted it all over her head very carefully, so that the cloth should not be disarranged.

For a moment or two afterwards no one moved. Lydia had a picture before her darkened eyes of a woman handling with tenderness and gazing with envy and desire at that miracle of loveliness—the pearls of Chitipur. Then she heard a little rattle, and the snap of a bag. The rope had been hidden away. She felt the fingers again at her neck, rearranging her cravat. She dared not move, she pressed her knees and her ankles together with a force which bruised them, lest a sudden temptation should master this enemy who held her at her mercy and the batiste neckcloth become a bowstring. And the enemy was now fastidious as a lady's maid. The folds of the cravat must sit as though it had just been for the first time wound about her throat, the bow under her chin extend its white and delicate wings in the dandy's fashion of the period. She heard the giggle again; this time close to her face, as the fingers gave a final pat, and her blood ran cold. But her enemy drew away.

She was lifted again on to her feet and led forward. A door was opened. She was pushed through the doorway. She knew it, for one of her shoulders knocked against the jamb. She was now in the dressing-room. They turned her to the left, forced her on a step or two, and stopped her. She was now by the side of the table with the mirror on the wall above it, and the big powder bowl upon it. She was held in that position. Something was being done in front of her. She could see nothing, but she could tell by the sound. A dress was rustling, feet moved, across the room a thing of glass fell and splintered, nearer to her another thing, round and heavier, rolled and settled with a dull whirr. Then she was again marched forward, and again stopped. Just in front of her the sash of a window squeaked and she felt the night air cool through the wrap over her face. Someone stopped beside her, and taking her ankles, pressed her feet down upon the floor. She was kept in that position. Lydia made no effort to resist. All the spirit was out of her, all the power of thought. She had been broken by terror and her will was numbed. She registered in her memory, unconscious of any intention to do so, her various movements and halts, but the only clear notion in her mind was an odd fancy which repeated itself and repeated itself.

"People on their way to the gallows, go meekly, as I am going. There must be nothing alive of them but the power to move."

She was turned about from the window and made to march, and at each step, her foot was pressed down so that the sole of her shoe was set firmly and heavily upon the carpet. A door was opened in front of her, and closed again behind her. She was once more, then, in the passage. The light was still on.

Then, to her amazement, the band about her wrists was slackened. The light was turned off, and once more she was in darkness. She was not held any more. It seemed to her that a glimmer of light showed, but so small a glimmer and for so short a fraction of time that she could not be sure. She stood, not daring to move, not thinking of moving, waiting for the next thrust to guide her. There was no speculation in her mind as to what was to be done to her. She stood stock still and waited. Gradually there came into her mind the faintest of hopes that she was actually alone, that the glimmer of light had been due to the door into the corridor opening just enough to let her captors through and closing again after they had gone. She didn't dare to encourage the hope. Some cruel trick was to be played upon her, if she moved. But in spite of her refusal to accept it, the hope grew stronger. No one held her any longer. No hands came touching her face, feeling for her eyes. No sound reached her ears. And the door had closed behind her, she remembered, when she had first entered from the corridor, without the least jar, the faintest whine of a hinge, the tiniest click of a latch. She was alone. Now she was sure of it!

In a frenzied revulsion she worked her hands behind her back, and the band about her wrists gave. Her hands were free. She rubbed and pressed her wrists until the blood ran free again in her veins and the numbness passed from her fingers. She tore at the knots in the cloth which covered her face. But they were behind her head and had sunk into the curls of her hair. She must control her impatience and pick at the ends. She plucked it off at the last, and thrust it into the deep side pocket of her coat, thinking only of one thing: to get the suffocating gag off her mouth. She pressed it down until the bandage hung loose about her neck. She untied it and let it drop beside the scarf. Then she felt for the door and opened it.

The corridor was lit and empty. She called out:

"Oliver! Oliver!"

And no answer was returned to her. She ran out into the corridor. She opened the door of Oliver's room. That too was empty—he had been

surprised as she had been—she had not a doubt of it. That he could have been a party to this theft, this violence, was unthinkable. She ran down the stairs, and at the foot of them in the lounge, she had stumbled upon Ricardo. He was the one man in that house of whom she could be sure. Lucrece Bouchette had joined them. She had leaned over the couch and touched Lydia Flight. It was a stupid thing to do. For in that caressing touch, Lydia recognised the touch of the fingers which had lingered about her eyes and arranged the cravat about her throat. She could not explain why she was certain of it, but she was certain; and Mr. Ricardo saw her face flush and grow white and her body flinch as though she had been struck. Guy Stallard had offered to help her in her search for Oliver. She had no faith in Guy Stallard. She remembered too vividly Oliver Ransom at the window of the corridor. But if she concealed her distrust, she might pick up some word from him which would help her to a conjecture, at all events, of what had happened to her lover. Even with the horrible experience of the last half-hour still fresh and raw in her memory, she had had the courage to walk forth with Guy Stallard at her side into the darkness of the garden.

This is the story which Lydia Flight told in Mr. Ricardo's sitting-room.

"And the cloth tied over your face, mademoiselle," said Hanaud, "was the handkerchief of crimson and yellow which I found in the pocket of your coat?"

"It must have been. I never looked at it again. I forgot it."

A smile crept over Hanaud's face.

"They all forgot it. You were sure, mademoiselle, that it was Lucrece Bouchette who covered your eyes and arranged your cravat?"

"I am very sure," Lydia replied. "But of course, I can't prove it. I saw nothing."

"And you heard no voices which you could identify?"

"Monsieur, from the first moment to the last when I was left alone, not one word was spoken."

Hanaud nodded his head and shrugged his shoulders, and was extremely discontented.

"I have to think of a jury. We may know, but can we prove? Luckily they forgot the handkerchief. That is one great chance." He rang the bell. "Mademoiselle, you shall drink a brandy and soda—I beg you not to contradict me—I am very unpleasant when I am contradicted—you shall

smoke a cigarette—these are orders—and you shall tell us then the little which remains for you to tell."

He mixed the brandy and soda himself and she uttered a cry and her eyes watered, and she screwed her face into the nearest approach to ugliness she could manage as she took a drink of it. But Hanaud stood over her and was furious with her for putting on namby-pamby airs, and knew extremely well that all prima donnas drank vast quantities of porter in their dressing-rooms, and that she must do what she was told by Principal Inspectors. Lydia Flight drank it protestingly to the bottom of the tumbler, and lit one of Mr. Ricardo's Balkan cigarettes.

"Whilst you smoke, mademoiselle, I send a message," said Hanaud. He scribbled on a sheet of Mr. Ricardo's note-paper and shut it up in one of Mr. Ricardo's envelopes. He went out on to the balcony and leaned over and beckoned. Someone came running up the stairs—Perrichet.

"It must go at once!" And Perrichet clattered down again. Hanaud moved back to his old chair.

"Now, mademoiselle!"

CHAPTER XXVI
HANAUD—COWARD

Lydia's account of the rest of that night tallied with the story which Guy Stallard had told to Hanaud. She added, however, that when, with a great deal of misgiving and still more chiding of herself for cowardice, she went to her room to change for her journey, she found two scarves of her own upon the floor of the passage, one still knotted in the loop which had bound her wrists, the other with the red paint of her lips still clearly marked upon it. She had thrown the two scarves into her suit-case—and at this point Hanaud winked prodigiously at Mr. Ricardo and Mr. Ricardo blushed to the roots of his hair—and for all she knew there they were still. She could not understand how she had managed to fall asleep in the lounge and sleep on until seven o'clock in the morning. For she was in a fever to get out of that house, tell her story to Scott Carruthers and enlist his help in her search for Oliver. If she had been drugged, it was extraordinary that she should wake up as she did without an ache of the head or any heaviness.

"Allonal," said Hanaud.

At Trouville she had suffered the bitterest disappointment. Scott Carruthers had heard her out with a reserve so stiff that it was clear that he did not believe a word of what she was saying. And when she asked for his help in instituting a search for Oliver, he burst out into contemptuous laughter, suggesting as plainly as possible that she and Oliver had put their heads together to rob the Prince. Scott Carruthers was looking very ill and labouring under some terrible shock. There was a staring terror in his eyes which the loss of the rope of pearls and his failure as Nahendra Nao's guardian could not account for. In spite of his disbelief in her, it was she who had to draft the telegram to Goodwood and send it off. Scott Carruthers was quite sunk in despondency.

When the answer came in the afternoon, bidding them wait at Trouville, Scott Carruthers would not let her stay in his hotel. She must find another. He didn't want to see her until Nahendra Nao arrived.

Hanaud laughed grimly and interposed:

"He didn't want you to see him. He couldn't trust himself, that fine Major."

Lydia found a small hotel and garaged the purple car and spent a dreadful night of waiting. There was nothing she could do but wait, feeding herself with hopes in which she had no faith, that at any moment Oliver might appear, that he would have some marvellous, convincing reason to give her for his disappearance, that he had recovered the stolen jewel and gone into hiding until he could restore it to its owner—there was no excuse at which in her distraction she did not grasp.

The next morning the young Rajah did not arrive. Had he crossed by the Southampton steamer to Havre, he should have been at Trouville before nine o'clock. Nor did any message come from him. Lydia waited until twelve and could wait no longer. Oliver was waiting, too, she told herself, with the Chitipur jewel, in some safe place like Havre. For the only alternative was that he had been the victim of some dreadful crime compared with which the attack on her had been a mere triviality; and that she refused to believe, though it pressed and clamoured to be believed, breaking her heart and breaking her courage too.

She was in her car when a messenger arrived for her from the Hotel des Fontaines. He brought a note from Scott Carruthers that she and he were to meet Hanaud and Nahendra Nao at the House of the Pebble at six o'clock that afternoon. She shrank from returning to that house of disaster, but Hanaud of the Police would be present and she would be spared something which she dreaded even more—a return to the house-boat of Lucrece Bouchette. She drove off to Havre. She and Oliver had slipped away more than once from Caudebec and lunched at the Restaurant du Sceptre. Why shouldn't he be waiting for her there? She drove to the restaurant and found Mr. Ricardo and Hanaud.

"You too didn't trust me, Monsieur Hanaud, though I did trust you," Lydia said gently.

Hanaud looked extremely uncomfortable and Ricardo was pleased to see it. It would do him good to feel uncomfortable.

"Mademoiselle, that morning I didn't understand you. First you wanted to see me—oh, most urgently, and in private."

"I have just told you that I trusted you. I wanted to tell you everything I knew."

"Then the next moment, you wouldn't see me at the only place where you could see me privately. At Caudebec."

"But, monsieur, I was terrified of Caudebec. Caudebec meant for me Lucrece Bouchette, her maid Marie, the house-boat. I was certain that it was Lucrece who had stolen the necklace, who had threatened my eyes. Another woman had helped her. Who, except her maid? No, I wasn't going to return to Caudebec."

"In another minute, mademoiselle, you had again changed your mind. You would see me at Caudebec."

"Yes. For during that minute Mr. Ricardo had told me that he had seen me aquaplaning at Caudebec the night before. The fact that I was aquaplaning was paraded in front of the hotel. Everybody there was meant to believe that I was aquaplaning."

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"When I was really at Trouville."

"Yes."

"Very well. It was plain to me at once that something else was planned against me, against both of us, Oliver and myself. There was a reason for staging that exhibition. It was to be done in my absence. I wasn't to know of it. Well, I did know of it. I had been made to look like a thief already. Something else was planned. I had got to find out what it was. I couldn't let it go, however much I was frightened. No!"

She lifted her head into the air. If she had lost her spirit during her bad hour at Guy Stallard's house, she had got it back now, and she had had it in the Restaurant du Sceptre.

"Do you remember what I said? 'Je m'y oblige.' I subdue myself to what I've got to do. I had got to find out what new stroke was aimed at me. I was going back to Caudebec, and more, monsieur, I was going back to Lucrece Bouchette's house-boat."

Hanaud stood up, and made her the most charming little bow.

"Mademoiselle, I live in a rough world, and therefore, when someone finer than those I meet as a rule shines upon me for a moment, I do not always know it at once. I make you my apologies."

It was very prettily done. Hanaud had his moments, Mr. Ricardo reflected.

Lydia Flight stretched out her hand and shook Hanaud's.

"You shall make me no apologies. But for you what should I be now?" She threw a glance out of the window to the river and shivered.

"And then, mademoiselle, you came late to Caudebec?" Hanaud suggested.

"Yes. I am a little ashamed there," Lydia returned. "I was more frightened of Lucrece than I ought to have been. I thought that I would give myself every chance. . . . I thought that if in spite of everything I could find Oliver—oh, I know it wasn't brave, but I am only the ordinary mixture. I was going to the house-boat to face Lucrece, but at the same time I shrank from it. I went to the cathedral. You see we had been there together—I stayed there pretending to look for Oliver—until the motto on the window drove me out ashamed. I went to the steamer booking-office. He might have crossed last night. He might be meaning to cross to-night. Then I caught at the idea that he might have, after all, gone to Trouville. I should be late for you, late for the appointment at the Château. But being late didn't seem to matter. I crossed by the nearest ferry. There was no one at Trouville. I had then to face up to my own fears."

She had crossed back by the ferry at Quilleboeuf. She had stopped her car at the hotel in Caudebec and asked for Hanaud. She had driven on, left her car at the end of the open space, ran along the embankment and hailed the house-boat. She wondered then whether Oliver had got back to it, whether he was waiting there for her, and not daring to go away lest she should arrive. It was growing dark by this time. Lydia heard the splash of the sculls and ran down the steps, but as the dinghy came round under the counter of the house-boat she saw that it was Marie who rowed it. She almost turned then and there and fled, but she did not. After all, here was a little town at her elbow, a house-boat only a few yards from the shore, and Hanaud of the Sûreté Générale on the watch. Nothing could happen to her, and she was stubborn in her conviction that between Oliver's disappearance and the aquaplaning camouflage of yesterday night, there was a vital connection. She stepped into the dinghy.

"I meant to have it out with Lucrece Bouchette," Lydia declared. "Then I should collect my things and leave the house-boat at once." But nothing turned out as she had planned.

The saloon was dark, but forward of the saloon the two windows of one of the cabins showed light behind the curtains.

"Madame is in her room?" said Lydia.

"Yes, mademoiselle."

Lydia climbed over the bulwarks into the stern of the house-boat, whilst Marie made the dinghy fast, and entered the saloon. She was in a fever now to find Lucrece. She threw off her hat on to the table. She did not trouble to switch on the lamps. There was enough glimmer from the twilight for her to see her way across to the forward door. She opened that door. The passage ahead of her between the two rows of cabins was in darkness, and though a skylight gave light to it by day, the skylight was covered with a carpet now. She knew that the door of Lucrece's cabin was the first upon the right-hand side, and the light switch on the wall beside it. Lydia went forward and caught her heel in what she thought to be a tear in the carpet. But it was not a tear in the carpet. She pitched forward into a net slung across the passage. Before she could recover herself, she heard a little rumbling sound on the roof behind her, and her feet were drawn backwards. She had stepped on to the tail of the net spread out upon the floor and it was slipping away beneath her and lifting. She knew what the sound meant. There was a small electrically driven capstan on the roof deck just abaft the covered skylight which was used for the cables in mooring. That capstan was revolving and taking up as it revolved the net in which she was caught. She tried to turn and escape. But she only caught her heels the deeper and twisted the meshes more inextricably about her feet. Panic seized her. She began to struggle desperately, trying to keep her balance, trying to thrust the net from her face and her breast. A thin rope was threaded at each edge and both were brought together through the roof of the skylight on to the capstan so that as the net tugged at her feet, its edges began to close round her too. She hadn't been equal to Lucrece . . . she was mad to have come on board. . . . This was the net which she herself had woven . . . under Lucrece's directions. As she struggled, tearing at the meshes, she remembered in a flash how she had been ordered to undo her work and do it again so that each knot should hold; and how she had obeyed. Lucrece had been making her plans then! Oh, she had been no match for Lucrece, and suddenly the door of the saloon behind her was shut. Lydia uttered a scream, but her breath was coming in gasps and it was little louder than a sob. Her feet were quite off the ground now and so tangled in the meshes that she could not free them. And now the net was tightening about her body, pressing her arms to her sides, cutting her face, leaving her as helpless as a fish. She lay still for a moment to gather what strength she had left and whilst she lay still the rumbling of the capstan ceased. A door opened and shut, just ahead of her, the door of Lucrece's cabin, but no light now came from it; and in the darkness a pair of hands made sure that the net held her tight. The touch of those hands made Lydia's blood run cold; and quite close to her face someone stooped and giggled. The sound drove Lydia into a frenzy. She struggled, she screamed once, and

then a palm was clapped upon her mouth, and the voice of Lucrece—oh, there was no doubt about it now—said in a low voice:

"Keep quiet! No one could hear you. If you scream again—this," and Lucrece's other hand curved round her forehead and felt for her eyes. Lydia couldn't speak, couldn't whisper: "I promise, I promise!" but she lay quite still; and again Lucrece laughed.

"That's better, Lydia," she said and she switched on the light. She had done with secrecy. There was no further need for it. She was going to make sure that Lydia would bear no witness against her. She stood and looked down at her held tightly in the coils with a smile spreading over her face.

"I thought that I had lost you," she cried. "When I heard your voice hailing from the bank, I couldn't believe it. I think it was wonderful of you —so brave!"

And the door opened from the saloon, and Lucrece nodded to her maid.

"Lace the little fool up, Marie."

Lydia dared not utter a word. This was to be the end for her, but the horror of Lucrece's hands about her eyes kept her dumb. Anything but that disfigurement and torture. "Je m'y oblige." She had bent herself to her task, and this was the result of it. Marie with a cord laced the edges of the net together with a rough hand. Then she went out again. In a moment, the little capstan revolved again, and let Lydia's feet down to the floor. But Lydia could not stand. The net was too fast about her. Her feet dragged on the floor; she could twitch them feebly, but she could not separate them. Marie was back again in a moment. The top of the net was slung upon a hook in the passage roof. She and Lucrece lifted it off the hook and bringing the end back laced it down behind Lydia's back. The girl was lying face downwards now on the floor of the passage. She could hardly move, the meshes of the net were so tightly drawn about her. If she did move, it was no more than a convulsion and the string cut into her arms and her throat and her legs.

"What are you going to do to me?" she implored piteously; and looking down at her, Lucrece laughed gleefully and Marie smiled.

"You are going aquaplaning again, my dear, as you did last night," said Lucrece. "But you'll be under the launch to-night."

That was the plan. Someone was to ride the aquaplane board whilst Lydia in her net was to be dragged along below the water.

"It won't take long," said Lucrece with a grin. They were to run down the river in the darkness past the houses, beyond the bend. At a point where no one could spy, there was to be an accident. The rider on the board would fall and be drawn in, the net would be cut away from the dead body of Lydia; and no one in the world would be so distressed as Lucrece Bouchette.

"She was so fond of it. She did it so well. I warned her of the currents and the tide. She laughed at me. There wasn't any danger. I allowed myself to be persuaded. Poor girl! I am really to blame. I ran the launch for her."

That was the line Lucrece Bouchette was going to take. Remorse at the loss of a dear friend and the abrupt ending of a career; censure of herself for her weakness in consenting to so dangerous a pastime.

"I think Guy Stallard will be very sorry for five minutes," said Lucrece venomously. "But he'll forget, my dear. Men do, you know. I wonder where they'll find you. Yes, and how long it'll take before they do find you. I hope it will be soon, don't you? Otherwise what they do find won't be so pretty and charming as the Rosenkavalier, will it?"

It would not be possible to exaggerate the cold malignancy of Lucrece Bouchette's voice. "Guy Stallard wouldn't like it at all," she went on smoothly. "You look quite lovely now in that pretty blue dress all disordered and your hair tangled, but in three days' time—what with fish and the steamers going up and down—oh, my dear, a horror!"

"But you can't do it!" Lydia cried. "You daren't! I won't scream, I promise, but you must listen. Hanaud's here!"

"Hanaud!"

Lucrece Bouchette was startled. She straightened her back and so stood looking down upon her victim. A hunted look came into her eyes. She didn't want Hanaud upon her heels.

"Here? What do you mean, Lydia?"

"He's at Caudebec."

Lydia saw a glimmer of hope. She pressed her little advantage and pressed it too hard. "I have seen him. I saw him at Havre to-day. I am to see him again—to-night. I stopped my car at the hotel to leave a message that he should expect me. The car's on the quay now."

"Is it?"

"Yes. And Hanaud knows the car. He'll know that I drove here and came on board"—and she stopped, for suddenly Lucrece began to laugh.

"That's very ingenious," she said. "I almost believed you. Of course we all know that he is in Havre, don't we. The papers have been full of him. And you've actually seen him! What a stroke of luck! And he has come to Caudebec to save you from that cruel Bouchette woman! Charming of him"—and her laughter ceased. "You little idiot!" she said, and she pushed Lydia contemptuously with her foot.

Lydia had said too much. Had she been content with her simple first statement that Hanaud was in Caudebec, she would have flung Lucrece Bouchette into a good deal of doubt and anxiety. She might even have abandoned the fine plan to punish Lydia which she had been savouring gleefully for a month. She might have tried to make terms. Lydia's life for Lydia's silence. But the details wouldn't do. They were made up and after all not so very cleverly made up. Lydia had seen Hanaud, had she? She had a second appointment with him too. And he was at Caudebec! Lucrece was more savage than ever for having allowed herself to be frightened for one moment by so childish a lie.

"No, you don't get free of your net so easily as that, my dear," she continued. "You made it very strong, you remember. It would hold a shark. Didn't we say that? Yes! At all events it'll need a better lie than yours to break any of those meshes, I can tell you."

Lydia's glimmer of hope was extinguished. Lucrece stood rocking her from side to side with her foot. Every now and then a little spurt of laughter broke from her.

"Lydia Flight," she said, speaking the name very slowly. "Lydia Flight," and she set it to the motion of her foot in a sort of rhythm. She rocked the girl in the net, as though she rocked a cradle and chanted the name like a lullaby.

But in another sense Lydia had said too much. She had told Lucrece that her car was standing on the quay. Lucrece was thinking. The car could stand on that wide space all night and no one would notice it, or interfere with it.

"It'll be useful, you'll lend it to me, won't you? There was a little difficulty, but since you lend me yours, or rather Guy Stallard's, everything will now be easy. Come!"

She stooped: and called on Marie to help her. Lydia choked back a scream. To cry out in the vain hope that, muffled by these walls and doors

and the covering over the skylight, her cry would reach the houses on the shore. No, she dared not do it. The talons of Lucrece were too near her face. They dragged her forward. In the bows of the house-boat there was a store-room for cables and a few sails and blocks and the hundred and one odd things needed upon any boat. There was neither window nor skylight to it, and the floor of it was deep under the water. Into this hole, the two women dragged Lydia and laid her down.

"If you cry out here, no one will hear you—unless I hear you," said Lucrece, "and if I do, my dear, you will be very, very sorry," and her lips were drawn back from her teeth and her eyes were terrifying.

They left her there and locked and barred the door. And there Lydia Flight lay in the darkness. But hours later, whilst Hanaud talked with Lucrece in the saloon, the Commissaire and Perrichet quietly searched the house-boat and discovered her. They loosed her from the net, bidding her keep silent. She was passed out from the window of her cabin on to the launch, and under Perrichet's direction the launch was driven to the hard opposite the hotel.

This was the story which Lydia Flight told to her friends in Mr. Ricardo's sitting-room in the hotel. She leaned back when she had told it, looking very white and troubled. Both men who had heard her had seen terror, stark and appalling, come and go in her face as she told it. Both had seen her head turn suddenly as though she was sure the dreadful events were to be renewed. But now that she lay back in her chair, wan and unhappy beyond words to describe, both were aware of the grief for her lover which took all the savour out of life.

"You shall go back to your bed, mademoiselle," said Hanaud with a respect which was of the sincerest, as he rose from his chair. "You will know that you can sleep safely. For you have three friends here, Monsieur Ricardo, this poor man Hanaud, and Perrichet his Brigadier, who will not be foolish enough to try to console you, but who will hold you in their hearts."

Lydia gave a hand to each of them, and a smile—a poor little thing in the way of smiles, wistful and unhappy, but the best she could manage. Hanaud opened the door. Outside it, stood Perrichet.

"I told you you wouldn't sleep to-night any more than you slept last night," said Hanaud, clapping him on the shoulder.

Perrichet's face split in a broad grin.

"Monsieur, I have never known you to be wrong," he said, and for him Lydia Flight had more than one hand.

"I know that if I sleep to-night, it will be in safety because of you."

She went into her bedroom. Hanaud and Ricardo returned into the parlour.

"We put ourselves into the night-cap, eh?" said Hanaud.

"On the contrary. We put the night-cap into us," returned Mr. Ricardo, and he rang the bell; and when the waiter presented himself he ordered a brandy and soda. "And for you?" he asked of Hanaud.

Hanaud smiled.

"I am not like you, a Continentalist. No, I have the English tastes. I will have a whisky and lemonade."

Of all the ghastly forms of drink that Mr. Ricardo had ever heard, this was the very worst. But Hanaud seemed certainly to enjoy it. He smoked one of his black cigarettes to keep it company.

"Yes," he said complacently, "the English know how to live."

"And whilst you drink that abominable concoction," said Mr. Ricardo, "I shall be glad to know how you guessed that Lydia was a prisoner on that house-boat."

"This is very good," said Hanaud, drinking out of his glass. He looked at Ricardo anxiously, a man not quite perfectly educated, but wanting always to do the right thing. "Would it be better with a straw?"

"It would not."

Mr. Ricardo was quite decisive upon that problem.

"The only thing to do with a drink of that kind is to take it down in one gulp and try to forget all about it."

"Meanwhile," said Hanaud. "I answer your question. It is clear that Miss Lydia went back to the house-boat. No one who saw her face in the restaurant, who heard her say: 'Je m'y oblige,' could doubt it. She meant to go back, she forced herself to go back, but she went back in fear. Well then, I do the arithmetics. I saw two and two are four. Now you understand."

"I don't," Ricardo answered stubbornly.

"Very well. I make two first. One, Lucrece Bouchette has fallen flop, as you say, for the beautiful Guy Stallard. Two, the beautiful Guy Stallard has

fallen flop for Lydia Flight. So Lucrece Bouchette does not like Lydia Flight —no, not one little bit of liking, and being Lucrece Bouchette, she would be pleased to show her that she does not like her. Agreed? Yes, agreed. Then I take another two. One, it was not Lydia Flight who aquaplaned. We knew that because a fork clattered on a plate in a restaurant and because two men sat perplexed and dumb as fishes when I told them, at the Château. So already we knew that Lydia Flight did not, but someone else did go aquaplaning from the *Marie-Popette* the night after the theft. Then two, the second of my second two which make the four. I speak with lucidity. A little picture you made for me, my friend, which I did not like at all. It remained in the mind, yes, and every time I snatch a look at it, it seems to me a little more grim and unpleasant than before. Three women, on the after-deck of a house-boat, two pretending to make a big strong net, and one of them making it—the one for whom it is intended. I do not know as yet what use is to be made of it—no! I do not know that until to-night. But I am not easy. I think that Lucrece woman is dangerous and evil and means all the harm she can mean to that foolish little brave one who has gone to bed. So I make my four. I send Perrichet up to the house-boat to see that no harm comes to her. But I blame myself. I did not know the story which Mademoiselle Lydia had to tell us. Still, I should at once have taken the risk. All the world, newspapers, ministers, deputies make much trouble for us when we make the mistakes, and sometimes we are not brave."

He got up from his chair and made a sweeping bow towards the door.

"Ah, mademoiselle, it is I, Hanaud, who was the coward last night," he said remorsefully. "I should have gone through that *Marie-Popette* with my jeweller's glass in my eye and no authority in my pocket, until I found you. I should not have left you all those hours fastened up in your net in the darkness, with despair for your lover at your heart and the terror of death beside you. Mademoiselle, I beg your pardon."

And having spoken thus, he sprang erect. He was like a schoolboy who, having dutifully said his prayers, has made everything all right and can now turn to more amusing matters.

"We go to bed, yes? All of us except Perrichet. Let us not forget that we have still the important question to ask of Mademoiselle! Oho, when we ask that one! I tell you! We shall not be any longer with Moses. No!"

He nodded his head very sagely. For himself, Ricardo could not think of a question which had been left unasked.

"A question?"

“Yes, my friend, and of the gravest. How many suit-cases she possesses.”

Hanaud roared with laughter, but Mr. Ricardo thought it the poorest kind of joke he had ever heard.

CHAPTER XXVII
THE NET CLOSES

The next morning Major Burrows, the Governor of the convict prison on the Moor, sent a message across the road to the house of Dr. Holt, and Dr. Holt answered it in person.

"The French police want some information, and it looks to me as if we could give it," said the Governor. "Have a look!"

He handed a paper across the table to Dr. Holt, who sat down and studied it.

"The millionaire from Arizona sounds like George Brymer, doesn't he?" said Holt. "Though where he got his money from and what this particular ramp is, I can't think."

"We don't have to go into that, fortunately. That's their pigeon. It's Brymer all right. Do you remember a little man who got acquitted at the mutiny trial six months ago, and gate-crashed us for a night's lodging? He was mighty anxious to get in for a night, and I think you and I came to the opinion that he had a message for someone."

Holt thumped the table.

"Of course I remember. I got five bob apiece for him from you, the chaplain, and myself, and then I saw him in the London train smoking an Havana cigar. Mike Budden, the little rat."

"It looks to me as if he might be Furlong, and that the message Mike had was for George Brymer. But it's a bad case, apparently—murder—and we've got to be careful. I think I'll send up Langridge to town, and he can cross over to Havre and identify them."

"He had better take their fingerprints too," said the Doctor.

"He can collect them at Scotland Yard," the Governor agreed.

The net was closing upon those summer visitors. Lucrece Bouchette and her maid Marie were in prison. Elsie Marsh was detained in Paris. Guy Stallard and Major Scott Carruthers had been summoned by the Examining Magistrate, and their movements were watched. But Hanaud wanted the net

to be as strong in all its meshes as that one which Lydia Flight had woven for her own distress and suffering. Whilst Langridge, the Dartmoor warder, was travelling to London, Hanaud quietly disappeared from Caudebec. He travelled to Paris with one of the coloured handkerchiefs which had been found in Furlong's bedroom. At the Sûreté he was informed that it was one of a line specially manufactured for a great chain of shops known as Au Profit des Pauvres. He sought the head office of that institution in the Rue du Quatre Septembre, and learned that the handkerchiefs were made at Lille.

"I can, Monsieur Hanaud, telephone to our factory and get you all the details you want," said the director whom he saw.

"I would rather, monsieur, have a letter of recommendation," said Hanaud.

With that in his pocket he caught the five-twenty afternoon train to Lille, and in the office of the manager on the next morning he spread out his handkerchief upon the table.

"You have some complaint, Monsieur Hanaud?" The manager was a small round man, and he bristled visibly. His fine factory was not to be lightly impugned, even by the most illustrious detective in France.

"On the contrary," said Hanaud, "I hope that I shall have reason to thank you."

But the manager hardly heard him. He seized the handkerchief, and was sunk in confusion and shame.

"Ah, that one of those should have been sold to you! What a misfortune!" he cried.

"It was not sold to me, and it is not a misfortune. This is a case of the most serious. This change in the width of the stripe in the middle of the handkerchief—fourteen threads crimson, fourteen threads yellow, then suddenly eighteen threads crimson and ten yellow—it is part of the pattern?"

"No, Monsieur Hanaud, no!"

The pattern was regular, fourteen crimson, fourteen yellow, from top edge to bottom edge, and again from side to side. But this had been an error, a fault in a loom. In one piece of the fabric, and in only one, let Monsieur Hanaud believe it, the pattern had been marred. It had been soon discovered.

"You can prove that only one piece shows this variation?"

The manager could certainly prove it.

"And how many handkerchiefs are there in a piece?" Hanaud asked.

"A gross," the factory manager answered. "They are cut and separated afterwards. But a gross are woven in the one piece."

"One hundred and forty-four handkerchiefs. That is all?"

"That is all."

"And how do you sell them? Singly?"

This was the question which to Hanaud was the most critical of all in this matter.

"Oh, no, monsieur. We sell them by the dozen or the half-dozen. And we sell millions of them."

"Yes. So I can rely upon it—and I beg you to be very sure—that of all the millions sold of this line of handkerchiefs, only twenty-four people at the outside can have bought one with this flaw in the pattern?"

"Only twenty-four."

No one could have been more definite.

"Then I shall ask you for a list of your shops in Havre and Rouen," said Hanaud.

There were only three, and he returned to Caudebec well contented. There could be no reasonable doubt that the handkerchief which was bound over Lydia's eyes to hide from her the identity of her assailants, the handkerchief which was used to chloroform Oliver Ransom, and the four discovered by Durasoy in Furlong's bedroom, belonged to the same set. They linked the theft and the murder together, with a chain which could not be broken. Followed a good deal of routine work. The Doctor de Viard testified that Oliver before he was chloroformed had been stunned by one of those weapons which leave no obvious mark, a sandbag or a rubber truncheon. Langridge the warder gave to George Brymer and Mike Budden their real names; and since they were possessed of false passports, they were held at once on that preliminary charge. There was enough presumption against Scott Carruthers to justify his arrest on the graver charge, and routine quickly made a certainty of the presumption. Hanaud had been sure from the beginning of the case that the great rope of pearls could not be far away. A receipt from the manager of the Hotel des Fontaines for a parcel locked up in the safe and dated the day after the murder was found amongst the Major's papers. The parcel contained the Chitipur pearls, and the key of a compartment in a safe deposit at the back of Lower Regent Street in

London. In the safe deposit was Monsieur Tabateau's admirable copy. The net had closed in upon the chief actors in this queer crime; and pressed day after day by the most persevering of Examining Magistrates, Scott Carruthers, already on the edge of a nervous collapse, threw in his hand. He had hidden himself, whilst supper was being served, in Oliver Ransom's bedroom. There George Brymer had joined him, after he had given the signal from the balcony of the gallery for the rocket to be let off.

The actual attack upon Oliver Ransom he had left to the ingenuity of Brymer, and no doubt that powerful piece of elegance was the better adept for such tactics; and in this respect the only instance of the kind in the affair, all had fallen out as it had been planned. Mike Budden slipping up the spiral staircase from the gallery had switched off the light in the top corridor, as Lydia's door closed behind her. That was all he had to do, and he ran downstairs at once and out by the service door to the courtyard. Less than a second afterwards Brymer had struck down Oliver Ransom and caught him as he fell. They had carried him down the staircase into Brymer's suite of rooms, quickly and quietly. Not one of the household was there to see. All were watching the performance of the rope-dancer. The only danger lay in the possibility of one of the men attending to the projectors coming out into the passage at the moment when Brymer and Scott Carruthers were carrying their victim the length of it. But the men were busy at their work and no such mischance occurred. A pad drenched with chloroform was then secured over Ransom's nostrils and mouth by the coloured handkerchief and he was left to die. Later on, when all the guests had gone and the servants had retired to their wing, and the house was in darkness, Lucrece Bouchette had kept watch, and the three men had brought Ransom down to the postern door leading to the forest, wheeled him on a barrow into the forest, and buried him. Scott Carruthers had been in a panic lest Ransom should not be dead. He wanted to make sure. It would be too horrible, he declared to the Magistrate, if he were to wake up under that clay.

"Indeed at last we find real consideration," said the Magistrate bitterly. "There has been a lack of kindness up till now. But you wanted to be sure that Monsieur Ransom was dead before you buried him. Yes, in effect most commodious and estimable!"

Scott Carruthers had no fine ear at that moment to catch a note or analyse a phrase of irony. He seized on the words. Yes, he had been careful. He would never have slept again with that doubt to torture him. Brymer, he was sorry to say, didn't care, but he allowed Scott Carruthers to take the pad from Ransom's mouth and make sure that he didn't breathe.

"Then I covered his face with the handkerchief again. It was more decent," said Scott Carruthers. "All that clay! No! No!"

The Magistrate was most sympathetic in his commendation of a sensitiveness so delicate. "So few murderers have it," he replied. "Indeed, I have found them as a rule without delicacy at all."

These examinations were conducted at Havre by the Magistrate and Hanaud had nothing to do with them. But he had not yet done with the case. What interested him, was not so much either of the two crimes themselves, but the way in which a cunning and perhaps over-subtle plot had been brought to nothing by the undisciplined people who were supposed to be step by step carrying it to its result. They just wouldn't be chessmen. They wouldn't move from square to square according to the player, and when they did move, they wouldn't even remain within those limitations of movement which the rules prescribed. Lucrece Bouchette, George Brymer, even Nahendra Nao! Their passions ran backwards and forwards across the pattern of the Major's scheme, altering it and spoiling it, betraying it, just as one refractory loom had spoilt a gross of cheap handkerchiefs, and drawn the keenest pair of eyes to the study of the pattern. Lucrece, Scott Carruthers, Mike Budden, George Brymer—Hanaud had them laced in the net. But there was another whose part in the affair was still something of a perplexity.

Elsie Marsh! Was she one of Scott Carruthers's pieces, something less than a bishop, and something more than a pawn? Scott Carruthers said "No!" She had had nothing whatever to do with the affair. She was part of Lucrece Bouchette's side-show, introduced, as it were, on to the board, when the player was concentrating on the next move. Hanaud, however, was not ready to believe all that Scott Carruthers told to him or to the Examining Magistrate. He talked his difficulty over with himself through the medium of Mr. Ricardo, one evening at Havre when they were dining late at the Restaurant du Sceptre and the oblong room was empty.

"Listen! It was Elsie Marsh who aquaplaned on the night after the murder. She admits it. She says that on her holidays it is her favourite amusement. The night was hot at Caudebec. She asked Lucrece to run the launch down the river, and the kind Lucrece was most commodious and obliging. If it fitted in with any secret plan of the Bouchette—that was the Bouchette's blackbird."

"That was the Bouchette's pigeon," said Mr. Ricardo. "Proceed!"

Hanaud proceeded:

"It was Elsie Marsh who was to aquaplane again on the night when Lucrece and her maid tucked away mademoiselle in the net. That is clear, yes? She was the only one on board to do it. But this time our Elsie does not admit it. No, no! There was no thought of it. If the Bouchette meant a crime so hideous as to put the lovely Mademoiselle Lydia into a net and drown her under the launch, she would know better than to tell Elsie Marsh about it. Elsie very likely had her faults—yes. She was not a model, but she would not sit for it."

"Or even stand," said Mr. Ricardo.

"In fact, so far was the Bouchette from hinting that she should assist in a proceeding so ferocious, that she actually lent Elsie the car in which the lovely mademoiselle had returned to the *Marie-Popette*, that she might drive herself to Paris."

At this point Mr. Ricardo had no corrections to make.

"Good!" Hanaud continued. "And it is true that Elsie Marsh was off the house-boat and away to Paris, before Perrichet arrived in his dinghy. On the other hand, she rowed herself ashore, and left the house-boat's dinghy to float whither it would. The Bouchette would have sent Marie with her to bring the dinghy back. I am puzzled. If Elsie Marsh is one of the Major's platoon, why, she must stay here and stand her trial. But if she was one of the Bouchette's side-show, and ran away rather than complete her job, we shall restore her to her native shores. You shall find out for me."

Mr. Ricardo shrank back in dismay.

"I?"

"You. You shall speak to her to-morrow."

"But she is in Paris."

"She is in Havre."

"God bless my soul!" said Mr. Ricardo.

"It is not that we love Elsie Marsh. No!" Hanaud insisted. "But we consider the young Prince Nahendra Nao. He is a gentleman of dignity, and has shown a high spirit in this trouble. If his folly must, in the interests of law and order, be brought into the light, he makes no complaint. For his own sake we would spare him, and also because, as I told you, we have Princes of our own."

"But can you spare him?" asked Ricardo.

"Perhaps. If Elsie Marsh was for nothing whatsoever in the crimes of Scott Carruthers, we can leave out altogether from the charge, any mention of Nahendra Nao's infatuation. The pearls went sick. That is all. It has happened before many times without a reason. The Chitipur pearls went sick, and since once or twice Lydia Flight had healed sick pearls by wearing them, she was entrusted with these, and precautions were taken to protect her."

"Yes, I see," said Ricardo, after a pause. "There need be no mention at all of Elsie Marsh?"

"At the trial—at the Court of Assize," Hanaud corrected. "But here, privately, before the Examining Magistrate, we must have the whole story complete. The A to Z of it. That's what the Examining Magistrate is for."

Mr. Ricardo did not relish the prospect of an interview with Elsie Marsh in a prison waiting-room at Havre, but he could not for the life of him see how he was to get out of it.

"Why don't you explain this to her yourself?" he asked.

Hanaud threw up his hands.

"But, my friend, I explain it to her once a day. But she sits stubborn with her eyes on the floor and her mouth shut tight. She says: 'This Hanaud is the foxy one. He will listen, one big false smile of kindness from ear to ear, to all I say, and then he will bite me to pieces.' But you can tell her you know me many years, and that I keep my word, and that I say that if she is only one in the Bouchette's side-show, even a bad one, the Magistrate will let her go. I am not the foxy one. You will tell her that."

Mr. Ricardo could tell her of an occasion when Hanaud had been called a Newfoundland retriever by one whom he had saved.

"Very well," he agreed reluctantly; and the next morning Mr. Ricardo did have his interview with Elsie Marsh, and was allowed to be present with her afterwards before the Examining Magistrate.

She was confronted first of all with Monsieur Crevette, who had come over from Bond Street to identify the great jewel and testify to the condition in which it had been brought to him. The confrontation was a surprise to Elsie Marsh and it almost wrecked the compromise. She was flung into such a rage at the description of the damage her skin and blood had done, that she was on the point of refusing to utter one word of her confession. Her skin was as clean as anyone else's. Certainly as clean as the skin of that cunning little Lydia Flight. Oh, she was a cunning one—Elsie Marsh begged the

Magistrate to believe. And probably she couldn't sing at all. If you asked her, Elsie Marsh—nobody was asking her, everybody was sitting quiet until the spate of acrimony was exhausted, but that didn't matter to Elsie—if you asked her, there had been no question of malady with Lydia Flight. Probably the only thing wrong with Lydia Flight's throat was that she couldn't sing, and had been sent away from the Opera House.

"As for you," she turned on Monsieur Crevette, who stroked his beard bravely, but quailed before this little fury none the less. Elsie pulled herself together. She swept away the interpreter, for her French being primitive and her vocabulary limited, she was in the habit of dashing into long periods of racy English and an interpreter had been necessary.

"*Je vous dirai dans votre language à vous ce que je pense de vous. Vous êtes un . . .*" Here her knowledge failed her, and she threw an abrupt question at Mr. Ricardo. "What's a fellow?"

Mr. Ricardo, taken aback, replied hastily:

"*Un Professeur.*"

"Right!" And facing up to the uneasy Crevette: "*Ce que vous êtes c'est un professeur sanguinaire*," and having delivered this astonishing accusation, she fortunately burst into tears.

Tears brought her to her senses. Yes, she had ridden the aquaplane board on the night after the ball. It was the Bouchette's idea, but she herself had been very wicked. The Bouchette wanted to get rid of Lydia Flight. Everybody would think it was Lydia Flight who rode the board, as indeed, everybody did. She was to ride it again on the Saturday night as Lydia Flight, and this time she would fall, and be dragged into the launch, but Lydia would be drowned. It was very wicked, she acknowledged it, but she had had great provocation.

"Provocation?" exclaimed the Examining Magistrate. But Elsie Marsh was as much surprised by his inability to understand, as he was by the word itself.

"Of course," she answered.

She was supposed to have spoilt a string of pearls, wasn't she? And another girl had healed them. Would any girl like that? Would any girl to whom that was supposed to have happened, be likely to be a friend of the other girl who had put the rocks right? Why, she would hate her, wouldn't she? Fairly hate her. Of course she would!

And there was hate, sheer crude hate, staring out of that little common empurpled stubborn face. Jealousy, humiliation, anger, all accumulating and seething and burning in the mind of Elsie Marsh, one of the undisciplined, until they precipitated a cold solid block of hatred—hatred strong enough to help in killing.

Ricardo watched Hanaud's face. There was almost pleasure in it. The queer motives of the undisciplined, their utter distortion of values, were of perennial interest to him. Here was a little performer of the music-halls, who because of some taint in her skin and of some healing quality in another's, contemplated murder and thought it strange that you should think her unreasonable.

"Just an insult to me! That's what Lydia Flight was. A walking insult!"

Then once more prudence caught her up and laid a quieting hand upon her shoulder.

"But I didn't do anything at all," she cried. "I was in one of the cabins when Lydia Flight walked into the net." The corners of her mouth gave, even at this moment, in a horrid spasm of pleasure. "A bit of a shock for Miss Lydia, feeling those meshes cutting her pretty face, and catching her pretty shoes, and making her more and more helpless."

The Examining Magistrate cut her short with a brusque question.

"You were hiding in a cabin, then. Proceed!"

"I was in the dark, my ear against the door. I was not to show myself, you understand. I would have liked to have shown myself. Yes, very much." She nodded, her face mutinous and dark. "But I did not. I crouched by the door, and listened. And I heard"—she pointed a finger at Hanaud—"that he was at Caudebec. It wasn't good enough, monsieur," she said to the Magistrate. Elsie Marsh was not going to be one of the Bouchette's chessmen. Not she! She had Elsie Marsh to consider. She was frightened out of her life. She crouched by the door, listening, in the darkness. She heard the drag on the floor, as Lucrece and Marie hauled Lydia Flight forwards to the store-room. Then she slipped out of her cabin and across the saloon to the stern of the house-boat. Hanaud in Caudebec! No, thank you very much! Not for Elsie! Lydia's car was waiting on the quay. She hauled in the dinghy, rowed herself on shore, let the dinghy drift to blazes, found the car, switched on the lights and the engine, and was off to Paris.

Thus Elsie Marsh. To Hanaud, her precipitate flight at the mention of his name seemed the most natural thing. He preened himself a little. "I have a

certain sympathy with that so swift disappearance," he said. To Mr. Ricardo she left yet another picture to add to the little gallery of pictures which he had acquired during the last month; the picture of a girl crouching behind a door in the dark, with murder in her heart, suddenly numbed by fear at the mention of Hanaud's name. To the Examining Magistrate who had a touch of drama in his soul, she was an opportunity for a gesture.

"Elsie Marsh, you shall be sent to England. Usher, open the windows!"

Hanaud and Mr. Ricardo walked away to take their luncheon at the Restaurant du Sceptre. Hanaud was very silent and Ricardo did not wonder at his silence. A young woman contemplating murder, and even eager to take a hand in it, because her skin had spoilt a rope of pearls and another young woman's had cured it! It provided a glimpse into a fierce underworld of jealousies and animosities which any detective might well ponder over in silence.

But on the quay, just outside the restaurant—and Victor was at the door bowing to them with servility—Hanaud stopped short. He said:

"I have been thinking of it. You shall explain to me. *Vous êtes un professeur sanguinaire*. That is an idiom?"

"It is the translation of an idiom," said Ricardo.

"Then I shall translate him back," said Hanaud.

"But," Mr. Ricardo observed with an admonishing accent, "although habitual nowadays in the best circles, it is not in good taste in the suburbs."

"Still I shall use him," Hanaud announced as he entered the restaurant.

"If you do, may I be there to hear," remarked Mr. Ricardo as he followed him in.

It was his good fortune to hear Hanaud's translation a few days afterwards. He was with Hanaud in a corridor of the Hotel de Ville, when George Brymer came marching from the cabinet of the Examining Magistrate. George Brymer stopped in front of Hanaud, with a face deadly and ferocious.

"You, Hanaud!" he cried. "I am going to tell you what I think of you."

An expression of delight overspread Hanaud's face. He shook an eager finger.

"Me first! I tell you—not what I think—but what you are. You are—prepare yourself!—you are a full-blooded professeur."

Whatever George Brymer had meant to say, what flood of abuse, what devastating epithets, all was checked by this astounding accusation. He looked from one of his guards to the other. He shrugged his shoulders.

"He's balmy," he said, and walked on.

"Balmy?" exclaimed Hanaud, and he turned, mystified to the point of exasperation, to Ricardo. "What does that type mean? Balmy? It is an adjective of the tropics. But I am not a tropic. . . ."

However, let us leave Hanaud, Inspecteur Principal of the Sûreté Générale, to realise that there were mysteries which he had not solved.

CHAPTER XXVIII
IN VENICE

A further word must be said of another figure in this odd history. On an evening in the early autumn of the next year, Mr. Ricardo turned into the beautiful little green and gold Opera House, the Fenice at Venice. They were giving *Mignon* that night, and the prima donna was Lydia Flight. She had recovered her voice; it was pure and clear as a bird's, but there was now a depth of feeling and a gravity which Ricardo welcomed as a patron of the arts, but was inclined to deplore as a citizen of the world. He sent in his card after the curtain had descended and was received in a little dressing-room overlooking the canal. Lydia gave him both her hands, drew him towards her, and with her eyes full of tears, gave him a kiss. But a kiss which was a kiss. Mr. Ricardo was a little overcome by the warmth of it.

"My dear!" he said, and even over those two words, so easy to pronounce, his voice broke. He had meant to say, very humorously: "Que schiva!"

All those old days at Caudebec came back to him in a rush. Nahendra Nao was back with his pearls in Chitipur, and forgiven. Brymer, Scott Carruthers, Mike Budden, were erased from the world. In some grim prison of the French provinces, Lucrece Bouchette and Marie learned discipline too late. In the minor music-halls of England Elsie Marsh twirled her toes and got a laugh for her veiled obscenities. And here in the Fenice Theatre was someone who had lost the glamour of her youth. He took Lydia to supper at the Luna Restaurant, and for an hour afterwards they lay back in a gondola which now carried them out into the sweep of the Grand Canal, now took them into black chasms between towering houses, where the only sound was the splash of the gondolier's long oar.

"I come back to England in the spring," she said.

"To Covent Garden?"

"Yes."

She told him the parts for which she was engaged. She was looking forward to the season with animation. But it was the animation of the artist; and she fell to talking to him quietly on a different theme.

“When I have a success, I am expecting him to knock at my door. I can’t help it. And he doesn’t come. He can’t come. If a basket of roses is sent to me, I get a thrill. I know it comes from him. But it can’t come from him, and there’s someone else’s card sticking out from the roses. If I’m uncomfortable, I look around for him to put things right. And he’s not there. He can’t be there.” Lydia was silent for a second. Then she added in a low voice: “Still, we had our one day. I am glad to remember that during it I gave him all that I had to give. You’ll come and see me in London? On my first night? Please!”

“I always go to the Opera,” said Mr. Ricardo defiantly. “What an idea! Of course I shall be there!”

He landed her on the steps of her hotel, and she had a grateful smile with which to wish him good night.

“Time!” said Mr. Ricardo, conscious of the profundity of his thought. “Lydia is a youngster. Time will erase her sense of loss and bring another Oliver. Let us leave it to time.”

With a Napoleonic sweep of his arm, he called to his gondolier:

“To the Danieli.”

He might have been saying: “To Austerlitz.”

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.

[The end of *They Wouldn't Be Chessmen* by A. E. W. Mason]