

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CANTANKEROUS OLD LADY

Grant Allen

Table of Contents

<u>THE ADVENTURE OF THE CANTANKEROUS OLD LADY</u>	1
<u>Grant Allen</u>	1

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CANTANKEROUS OLD LADY

Grant Allen

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

ON the day when I found myself with twopence in my pocket, I naturally made up my mind to go round the world.

It was my stepfather's death that drove me to it. I had never seen my stepfather. Indeed, I never even thought of him as anything more than Colonel Watts–Morgan. I owed him nothing, except my poverty. He married my dear mother when I was a girl at school in Switzerland; and he proceeded to spend her little fortune, left at her sole disposal by my father's will, in paying his gambling debts. After that, he carried my dear mother off to Burma; and when he and the climate between them had succeeded in killing her, he made up for his appropriations at the cheapest rate by allowing me just enough to send me to Girton. So, when the Colonel died, in the year I was leaving college, I did not think it necessary to go into mourning for him. Especially as he chose the precise moment when my allowance was due, and bequeathed me nothing but his consolidated liabilities.

'Of course you will teach,' said Elsie Petheridge, when I explained my affairs to her. 'There is a good demand just now for high–school teachers.'

I looked at her, aghast. 'Teach! Elsie, I cried (I had come up to town to settle her in at her unfurnished lodgings.) 'Did you say teach? That's just like you dear good schoolmistresses! You go to Cambridge, and get examined till the heart and life have been examined out of you; then you say to yourselves at the end of it all, "Let me see; what am I good for now? I'm just about fit to go away and examine other people!" That's what our Principal would call "a vicious circle" if one could ever admit there was anything vicious at all about you, dear. No, Elsie, I do not propose to teach. Nature did not cut me out for a high–school teacher. I couldn't swallow a poker if I tried for weeks. Pokers don't agree with me. Between ourselves, I am a bit of a rebel.'

'You are, Brownie,' she answered, pausing in her papering, with her sleeves rolled up they called me 'Brownie,' partly because of my dark complexion, but partly because they could never understand me. 'We all knew that long ago.'

I laid down the paste–brush and mused.

'Do you remember, Elsie,' I said, staring hard at the paper–board, 'when I first went to Girton, how all you girls wore your hair quite straight, in neat smooth coils, plaited up at the back about the size of a pancake; and how of a sudden I burst in upon you, like a tropical hurricane, and demoralised you; and how, after three days of me, some of the dear innocents began with awe to cut themselves artless fringes, while others went out in fear and trembling and surreptitiously purchased a pair of curling–tongs? I was a bomb–shell in your midst in those days; why, you yourself were almost afraid at first to speak to me.'

'You see, you had a bicycle,' Elsie put in, smoothing the half–papered wall; 'and in those days they cut themselves artless fringes, while others went out in fear and trembling and surreptitiously purchased a pair of curling–tongs? I was a bomb–shell in your midst in those days; why, you yourself were almost afraid at first to speak to me.'

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CANTANKEROUS OLD LADY

'You see, you had a bicycle,' Elsie put in, smoothing the half-papered wall; 'and in those days, of course, ladies didn't bicycle. You must admit, Brownie, dear, it was a startling innovation. You terrified us so. And yet, after all, there isn't much harm in you.'

'I hope not,' I said devoutly. 'I was before my time that was all; at present, even a curate's wife may blamelessly bicycle.'

'But if you don't teach,' Elsie went on, gazing at me with those wondering big blue eyes of hers, 'whatever will you do, Brownie?' Her horizon was bounded by the scholastic circle.

'I haven't the faintest idea,' I answered, continuing to paste. 'Only, as I can't trespass upon your elegant hospitality for life, whatever I mean to do, I must begin doing this morning, when we've finished the papering. I couldn't teach' (teaching, like mauve, is the refuge of the incompetent); 'and I don't, if possible, want to sell bonnets.'

'As a milliner's girl?' Elsie asked, with a face of red horror.

'As a milliner's girl; why not? 'Tis an honest calling. Earls' daughters do it now. But you needn't look so shocked. I tell you, just at present, I am not contemplating it.'

'Then what do you contemplate?'

I paused and reflected. 'I am here in London,' I answered, gazing rapt at the ceiling; London, whose streets are paved with gold though it looks at first sight like flagstones; London, the greatest and richest city in the world, where an adventurous soul ought surely to find some loophole for an adventure. (That piece is hung crooked, dear; we shall have to take it down again.) I devise a Plan, therefore. I submit myself to fate; or, if you prefer it, I leave my future in the hands of Providence. I shall stroll out this morning, as soon as I've "cleaned myself," and embrace the first stray enterprise that offers. Our Bagdad teems with enchanted carpets. Let one but float my way, and, hi, presto, I seize it. I go where glory or a modest competence waits me. I snatch at the first offer, the first hint of an opening.'

Elsie stared at me, more aghast and more puzzled than ever. 'But, how?' she asked. 'Where? When? You are so strange! What will you do to find one?'

'Put on my hat and walk out,' I answered. 'Nothing could be simpler. This city bursts with enterprises and surprises. Strangers from east and west hurry through it in all directions. Omnibuses traverse it from end—even, I am told, to Islington and Putney; within, folk sit face to face who never saw one another before in their lives, and who may never see one another again, or, on the contrary, may pass the rest of their days together.'

I had a lovely harangue all pat in my head, in much the same strain, on the infinite possibilities of entertaining angels unawares, in cabs, on the Underground, in the aerated bread shops; but Elsie's widening eyes of horror pulled me up short like a hansom in Piccadilly when the inexorable upturned hand of the policeman checks it. 'Oh, Brownie,' she cried, drawing back, 'you don't mean to tell me you're going to ask the first young man you meet in an omnibus to marry you?'

I shrieked with laughter, 'Elsie,' I cried, kissing her dear yellow little head, 'you are impayable. You never will learn what I mean. You don't understand the language. No, no; I am going out, simply in search of adventure. What adventure may come, I have not at this moment the faintest conception. The fun lies in the search, the uncertainty, the toss-up of it. What is the good of being penniless—with the trifling exception of twopence—unless you are prepared to accept your position in the spirit of a masked ball at Covent Garden?'

'I have never been to one,' Elsie put in.

'Gracious heavens, neither have I! What on earth do you take me for? But I mean to see where fate will lead me.'

'I may go with you?' Elsie pleaded.

'Certainly not, my child,' I answered—she was three years older than I, so I had the right to patronise her. 'That would spoil all. Your dear little face would be quite enough to scare away a timid adventure.' She knew what I meant. It was gentle and pensive, but it lacked initiative.

So, when we had finished that wall, I popped on my best hat, and popped out by myself into Kensington Gardens.

I am told I ought to have been terribly alarmed at the straits in which I found myself—a girl of twenty-one, alone in the world, and only twopence short of penniless, without a friend to protect, a relation to counsel her. (I don't count Aunt Susan, who lurked in ladylike indigence at Blackheath, and whose counsel, like her tracts, was

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CANTANKEROUS OLD LADY

given away too profusely to everybody to allow of one's placing any very high value upon it.) But, as a matter of fact, I must admit I was not in the least alarmed. Nature had endowed me with a profusion of crisp black hair, and plenty of high spirits. If my eyes had been like Elsie's—that liquid blue which looks out upon life with mingled pity and amazement—I might have felt as a girl ought to feel under such conditions; but having large dark eyes, with a bit of a twinkle in them, and being as well able to pilot a bicycle as any girl of my acquaintance, I have inherited or acquired an outlook on the world which distinctly leans rather towards cheeriness than despondency. I croak with difficulty. So I accepted my plight as an amusing experience, affording full scope for the congenial exercise of courage and ingenuity.

How boundless are the opportunities of Kensington Gardens—the Round Pond, the winding Serpentine, the mysterious seclusion of the Dutch brick Palace! Genii swarm there. One jostles possibilities. It is a land of romance, bounded on the north by the Abyss of Bayswater, and on the south by the Amphitheatre of the Albert Hall.

But for a centre of adventure I choose the Long Walk; it beckoned me somewhat as the North–West Passage beckoned my seafaring ancestors—the buccaneering mariners of Elizabethan Devon. I sat down on a chair at the foot of an old elm with a poetic hollow, prosaically filled by a utilitarian plate of galvanised iron. Two ancient ladies were seated on the other side already—very grand–looking dames, with the haughty and exclusive ugliness of the English aristocracy in its later stages. For frank hideousness, commend me to the noble dowager. They were talking confidentially as I sat down; the trifling episode of my approach did not suffice to stem the full stream of their conversation. The great ignore the intrusion of their inferiors.

'Yes, it's a terrible nuisance,' the eldest and ugliest of the two observed—she was a high–born lady, with a distinctly cantankerous cast of countenance. She had a Roman nose, and her skin was wrinkled like a wilted apple; she wore coffee–coloured point–lace in her bonnet, with a complexion to match. 'But what could I do, my dear? I simply couldn't put up with such insolence. So I looked her straight back in the face—oh, she quailed, I can tell you; and I said to her, in my iciest voice—you know how icy I can be when occasion demands it!—the second old lady nodded an ungrudging assent, as if perfectly prepared to admit her friend's rare gift of iciness—I said to her, Celestine, you can take your month's wages, and half an hour to get out of this house.' And she dropped me a deep reverence, and she answered: *Oui, madame, merci beaucoup, madame; je ne desire pas mieux, madame.* And out she flounced. So there was the end of it.'

'Still, you go to Schlangenbad on Monday?'

'That's the point. On Monday. If it weren't for the journey, I should have been glad enough to be rid of minx. I'm glad as it is, indeed; for a more insolent upstanding, independent, answer–you–back–again young woman, with a sneer of her own, I never saw, Amelia—but I must get to Schlangenbad. Now, there the difficulty comes in. On the one hand, if I engage a maid in London, I have the choice of two evils. Either I must take a trapesing English girl—and I know by experience that an English girl on the Continent is a vast deal worse than no maid at all: you have to wait upon her, instead of her waiting upon you; she gets seasick on the crossing, and when she reaches France or Germany, she hates the meals, and she detests the hotel servants, and she can't speak the language, so that she's always calling you in to interpret for her in her private differences with the *fille–de–chambre* and the landlord; or else I must pick up a French maid in London, and I know equally by experience that the French maids one engages in London are invariably dishonest—more dishonest than the rest even; they've come here because they have no character to speak of elsewhere, and they think you aren't likely to write and enquire of their last mistress in Toulouse or St. Petersburg. Then, again, on the other hand, I can't wait to get a Gretchen, an unsophisticated little Gretchen of the Taunus at Schlangenbad—I suppose there are unsophisticated girls in Germany still—made in Germany—they don't make 'em any longer in England, I'm sure—like everything else, the trade in rustic innocence has been driven from the country. I can't wait to get a Gretchen, as I should like to do, of course, because I simply daren't undertake to cross the Channel alone and go all that long journey by Ostend or Calais, Brussels and Cologne, to Schlangenbad.'

'You could get a temporary maid,' her friend suggested, in a lull of the tornado.

The Cantankerous Old Lady flared up. 'Yes, and have my jewel–case stolen! Or find she was an English girl without one word of German. Or nurse her on the boat when I want to give my undivided attention to my own misfortunes. No, Amelia, I call it positively unkind of you to suggest such a thing. You're so unsympathetic! I put my foot down there. I will not take any temporary person.'

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CANTANKEROUS OLD LADY

I saw my chance. This was a delightful idea. Why not start for Schlangenbad with the Cantankerous Old Lady?

Of course, I had not the slightest intention of taking a lady's—maids place for a permanency. Nor even, if it comes to that, as a passing expedient. But if I wanted to go round the world, how could I do better than set out by Rhine country? The Rhine leads you on to the Danube, the Danube to the Black Sea, the Black Sea to Asia; and so, by way of India, China and Japan, you reach the Pacific and San Francisco; whence one returns quite easily by New York and the White Star Liners. I began to feel like a globe-trotter already; the Cantankerous Old Lady was the thin end of the wedge—the first rung of the ladder! I proceeded to put my foot on it.

I leaned around the corner of the tree and spoke. 'Excuse me,' I said, in my suavest voice, 'but I think I see a way out of your difficulty.'

My first impression was that the Cantankerous Old Lady would go off in a fit of apoplexy. She grew purple in the face with indignation and astonishment, that a casual outsider should venture to address her; so much so, indeed, that for a second I almost regretted my well-meant interposition. Then she scanned me up and down, as if I were a girl in a mantle shop, and she contemplated buying either me or the mantle. At last, catching my eye, she thought better of it, and burst out laughing.

'What do you mean by this eavesdropping?' she asked.

I flushed up in turn. 'This is a public place,' I replied, with dignity; 'and you spoke in a tone which was hardly designed for the strictest privacy. If you don't wish to be overheard, you oughtn't to shout. Besides, I desired to do you a service.'

The Cantankerous Old Lady regarded me once more from head to foot. I did not quail. Then she turned to her companion. 'The girl has spirit,' she remarked, in an encouraging tone, as if she were discussing some absent person. 'Upon my word, Amelia, I rather like the look of her. Well, my good woman, what do you want to suggest to me?'

'Merely this,' I replied, bridling up and crushing her. 'I am a Girton girl, an officer's daughter, no more a good woman than most others of my class; and I have nothing in particular to do for the moment. I don't object to going to Schlangenbad. I would convoy you over, as companion, or a lady-help, or anything else you choose to call it; I would remain with you there for a week, till you could arrange with your Gretchen, presumably unsophisticated; and then would leave you. Salary is unimportant; my fare suffices. I accept the chance as a cheap opportunity of attaining Schlangenbad.'

The yellow-faced old lady put up her long-handled tortoise-shell eyeglasses and inspected me all over again. 'Well, I declare,' she murmured. 'What are girls coming to, wonder? Girton, you say; Girton! That place at Cambridge! You speak Greek, of course; but how about German?'

'Like a native,' I answered, with cheerful promptitude. 'I was at school in Canton Berne; it is a mother tongue to me'

'No, no,' the old lady went on, fixing her keen small eyes on my mouth. 'Those little lips could never frame themselves to "schlecht" or "wunderschon"; they were not cut out for it.'

'Pardon me,' I answered, in German. 'What I say, that I mean. The never-to-be-forgotten music of the Fatherland's—speech has on my infant ear from the first—beginning impressed itself.'

The old lady laughed aloud.

'Don't jabber it to me, child,' she cried. 'I hate the lingo. It's the one tongue on earth that even a pretty girl's lips fail to render attractive. You yourself make faces over it. What's your name, young woman?'

'Lois Cayley.'

'Lois! What a name! I never heard of any Lois in my life before, except Timothy's grandmother. You're not anybody's grandmother, are you?'

'Not to my knowledge,' I answered, gravely.

She burst out laughing again.

'Well, you'll do, I think,' she said, catching my arm. 'That big mill down yonder hasn't ground the originality altogether out of you. I adore originality. It was clever of you to catch at the suggestion of this arrangement. Lois Cayley, you say; any relation of a madcap Captain Cayley whom I used once to know, in the Forty-second Highlanders?'

'His daughter,' I answered, flushing. For I was proud of my father.

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CANTANKEROUS OLD LADY

'Ha! I remember; he died, poor fellow; he was a good soldier—and his'—I felt she was going to say 'his fool of a widow,' but a glance from me quelled her; 'his widow went and married that good-looking scapegrace, Jack Watts—Morgan. Never marry a man, my dear, with a double-barrelled name and no visible means of subsistence; above all, if he's generally known by a nickname. So you're poor Tom Cayley's daughter, are you? Well, well, we can settle this little matter between us. Mind, I'm a person who always expects to have my own way. If you come with me to Schlangenbad, you must do as I tell you.'

'I think I could manage it—for a week,' I answered, demurely.

She smiled at my audacity. We passed on to terms. They were quite satisfactory. She wanted no references. 'Do I look like a woman who cares about a reference? What are called characters are usually essays in how not to say it. You take my fancy; that's the point! And poor Tom Cayley! But, mind, I will not be contradicted.'

'I will not contradict your wildest misstatement,' I answered, smiling.

'And your name and address?' I asked, after we had settled preliminaries.

A faint red spot rose quaintly in the centre of the Cantankerous Old Lady's sallow cheek. 'My dear,' she murmured 'my name is the one thing on earth I'm really ashamed of. My parents chose to inflict upon me the most odious label that human ingenuity ever devised for a Christian soul; and I've not had courage enough to burst out and change it.'

A gleam of intuition flashed across me, 'You don't mean to say,' I exclaimed, 'that you're called Georgina?'

The Cantankerous Old Lady gripped my arm hard. 'What an unusually intelligent girl!' she broke in. 'How on earth did you guess? It is Georgina.'

'Fellow-feeling,' I answered. 'So is mine, Georgina Lois. But as I quite agree with you as to the atrocity of such conduct, I have suppressed the Georgina. It ought to be made penal to send innocent girls into the world so burdened.'

'My opinion to a T! You are really an exceptionally sensible young woman. There's my name and address; I start on Monday.'

I glanced at her card. The very copperplate was noisy. 'Lady Georgina Fawley, 49 Fortescue Crescent, W.'

It had taken us twenty minutes to arrange our protocols. As I walked off, well pleased, Lady Georgina's friend ran after me quickly.

'You must take care,' she said, in a warning voice. 'You've caught a Tartar.'

'So I suspect,' I answered. 'But a week in Tartary will be at least an experience.'

'She has an awful temper.'

'That's nothing. So have I. Appalling, I assure you. And if it comes to blows, I'm bigger and younger and stronger than she is.'

'Well, I wish you well out of it.'

'Thank you. It is kind of you to give me this warning. But I think I can take care of myself. I come, you see, of a military family.'

I nodded my thanks, and strolled back to Elsie's. Dear little Elsie was in transports of surprise when I related my adventure.

'Will you really go? And what will you do, my dear, when you get there?'

'I haven't a notion,' I answered; 'that's where the fun comes in. But, anyhow, I shall have got there.'

'Oh, Brownie, you might starve!'

'And I might starve in London. In either place, I have only two hands and one head to help me.'

'But, then, here you are among friends. You might stop with me for ever.'

I kissed her fluffy forehead. 'You good, generous little Elsie,' I cried; 'I won't stop here one moment after I have finished the painting and papering. I came here to help you. I couldn't go on eating your hard-earned bread and doing nothing. I know how sweet you are; but the last thing I want is to add to your burdens. Now let us roll up our sleeves again and hurry on with the dado.'

'But, Brownie, you'll want to be getting your own things ready. Remember, you're off to Germany on Monday.'

I shrugged my shoulders. 'Tis a foreign trick I picked up in Switzerland. 'What have I got to get ready?' I asked. 'I can't go out and buy a complete summer outfit in Bond Street for twopence. Now, don't look at me like that: be practical, Elsie, and let me help you paint the dado.' For unless I helped her, poor Elsie could never have

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CANTANKEROUS OLD LADY

finished it herself. I cut out half her clothes for her; her own ideas were almost entirely limited to differential calculus. And cutting out a blouse by differential calculus is weary, uphill work for a high-school teacher.

By Monday I had papered and furnished the rooms, and was ready to start on my voyage of exploration. I met the Cantankerous Old Lady at Charing Cross, by appointment, and proceeded to take charge of her luggage and tickets.

Oh my, how fussy she was! 'You will drop that basket! I hope you have got through tickets, via Malines, not by Brussels—I won't go by Brussels. You have to change there. Now, mind you notice how much the luggage weighs in English pounds, and make the man at the office give you a note of it to check those horrid Belgian porters. They'll charge you for double the weight, unless you reduce it at once to kilogrammes. I know their ways. Foreigners have no consciences. They just go to the priest and confess, you know, and wipe it all out, and start fresh again on a career of crime next morning. I'm sure I don't know why I ever go abroad. The only country in the world fit to live in is England. No mosquitoes, no passports, no—goodness gracious, child, don't let that odious man bang about my hat-box! Have you no immortal soul, porter, that you crush other people's property as if it was blackbeetles? No, will not let you take this, Lois; this is my jewel-box—it contains all that remains of the Fawley family jewels. I positively decline to appear at Schlangenbad without a diamond to my back. This never leaves my hands. It's hard enough nowadays to keep body and skirt together. Have you secured that coupe at Ostend?'

We got into our first-class carriage. It was clean and comfortable; but the Cantankerous Old Lady made the porter mop the floor, and fidgeted and worried till we slid out of the station. Fortunately, the only other occupant of the compartment was a most urbane and obliging Continental gentleman—I say Continental, because I couldn't quite make out whether he was French, German, or Austrian—who was anxious in every way to meet Lady Georgina's wishes. Did madame desire to have the window open? Oh, certainly, with pleasure; the day was so sultry. Closed a little more? Parfaitement, there was a current of air, il faut l'admettre. Madame would prefer the corner? No? then perhaps she would like this valise for a footstool? Permettez—just thus. A cold draught runs so often along the floor in railway carriages. This is Kent that we traverse; ah, the garden of England! As a diplomat, he knew every nook of Europe, and he echoed the mot he had accidentally heard drop from madame's lips on the platform: no country in the world so delightful as England!

'Monsieur is attached to the Embassy in London?' Lady Georgina inquired, growing affable.

He twirled his grey moustache: a waxed moustache of some distinction. 'No, madame; I have quitted the diplomatic service; I inhabit London now pour mon agrément. Some of my compatriots call it triste; for me, I find it the most fascinating capital in Europe. What gaiety! What movement! What poetry! What mystery!'

'If mystery means fog, it challenges the world,' I interposed.

He gazed at me with fixed eyes. 'Yes, madamemoiselle,' he answered in quite a different and markedly chilly voice. 'Whatever your great country attempts—were it only a fog—it achieves consummately.'

I have quick intuitions. I felt the foreign gentleman took an instinctive dislike to me.

To make up for it, he talked much, and with animation, to Lady Georgina. They ferreted out friends in common, and were as much surprised at it as people always are at that inevitable experience.

'Ah yes, Madame, I recollect him well in Vienna. I was there at the time, attached to our Legation. He was a charming man; you read his masterly paper on the Central Problem of the Dual Empire?'

'You were in Vienna then!' the Cantankerous Old Lady mused back. 'Lois, my child, don't stare!—she had covenanted from the first to call me Lois, as my father's daughter, and I confess I preferred it to being Miss Cayley'd. 'We must surely have met. Dare I ask your name, monsieur?'

I could see the foreign gentleman was delighted at this turn. He had played for it, and carried his point. He meant her to ask him. He had a card in his pocket, conveniently close; and he handed it across to her. She read it, and passed it on: 'M. le Comte de Laroche-sur-Loiret.' Oh, I remember your name well,' the Cantankerous Old Lady broke in. 'I think you knew my husband, Sir Evelyn Fawley, and my father, Lord Kynaston.'

The Count looked profoundly surprised and delighted. 'What! you are then Lady Georgina Fawley!' he cried striking an attitude. 'Indeed, miladi, your admirable husband was one of the very first to exert his influence in my favour at Vienna. Do I recall him, ce cher Sir Evelyn? If I recall him! What a fortunate rencounter! I must have seen you some years ago at Vienna, miladi, though I had not then the great pleasure of making your acquaintance. But your face had impressed itself on my sub-conscious self!' (I did not learn till later that the esoteric doctrine

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CANTANKEROUS OLD LADY

sub-conscious self was Lady Georgina's favourite hobby.) The moment chance led me to this carriage this morning, I said to myself, "That face, those features: so vivid, so striking: I have seen them somewhere With what do I connect them in the recesses of my memory? A high-born family; genius; rank; the diplomatic service; some unnameable charm; some faint touch of eccentricity. Ha! I have it. Vienna, a carriage with footmen in red livery, a noble presence, a crowd of wits—poets, artists, politicians—pressing eagerly round the landau." That was my mental picture as I sat and confronted you: I understand it all now; this is Lady Georgina Fawley!

I thought the Cantankerous Old Lady, who was a shrewd person in her way, must surely see through this obvious patter; but I had under-estimated the average human capacity for swallowing flattery. Instead of dismissing his fulsome nonsense with a contemptuous smile, Lady Georgina perked herself up with a conscious air of coquetry, and asked for more. 'Yes, they were delightful days in Vienna,' she said simpering; 'I was young then, Count; I enjoyed life with a zest.'

'Persons of miladi's temperament are always young,' the Count retorted, glibly, leaning forward and gazing at her. 'Growing old is a foolish habit of the stupid and the vacant. Men and women of esprit are never older. One learns as one goes on in life to admire, not the obvious beauty of mere youth and health'—he glanced across at me disdainfully—'but the profounder beauty of deep character in a face—that calm and serene beauty which is imprinted on the brow by experience of the emotions.'

'I have had my moments,' Lady Georgina murmured, with her head on one side.

'I believe it, miladi,' the Count answered, and ogled her.

Thenceforward to Dover, they talked together with ceaseless animation. The Cantankerous Old Lady was capital company. She had a tang in her tongue, and in the course of ninety minutes she had flayed alive the greater part of London society, with keen wit and sprightliness. I laughed against my will at her ill-tempered sallies; they were too funny not to amuse, in spite of their vitriol. As for the Count, he was charmed. He talked well himself, too, and between them I almost forgot the time till we arrived at Dover.

It was a very rough passage. The Count helped us to carry our nineteen hand-packages and four rugs on board; ut I noticed that, fascinated as she was with him, Lady Georgina resisted his ingenious efforts to gain possession of her precious jewel-case as she descended the gangway. She clung to it like grim death, even in the chops of the Channel. Fortunately I am a good sailor, and when Lady Georgina's sallow cheeks began to grow pale, I was steady enough to supply her with her shawl and her smelling-bottle. She fidgeted and worried the whole way over. She would be treated like a vertebrate animal. Those horrid Belgians had no right to stick their deck-chairs just in front of her. The impertinence of the hussies with the bright red hair—a grocer's daughters, she felt sure—in venturing to come and on the same bench with her—the bench 'for ladies only,' under the lee of the funnel! 'Ladies only,' indeed! Did the baggages pretend they considered themselves ladies? Oh, that placid old gentleman in the episcopal gaiters was their father, was he? Well, a bishop should bring up his daughters better, having his children in subjection with all gravity. Instead of which—'Lois, my smelling-salts!' This was a beastly boat; such an odour of machinery; they had no decent boats nowadays; with all our boasted improvements, she could remember well when the cross-Channel service was much better conducted than it was at present. But that was before we had compulsory education. The working classes were driving trade out of the country, and the consequence was, we couldn't build a boat which didn't reek like an oil-shop. Even the sailors on oar were French—jabbering idiots; not an honest British Jacktar among the lot of them; though the stewards were English, and very inferior Cockney English at that, with their off-hand ways, and their School Board airs and graces. She'd School Board them if they were her servants; she'd show them the sort of respect that was due to people of birth and education. But the children of the lower classes never learnt their catechism nowadays; they were too much occupied with literatoor, jography, and free-'and drawrin'. Happily for my nerves, a good lurch to leeward put a stop for a while to the course of her thoughts on the present distresses.

At Ostend the Count made a second gallant attempt to capture the jewel-case, which Lady Georgina automatically repulsed. She had a fixed habit, I believe, of sticking fast to that jewel-case; for she was too overpowered by the Count's urbanity, I feel sure, to suspect for a moment his honesty of purpose. But whenever she travelled, I fancy, she clung to her case as if her life depended upon it; it contained the whole of her valuable diamonds.

We had twenty minutes for refreshments at Ostend during which interval my old lady declared with warmth that I must look after her registered luggage; though, as it was booked through to Cologne, I could not even see it

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CANTANKEROUS OLD LADY

till we crossed the German frontier; for the Belgian douaniers seal up the van as soon as the through baggage for Germany is unloaded. To satisfy her, however, I went through the formality of pretending to inspect it, and rendered myself hateful to the head of the douane by asking various foolish and inept questions, on which Lady Georgina insisted. When I had finished this silly and uncongenial task—for I am not by nature fussy, and it is hard to assume fussiness as another person's proxy—I returned to our coupe which I had arranged for in London. To my great amazement, I found the Cantankerous Old Lady and the egregious Count comfortably seated there. 'Monsieur has been good enough to accept a place in our carriage,' she observed, as I entered.

He bowed and smiled. 'Or, rather, madame has been so kind as to offer me one,' he corrected.

'Would you like some lunch, Lady Georgina?' I asked, in my chilliest voice. 'There are ten minutes to spare, and the buffet is excellent.'

'An admirable inspiration,' the Count murmured. 'Permit me to escort you, miladi.'

'You will come, Lois?' Lady Georgina asked.

'No, thank you,' I answered, for I had an idea. 'I am a capital sailor, but the sea takes away my appetite.'

'Then you'll keep our places,' she said, turning to me. 'I hope you won't allow them to stick in any horrid foreigners! They will try to force them on you unless you insist. I know their tricky ways. You have the tickets, I trust? And the bulletin for the coupe? Well, mind you don't lose the paper for the registered luggage. Don't let those dreadful porters touch my cloaks. And if anybody attempts to get in, be sure you stand in front of the door as they mount to prevent them.'

The Count handed her out; he was all high courtly politeness. As Lady Georgina descended, he made yet another dexterous effort to relieve her of the jewel-case.

I don't think she noticed it, but automatically once more she waved him aside. Then she turned to me. 'You'd better take care of it. If I lay it down in the buffet while I am eating my soup; some rogue may run away with it. But mind, don't let it out of your hands on any account. Hold it so, on your knee; and, for Heaven's sake, don't part with it.'

By this time my suspicions of the Count were profound. From the first I had doubted him; he was so blandly plausible. But as we landed at Ostend I had accidentally overheard a low whispered conversation when he passed a shabby-looking man, who had travelled in a second-class carriage from London. 'That succeeds?' the shabby-looking man had muttered under his breath in French, as the haughty nobleman with the waxed moustache brushed by him.

'That succeeds admirably,' the Count had answered, in the same soft undertone. 'Ca reussit a merveille.'

I understood him to mean that he had prospered in his attempt to impose on Lady Georgina.

They had been gone five minutes at the buffet, when the Count came back hurriedly to the door of the coupe with a nonchalant air. 'Oh, mademoiselle,' he said, in an off-hand tone, 'Lady Georgina has sent me to fetch her jewel-case.'

I gripped it hard with both hands. 'Pardon, M. le Comte,' I answered; 'Lady Georgina intrusted it to my safe keeping, and, without her leave, I cannot give it up to any one.'

'You mistrust me?' he cried, looking black. 'You doubt my honour? You doubt my word when I say that miladi has sent me?'

'Du tout,' I answered, calmly. 'But I have Lady Georgina's orders to stick to this case; and till Lady Georgina returns I stick to it.'

He murmured some indignant remark below his breath, and walked off. The shabby-looking passenger was pacing up and down the platform outside in a badly-made dust-coat. As they passed their lips moved. The Count's seemed to mutter, 'C'est un coup, manque.'

However, he did not desist even so. I saw he meant to go on with his dangerous little game. He returned to the buffet and rejoined Lady Georgina. I felt sure it would be useless to warn her, so completely had the Count succeeded in gulling her; but I took my own steps. I examined the jewel-case closely. It had a leather outer covering; within was a strong steel box, with stout bands of metal to bind it. I took my cue at once, and acted for the best on my own responsibility.

When Lady Georgina and the Count returned, they were like old friends together. The quails in aspic and the sparkling hock had evidently opened their hearts to one another. As far as Malines they laughed and talked without ceasing. Lady Georgina was now in her finest vein of spleen: her acid wit grew sharper and more caustic

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CANTANKEROUS OLD LADY

each moment. Not a reputation in Europe had a rag left to cover it as we steamed in beneath the huge iron roof of the main central junction.

I had observed all the way from Ostend that the Count had been anxious lest we might have to give up our coupe at Malines. I assured him more than once that his fears were groundless, for I had arranged at Charing Cross that it should run right through to the German frontier. But he waved me aside, with one lordly hand. I had not told Lady Georgina of his vain attempt to take possession of her jewel-case; and the bare fact of my silence made him increasingly suspicious of me.

'Pardon me, mademoiselle,' he said, coldly; 'you do not understand these lines as well as I do. Nothing is more common than for those rascals of railway clerks to sell one a place in a coupe or a wagon-lit, and then never reserve it, or turn one out half way. It is very possible miladi may have to descend at Malines.'

Lady Georgina bore him out by a large variety of selected stories concerning the various atrocities of the rival companies which had stolen her luggage on her way to Italy. As for trains de luxe, they were dens of robbers.

So when we reached Malines, just to satisfy Lady Georgina, I put out my head and inquired of a porter. As I anticipated, he replied that there was no change; we went through to Verviers.

The Count, however, was still unsatisfied. He descended, and made some remarks a little farther down the platform to an official in the gold-banded cap of a chef-de-gare, or some such functionary. Then he returned to us, all fuming. 'It is as I said,' he exclaimed, flinging open the door. 'These rogues have deceived us. The coupe goes no farther. You must dismount at once, miladi, and take the train just Opposite.'

I felt sure he was wrong, and I ventured to say so. But Lady Georgina cried, 'Nonsense, child! The chef-de-gare must know. Get out at once! Bring my bag and the rugs. Mind that cloak! Don't forget the sandwich-tin! Thanks Count; will you kindly take charge of my umbrellas? Hurry up, Lois; hurry up! the train is just starting!'

I scrambled after her, with my fourteen bundles, keeping a quiet eye meanwhile on the jewel-case.

We took our seats in the opposite train, which I noticed was marked Amsterdam, Bruxelles, Paris.' But I said nothing. The Count jumped in, jumped about, arranged our parcels, jumped out again. He spoke to a porter; then he rushed back excitedly. 'Mille pardons, miladi,' he cried. 'I find the chef-de-gare has cruelly deceived me. You were right, after all, mademoiselle! We must return to the coupe!'

With singular magnanimity, I refrained from saying, 'I told you so.'

Lady Georgina, very flustered and hot by this time, tumbled out once more, and bolted back to the coupe. Both trains were just starting. In her hurry, at last, she let the Count take possession of her jewel-case. I rather fancy that as he passed one window he handed it in to the shabby-looking passenger; but I am not certain. At any rate, when we were comfortably seated in our own compartment once more, and he stood on the footboard just about to enter, of a sudden he made an unexpected dash back, and flung himself wildly into a Paris carriage. At the self-same moment, with a piercing shriek, both trains started.

Lady Georgina threw up her hands in a frenzy of horror. 'My diamonds!' she cried aloud. 'Oh, Lois, my diamonds!'

'Don't distress yourself,' I answered, holding her back, for I verily believe she would have leapt from the train. 'He has only taken the outer shell, with the sandwich-case inside it. Here is the steel box!' And I produced it, triumphantly.

She seized it, overjoyed. 'How did this happen?' she cried, hugging it, for she loved those diamonds.

'Very simply,' I answered. 'I saw the man was a rogue, and that he had a confederate with him in another carriage. So, while you were gone to the buffet at Ostend, I slipped the box out of the case, and put in the sandwich-tin, that he might carry it off, and we might have proofs against him. All you have to do now is to inform the conductor, who will telegraph to stop the train to Paris. I spoke to him about that at Ostend, so that everything is ready.'

She positively hugged me. 'My dear,' she cried, 'you are the cleverest little woman I ever met in my life! Who on earth could have suspected such a polished gentleman? Why, you're worth your weight in gold. What the dickens shall I do without you at Schlangenbad?'