Red Harvest

Newman Flower

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CHAPTER I. THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

"SUPPOSING−−−−" The man at a London club looked towards his colleague, as he put the question: "Supposing you were heir to a quarter of a million sterling, but on the day of succession a child was born, and robbed you of your inheritance. What would you do?"

"What would I do?" replied the other. "I would do what Paul Cazalet did."

"Aye. It was of him I was speaking."

A few days prior to this conversation, four men were sitting at a small table in the Toledo Restaurant. Everyone knows the Toledo. That night it was crowded. The room is small and so severely plain that it almost jars the appetite, and seems an ever−present suggestion for an apéritif. It is panelled with scarlet tapestries, and at one end is a long aquarium, in which endless varieties of fish glide and peer out through the mist− covered glass of their prison.

Pentelow was there, Marchant sat opposite, Fenning lounged in the far corner, and Paul Cazalet was facing him. The first three were enjoying the reverie which comes with the coffee and liqueurs, when Cazalet strode in fresh from the House of Commons.

"Been letting off steam again, Cazalet?" said Marchant. "I heard something about it when I came up the street, but I was too infernally hungry to buy a paper. What's it all about this time?"

Cazalet smiled, and the strong, clean−shaven face flushed with pleasure. The mouth was a thin, firm line, and the eyes reflected the determination of the man.

"Same old theme−−blood−taint," he laughed. "Kenwood has been bullying his way too far; half the House is afraid of him. He has a fine vocabulary, that man, and it carries conviction. Yes, I suppose I did let off steam to−night. But Kenwood forgets that there are criminals and criminals, half deserve all they get, and as for the other half−−huh! we don't understand."

"And what do you know about it, anyway?" asked Fenning. He seemed little more than a boy, for although he was twenty− seven his face had failed to record the march of years. His features were finely cut, and some would have traced in them a certain type of beauty, effeminate yet attractive. The eyes were dark, and set well back under long, black brows, the lips weak yet warm and passionate. He was smoking a lean Italian cigar, and as he spoke he held it before his face and watched the rising spiral of smoke with a sense of pleasure.

"I hate to hear a man condemn who has probably never been tempted," returned Cazalet. A waiter swept down with a pot of caviare, and he stopped him. "Yes, just that, please," he said. "And hurry with the toast. My appetite is killing me to−night." He dug out two spoonfuls carefully and put it on his plate. Then he turned his attention to Fenning again. "Well, Jimmy, and what are you doing outside Paris?" he asked.

"Habit, dear boy, only habit. Paris is unendurable when she is not there." He flicked the ash from his cigar and looked up.

"Ah! The latest affaire!" Cazalet said with a laugh. He watched Fenning's nervous fingers clutch the stem of his liqueur glass and tip the crimson contents down his throat. "Whenever I hear of you, rumour tells me that you are in love with a different woman, and rumour's a chattering jade. Who is it this time?"

"A duchess very much bored with life," broke in Marchant, the Jew stockbroker, under his breath. "Has a little money, a husband she contrives to lose at every opportunity, and, her pet spaniel having died, she has adopted Fenning."

"Marchant's a fool, or very drunk. He doesn't understand pretty women," exclaimed Fenning. "She's a queen, Paul; that describes her−−a queen."

"They're all queens till you compel them to abdicate," said Paul. "Fenning's in love for the ninetieth time; and you, Pentelow, why aren't you at the National, discussing my speech?"

Pentelow pulled his long grey moustache and tilted his bullet head. His was a hard, brutal face, typical of the man who has built up his position in the world from the lowest depths of poverty to an exchequer running into untold thousands. Even as he lounged there tired men and women−−the white slaves of his Lancashire cotton mills−−slept the deep sleep of exhaustion, a little more life−blood drained from their very hearts than was the case yesternight, maybe, by the man they never saw, but whose hand lay heavy as that of the worst Congo slaver.

"I'm just a bit sick of your preaching," he grunted, and the smile on Cazalet's face broadened. He knew Pentelow's mood when an empty champagne bottle stood at his elbow. "An arch humbug like you ought to have a licence to speak on sane subjects. I listened to half your speech and then came out. Arrant rot−−a re−hashed sermon, and, as Fenning says, what the devil do you know about blood−taint anyway? I'm blunt, but I'm honest. I don't cant."

"I'm not quite sure whether your honesty or mine is the worst form of that virtue," Cazalet replied with a laugh. "I've got one or two cold truths docketed against you concerning those Drayton mills. I could give you a column next week that would make you desire to see the colour of the Mediterranean water in your yacht−−that is, if you wish me to be scrupulously honest."

Pentelow flung back his head, an ugly flush creeping slowly across his forehead. Cazalet's words were beginning to whip to life the devil in him.

"I should never run away from the ravings of a crazy political journalist," he said bitterly.

"Because it would be confession. Dear old Pent., how I love thee!"

Cazalet turned his attention to the Sole Colbert, and carefully spread the liquid butter with the edges of his knife. He ate two mouthfuls, then leaned across the table and spoke in an undertone to Pentelow.

"I don't want to stir up muddy water, but you've pitched a challenge at me, more or less. Of course the case of Jessie Philpot," he said, but Pentelow put up his hand with an angry gesture. "I'm sorry if that touches you," he continued. "You think I am in a quarrelsome mood to−night, friend Pentelow, but I am feeling rather the reverse. I'd like to shake your hand and remember you as the best pal at a dinner table I know. But I want you to understand why I have never taken up that horrible business in print. I have too much respect for your daughter. That's the whole stupid reason. I do not strike indiscriminately without thinking of the dependents of those who will be disgraced by the publicity of scandal. I know what your daughter would feel−−she who is just about to marry a man who loves her to distraction. No, I am not honest, but sometimes, dear Pent., devilishly tender−hearted. I hate causing either a woman or an animal pain, but I would torture a man to any extent if he deserved it."

"Then I wish you would make a start on Fenning. He is getting sentimental about his little duchess," broke in Marchant, to clear the air. "When you consider the wistful expression in his eyes−−−−"

"She's probably at the opera now. I let a friend buy her a dinner at the Ritz on condition that he told me if she cried when they played the Wedding March from Lohengrin," said Fenning.

He was leaning back with his head against the mirror behind him as Cazalet glanced up.

"Absurd faith in your friend if the woman's pretty," Paul said.

Apparently Fenning did not hear the words, for he was intent on watching two men who were just rising from the table at the other side of the room. His eyes were half closed, but Cazalet knew the mood of the boy. He turned and looked round. The two men, obvious foreigners both of them, were in evening dress, well groomed, too, and handsome. The elder of the pair was a short military looking man, his moustache grey and partially concealing a strong mouth, and his eyes keen as those of a hawk.

"Some old army colonel out for an evening's amusement," Cazalet said laughingly, as he laid down his knife and fork. He looked across at Fenning, who was watching the pair disappear through the curtained door.

"Wrong, friend," said Fenning. "That man is the future king of Servia."

Cazalet was incredulous.

"Servia?" he repeated.

"Yes, Servia. And don't talk so that the whole room may listen. The fellow who is speaking abominable English to the waiter at the next table has sharp ears. You could scarcely open an illustrated paper in Vienna just now without seeing his portrait."

"So he has come here to escape from himself?"

"He is not quite so modest," Fenning said. "But it must be a relief to him to fancy he is unrecognised. If he had not decided to take a little trip to London−−shall we say for his health?−−I might be dreaming in my bed in Paris at this moment. Don't talk any more, Cazalet, but enjoy that excellent fillet of beef which is getting cold in front of you. Later on glance to the far corner of the room−−to the extreme right−−a girl is sipping coffee there. Don't let her see you, but if you like a little comedy, watch her."

Cazalet began to eat in a desultory fashion, but his appetite had vanished. He muttered maledictions on the

cooking, which was unimpeachable. Then, swallowing a glass of Niersteiner, he began to look round the room, till his eyes fell on the table in the far corner.

The girl who was sitting there had just put down her coffee cup, and their eyes met. She had a small oval face, with delicate colouring and skin soft and unspoiled. Her hair had in it the dull warm glow of copper, and was deftly coiled around her head in a manner which suggested profusion. Her mouth was small with very red lips−−red with the rich red of poppies−−her eyes grey, and it seemed even at a distance as if there were an outer ring of black around the pupils that made them appear large. Such eyes would make any face, Cazalet told himself. And the straight narrow eyebrows above only made them more wonderful.

She turned away, but he continued to look at her for some time, believing himself unobserved. Nevertheless an adjacent mirror enabled her to see his interest in her, though he was unaware of it. She had obviously dined alone, for the table was set for one, and as he looked he saw that she was dressed in a gown of white and wore a circlet of pink coral around her throat. Her solitude and seeming lack of interest in anything that was passing around made him inquisitive, and he turned to Fenning.

"Who is she?" he asked.

"That is what I've been trying to find out for the past hour," Fenning drawled back. "It has cost me precisely five liqueurs to pass the time in which to study her. I have my suspicions as to why she is dining here."

"Tell me?" said Cazalet.

Fenning yawned.

"Isn't she ripping?" he answered, and lit a fresh cigarette.

"Very well, my fine diplomat, keep your secret. But wouldn't your little duchess like to see the admiration in your eyes for the lady with the copper hair? Gad, wouldn't she pull your ears for you?"

"My ears would have to be very long to let her, Paul."

Cazalet produced his cigar case and began to smoke; he tipped the cognac the waiter had brought into his coffee and swallowed it at a gulp. Then he leaned across the table and touched Marchant's arm.

"Do you know what's happened to me to−day?" he asked.

"You mean the Penstone demise? Yes, convenient, isn't it? Someone told me about it at lunch."

"I almost fancy my creditors−−and they are legion−−giving me the finest dinner in London," rejoined Cazalet. "They have been very patient and so genially polite. They knew, most of them, that when a certain peer died, I should probably be a very rich man, and this morning's paper must have made them happy. And don't forget that a journalist who retains a seat in the House on Grub Street guineas isn't exactly the man to bank on for choice. If it weren't so undignified, I'd have the brutes out and feed 'em."

"You always wandered under a lucky star. It's a habit with some men," explained Marchant.

"As a matter of fact the circumstances are rather peculiar," Cazalet said. "Penstone was an old man−−a very old man−−and two years ago he married a young girl of twenty−seven−−carried away by his wealth and position, I believe she was. She is a Russian or something. I have only seen her twice; the last time was about a year ago, when I went down to Penstone Place to lunch. I remember her well−−tall, dark hair, and strong, very strong eyes. Cold as a frozen statue, but handsome. You have to look at her. She compels you, and Penstone asked no more than that."

"Talks English?"

"Oh, like a native; speaks several languages−−all that sort of thing. Travelled a good deal, I believe−−at least I always gathered as much. Penstone unearthed her somewhere abroad, found her luggage for her at a railway station in Bavaria. Regular old gallant, Penstone. Couldn't help butting against a romance some time or other; lucky to have escaped so long. Well, he told me after his marriage that he was going to cut his fortune into two halves. I, his only nephew, was to have one half in the event of his having no issue, and she the other. In the event of issue, however, I was to have little or nothing. Pretty fair arrangement I thought. As I told you, I have seen neither of them for a year. The old chap was ailing, and he would have thought I was there to grab. So I just kept away."

"And you got a wire to−day?"

"This morning. There will be the usual legal points to be settled, I suppose. Then the widow will take her half and I shall take mine. I don't know what she will do, let loose with a quarter of a million, but I know that my share, Marchant, is going to make a man of me. And heaven knows I need it."

"And could nothing make a man of you except money−−you with your brains?" Marchant asked with a touch of sarcasm.

"I'm afraid not. Respectability is a matter of pounds, shillings and pence; it's too difficult a problem for a man to attempt on a flat purse. I shall change my whole mode of life. No more going to the House to make speeches that will annoy Pent. I'm going to see life. I'm thirty−six, and it's time I did."

Pentelow leaned across the table, his eyes wide open, and his arms folded on the white cloth, a sardonic grin on his face.

"Do you think you are worth a quarter of a million by Lord Penstone's death?" he asked.

"I do."

Pentelow got up silently, crossed the room to where his coat hung, and came back with a copy of an evening paper in his hand. He sat down without speaking, and began to turn over the pages idly, till, finding what he sought, he folded the paper back and half held it out.

"A few moments ago you almost threatened to give me a knock−down blow," he said. "I bear you no malice, but, my friend, I fear it is my unhappy duty to give you one. I shall have to listen to your infernal nonsensical speeches for some time yet. Read that."

Cazalet took the paper and looked at the stop−press column on which Pentelow laid his finger. Slowly, and with the expression changing on his face as he did so, he began to read. It was a short telegram printed in blurred type:−− LORD PENSTONE'S DEATH. Lady Penstone prematurely gave birth to a son this evening, due to the shock caused by her husband's death. We are glad to state that both mother and son are doing well.

Cazalet dropped the paper and lay back in his chair. His cigar dropped from his hand and fell to the floor, where it rolled under the table unobserved; his face was white and bloodless. There were cold fingers clutching at his heart, and something was hammering at his brain till it seemed to spring with pain at every blow. Fenning clutched his sleeve and sent the waiter for some brandy; Marchant, conscious that he must do something, picked up the paper and read the paragraph.

"Good God!" he muttered as he put it down. "Hard luck, Cazalet."

Pentelow sat quietly drawing the smoke from his cigar in fierce draughts. His little bloodshot eyes whipped round the room, and met those of the occupants of the other table with inquiry and challenge.

Everyone had observed the episode, everyone was staring hard. The bearded foreigner of whom Fenning had been speaking was clutching his serviette and had half risen in his chair to offer help till he read the blunt dismissal in Pentelow's eyes. Even the girl at the far corner had put down her cigarette and turned in her chair, watching, with no attempt to conceal her curiosity.

Cazalet revived as the brandy drove the blood back to his brain. He swung an arm half across the table and laughed.

"What a jest!" he choked. "Who would have thought that the most infernal luck could have dealt the cards like that! And I never knew−−I never guessed!"

"What are you going to do now?" Marchant asked in his even, businesslike voice. He was always looking to the future, always weighing the chances, the one faculty which had made him a rich man when every other he possessed would have ruined him.

"Do now?" Cazalet glanced up, the growing colour creeping into his cheeks, the old debonair manner, the happy−go−lucky courage renewing their power. "Do now? Saints above! What can a man do when he's hit sideways like that? What chance has he got? What good are his resolves when the power to carry them out has gone? Do now! Why, go to the devil−−and go like blazes!"

He lounged back and closed his eyes, but there was a smile on his lips. He was unaware that the bearded foreigner had risen from his seat and, approaching the table, had laid a card on his plate. He touched Cazalet's shoulder.

"Then may I show you the way?" he said in a quiet voice.

Cazalet gave a start, sat up and laughed. The man before him was bowing, and with the exaggerated courtesy of a foreigner he bowed again and walked out.

"Silly fool!" exclaimed Cazalet. He picked up the card, and looking at it for a moment was about to put it into his vest pocket. "I say, some people have queer ideas of humour, haven't they?"

"You will give him a call?" said Fenning. "Look, man, there's something scribbled on the back. Don't lose

sight of that chap."

Cazalet pushed the card into his pocket. He looked round the room seeing nothing. Marchant nodded to Pentelow. "He's dazed," he said.

The girl at the far table had left the room; only when Cazalet glanced across to where she had sat was he aware of her absence.

"Good lord! She's gone!" he said, turning to Fenning.

"Couldn't wait here for your pleasure all the evening," replied the other. "She followed your fine friend out. I have been waiting for her to do so for the last hour. I rather think I've learned a thing or two to−night, Paul."

Cazalet got up slowly. He wandered aimlessly across the half− empty room to where his coat hung on the peg. Then he clambered laboriously into it and nodded to the three at the table.

"I'll be in the House to−morrow, and I'll make them sing," he said by way of greeting. "I've changed my plans. I'll be in town for your daughter's wedding, Pent." Then he went out.

He walked slowly down the stairs, pausing at almost every step. He did not know where he wanted to go; he only felt that the bottom had dropped out of everything. He was ambitionless now; he had no sheet anchor to which to cling. The old life, the continual struggle, the false veneer of apparent affluence, the hideous mockery of it all came rolling back with united forces. He clung to the banisters, feeling that his legs were faltering under him.

The thirst for air sent him down to the street. And there the touch of the cold wind on his face made him stop and open his lips to drink it in. He crossed the small hall to the open street and stood waiting, picturing to−morrow as he had imagined it and to−morrow as it would be when it came to him. He scarcely felt the light touch on his arm, but he looked down into the bright eyes of the girl who had occupied the table in the far corner of the room above. Her white hand, with no rings upon it, rested on the sleeve of his arm. The half light, the rays of the electric jet touching the loose strands of her hair till they were filigree gold, the perfume creeping out from the fold of the blue and gold wrap she wore, her splendid eyes−− swift with the play of a dozen emotions−−they formed a picture −−these things, which his mind took to itself and loved and set up in some little chancel of memory.

"Don't go," she said.

"Where?" he asked her, and wondered at the miracle that had brought her to his side.

"I saw that man give you his card. I heard what was said. I know−−−−"

"Yes? Weird−looking chap, wasn't he? Might have been an anarchist or a Tower Hill prophet."

She gripped her hands together, and he looked at the weft her long white fingers made.

"Oh, you are nothing to me," she exclaimed. "We shall probably never meet again−−−−"

"We will," he assured her. "By the living Jingo, we will!"

"No," she answered; "we won't. But−−−−"

"There are no `buts.' Do you think I am going to let a divinity steal into my life and stroll out again without even leaving a card? Five minutes ago I told myself there was no good fortune in the world. and I came down and found it in the doorway."

"Tear up that man's card," she said.

"I won't," he flung back; "but I'll escort you to the uttermost ends of the earth−−in a cab!"

"Tear up that card," she said again.

He pulled it out of his pocket, and kissed it with a laugh.

"Dear lady, I'll keep it if only to remind me of you," he answered. "If you would give me that pink carnation−−−−"

She went from him without a word. He saw her climb into a cab, and saw it sweep round the corner with the jangle of a tuneless horse−bell.

"This is what they would call the parting of the ways, and a woman leads," he muttered to himself. "And I might have followed that cab! Infernal fool!"

He stood looking up the street. The memory of her face seemed to cling to his mind; the perfume she used still lingered in his nostrils.

CHAPTER II. THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN STEPS

FOR a moment Cazalet was nonplussed. Impulse dictated one line of action; discretion suggested another. And the sense of adventure, dormant though ever present in his blood, was slowly stirring. To−day the old life had ended; to−morrow it would begin again. But just where the two epochs merged a woman had crept in, symbolic, she seemed, of what to−morrow might have been.

He stood looking at the foolish card he held in his hand; then he jabbed it into his pocket. She was an episode, so he would have told himself. Other women−−were there not many others who had dropped over the horizon of his memory just as she would do? Life, after all, was merely a shuffling and reshuffling, a grand kaleidoscope, the colours of which one forgot as soon as they passed from view.

He walked for some time along the street, which teemed with the mystery of London late at night. He crossed silent squares, but little pictures of her face−−the half profile, now the features in strong relief against a background of the dark−−were living memories still. He walked on and on. It was the crowd of carriages outside Lady Chesney's house in Berkeley Street that reminded him of the fact that he had promised to look in there during the evening.

Even as he passed through the heavy doors he could hear the subdued echo of a string band, and the mutter of a hundred tongues engaged in animated conversation. The whole world of moneyed London seemed to be gathered here. Yet he entered the crowded room, a silent figure alone, till the human tide caught him up and bore him to the side of his hostess before he was scarcely aware of the fact.

He found himself peering into the face of a woman upon whom the heavy lights−−flaming remorselessly from every angle−− revealed a thin, ascetic expression, a pasty complexion covered with an obvious layer of powder. The slight rouged lips curled into an unconscious sneer which an attempt to smile could not straighten out; her sharp nose emphasised the puffiness of her cheeks. Large diamond earrings swung vulgarly in her ears, and on one hand a group of old−fashioned rings looked like a smother of gold with a jewel here and there striving to thwart the monotony. Lady Chesney's maid had told her she was looking her best that night, and Lady Chesney's conscience told her that the maid was lying. She even hated Cazalet for the apparent lack of interest he showed when he spoke to her. He was a man of moods, and she knew it, and would have chided him for not leaving his mood on the doorstep. To him Lady Chesney was one of those women who, familiar as we may be with them, produce a feeling of strangeness at every meeting because vulgarity has no common chord of sympathy. She was vulgar, but she was necessary to London society, and Cazalet endured her much as he would a bluebottle that fussed round his room when his mind was wandering elsewhere.

She was holding out her hand, and he took it and smiled.

"Ah, Mr. Cazalet, you dear, kind fellow," she said, with a little flutter of excitement, and, sidling up to him, she looked into his face. He knew by her forced enthusiasm that the echo of his speech in the House had already extended here. "I knew you would come. I told Toby all along you would." The dark eyes warped to points of jet. "I heard of your speech to−night; they are discussing it everywhere. What a steady climb up the political ladder yours is! And it's good of you to bother to come on here."

"I hoped I would have been in front of the speech," he laughed. "And you, Sir Toby−−−−"

He turned aside to shake hands with Sir Tobias Chesney, a little man who had crept nervously round his wife's tall figure and stood meekly at her side, biting the fragment of his grey moustache. He held out a skinny white hand, heavily marked with blue veins, and looked up blinkingly into Paul's face like an owl suddenly thrust into the full glare of daylight.

"Anabel thought she recognised the back of your head at lunch at the Carlton to−day," Sir Tobias explained, conscious that he must say something. "She tells me you have made a great speech. Anabel is so up−to−date, so clever. She feels every pulse of the House. How you must love your work!"

"What man doesn't? Yet at times I hate it," Paul answered.

"Hate it? With your brains−−−−"

"Oh, lie down, Toby," retorted Lady Chesney, using the phrase she always employed towards her husband and pet spaniel alike. "Mr. Cazalet must be tired of the very mention of politics to− night."

"Frankly, I am," Paul replied. "I am going to have a fearful whipping from the papers in the morning."

"But you are never afraid of the critics−−you?" Lady Chesney returned. She shook her head and sent the waves of colour rushing across the diamonds in her ears. "Why, when Toby was in the House he used to dance with delight if the papers even mentioned him."

The little man winced.

"Possibly the comment was always favourable; that makes all the difference," said Paul.

"On the contrary. The papers always said Toby didn't count, and in the end I almost had to believe the papers. Eh, Toby?"

"It was safer, my dear," breathed the little man.

Paul looked quickly round the crowded room. There were dozens of faces that he knew, dozens more he remembered having seen in the illustrated journals. Politicians from opposite benches, musicians, writers, medical men, and actresses. The centre of attention at one corner seemed to be the leading lady at a well−known−theatre given over to musical comedy, who was surrounded by a dozen brainy men trying to talk down to her. Hard by a society woman who could talk was endeavouring to keep up a desultory conversation with a fair−haired fop just past his majority who had an amazing passion for puppy−walking and wanted everyone to know it. A golfing bishop forgot his sheep, and was talking tee−shots with a doll−faced minx just learning her strokes.

The sight sickened Paul. The absolute insincerity of the whole gathering filled him with a passing sense of disgust. He knew that Lady Chesney had scraped together everyone with a name with whom she had any acquaintance; he knew that she had asked him there merely to show him off as one of the strong men of the Opposition.

"You must know everyone here." Her words drew him back to the knowledge that she was still by his side. "But if there is anyone you don't know−−−−"

Paul was not listening. He caught the mention of his own name, muttered in an undertone a few yards away.

"That's Paul Cazalet−−the tall chap there. Fearful rotter really, but he has the strength of his convictions. I admire the scoundrel for his brazen effrontery. He thinks he's reforming the earth. Has big ideas about criminals, blood−taint and all that sort of thing. But, mark my words, he will never do any good in the world. I would put up a party of respectable citizens to shoot him, and bury him as a hero to his cause!"

Paul glanced at his hostess, and knew by the expression in her eyes that she had overheard. He laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Popularity, Lady Chesney!" he said. "Just that! To stick to one's convictions is to some a sin. But do not think I mind. Young Fremlin meant me to hear every word. He doesn't love me, you know. I once corrected, in the Press, his method of spending his leisure−−a fearful thing to do−−and he will never forgive me for it. But I dare say he's right. And, you know, other people's corns have a fearful attraction for my boots!"

"I think his manners are appalling!" Lady Chesney replied, and strove to turn the subject. "That interesting girl over there," she added, nodding to the far corner of the room. "No one has been able to discover exactly what she is or what she does."

Looking across, Paul saw the girl of the restaurant standing in the centre of a group of men and women. She was laughing, her eyes full of fire and merriment; but suddenly the grave expression settled on her face, and she was talking in a rapid undertone.

"Who is she?" he asked.

"Who is she? You don't know her? I'm glad. She's frightfully interesting." Lady Chesney became impressive. "Her name is Jean Lorimer; you must meet her. People say she's mysterious, but I have found her to be just an unassuming English girl, full of cleverness, full of charm. She has no living relatives, enough money to make her independent, and you will hear her name in Paris, Berlin or in Vienna. Her brother was of the same roving disposition, and he died miserably in prison in Servia."

"In Servia?" exclaimed Paul. He remembered what Fenning had told him about the strangers at the Toledo; remembered, too, how this girl had urged him to forgo the appointment with the foreigner whose card he carried in his pocket. He felt that he was on the threshold of discovery.

"About this brother," he said. "Tell me. I've a reason for asking."

Lady Chesney shrugged her shoulders.

"It's a horrible story," she replied. "I've only heard bits of it. He was given a life sentence; she had the chance

to save him."

"And she failed?"

Lady Chesney nodded.

"The price was too high. Do you wonder, then, that the ambition of her life is vengeance? Look at her now! She's lovely; she ought to make a big society match. Lord Temperley raved over her till he married the actress."

"Hardly a compliment to Miss Lorimer," said Paul.

"Oh, Jean loathed him. Odd name, Jean. I suppose it's really foreign, but we've made it fearfully English and fearfully common. For myself I like foreign names when they are in taste. Unfortunately, if one uses them for one's children in England one is considered vulgar."

"But you say she is English?" Paul returned.

Sir Tobias had shifted a step nearer. He felt that he had discovered a chance to say something, and he took it.

"My dear," he said, laying his hand on his wife's arm, "your views are too revolutionary. Surely travel has broadened our minds. May I correct you by saying that it is almost vulgar in England now to call one's child John?"

"Not in the best families, Toby. You have forgotten that Sir Crichel named his fourth Ebenezer, after your second name, only last week, in spite of public opinion. You know what Lady Marion said: she wanted Ivan. Of course, it was romantic."

"There is enough romance in the writings of Solomon to suffice for all generations," her husband answered in a tone almost of apology. "But, unhappily, most biblical names are associated with money−lenders."

Lady Chesney gave vent to an expression of boredom.

"Toby, you wander so," she said. "I am painfully aware that I have heard the name Jean before. You remember that French maid we had, Toby−−the one who stole all those things? Her name was Jean, or was it Jeanne? Possibly we added the last two letters before we found her out."

"But you would not class Miss Lorimer with a felon," Paul broke in. "Will you introduce me?"

He crossed the room, and as they approached the girl looked up. Paul detected the slight flicker of her eyelids, the subtle change of expression in her face. The large eyes seemed charged with a look of inquiry, of reproach. She might have been standing on the pavement, looking steadily at him and begging him to abandon the invitation on the mad foreigner's card. Why should she have pleaded with him? Why, indeed, should she be here? She had recognised him. The single glance from her told him that. And he knew by the movement of her lips that her words were faltering.

"Well, that is my view of the case," he heard her say. "I don't believe there is any woman who is not at some time of her life bored to death by her husband. Marriage isn't really the goal of a woman's life."

"Oh, come now," cried someone. "Love is necessary to the worst−ordered life."

Paul watched the play of conflict in her eyes.

"Necessary? Oh, you dear, delightful believers! It's a luxury like truffles and champagne to a man with thirty shillings a week. True, many do without it−−generally because of their sordid incomes. A man who doesn't want to marry isn't really a man. He knows, nevertheless, that marriage makes him respectable: it makes him a ratepayer."

"Gad, that's straight from the shoulder, anyway," laughed a grey−haired Hussar colonel. "When I paid my first rates I let my past go with the cheque."

"And found the uninteresting receipt wonderfully reminiscent, eh?" exclaimed his friend.

They turned aside as Lady Chesney, with Paul at her heels, came up.

"Marriage," Lady Chesney was saying, "we women have been arguing it since Eve taught us housekeeping."

The girl flushed. Yet her eyes were filled with laughter.

"Eve?" she cried. "Must we always follow Eve? She wasn't a woman, or she would have created a Paquin in Eden."

"So much for your sex, then!" exclaimed Paul.

"My sex!" she answered him. "And yours? To many of you the gown is the woman. Cupid's only rival is a Regent Street milliner. I was telling your friends so but a moment ago, and they answered that all marriages were made in heaven. And heaven wouldn't even admit the trimmings of many of them!"

"Could ever a woman defend a woman!" laughed Paul. "What a shambles you would make of a woman's

charms."

Paul had swung himself into the argument. He bowed as his hostess slipped away, conscious that she had successfully achieved another social duty.

"If you had argued like that to me when we met on the steps of the Toledo to−night you might have made me change my mind about that man's card."

"Then you intend to go−−still?" she asked.

She looked down, and he studied the jewelled fillet in her hair for a moment before replying. It is difficult to tell a woman she has failed when she has put her whole soul into the argument.

"I think, perhaps−−I shall," he said lamely. "But come, we've got to talk it out. That alcove yonder−−−−"

He followed her across the room, and set a chair for her behind the thick screen of palms, and held up a cushion to place at her back. Then he balanced himself on the edge of a wicker lounge opposite.

"There is one thing that has puzzled me a good deal," he said.

"Yes?"

"Why do you not wish me to meet that man?"

"Because you will regret it if you do. I have another reason, but that should not trouble you now. Do you think I don't know all about you? I probably know as much about your powers, your abilities as you do yourself. Don't you know that your future lies here−−here in England?"

"Then this man−−what's his name−−−−"

"Count Stolpin."

"Ah, yes. He would want me to leave England?"

"The Count wants the help of a clever man in another part of Europe. You are a clever man," she answered tersely.

Paul leant forward. "How do you know his object in asking me to meet him?" he said.

He saw her white throat heave quickly. She turned her eyes away; for the moment she was silent.

"There are things I cannot tell you−−things I would not if I could," she answered under her breath. "Only let me ask you for the last time−−−−"

"Surely if I went it could make no difference to you," he suggested.

"I suppose not. There is no reason why it should. But most women hate to see a man spoil himself."

He was puzzled and bewildered by her attitude towards him. He looked steadily into her grey eyes, but could discover no clue there−−only he saw that they were wonderful eyes, wistful and challenging. He felt the new awakening interest in her; the smooth sweetness of her voice; the delicate shaping of her face, the glory of her hair, each rang some separate note of sympathy. Never since those years ago when he had placed all the love of which he was capable into another's keeping to have it wantonly destroyed had he felt the same living interest in a woman.

She was leaning forward in her chair, her head in her hands, her lips quivering. Paul got up and stood at the window overlooking the terrace so that the night air might rush in upon his face. The jargon of voices near at hand irritated him when he tried to follow every note of the violins singing some dreamy waltz of Waldteufel's; even the flapping of a giant moth against the glass outside played with his nerves to−night.

"You know," he said, returning to his chair, "we ought to have you in the House. Your fearless remarks just before I was introduced to you made me wish we had you as a recruit for the Opposition. But you were a little hard on the married section of the community, don't you think?"

She looked up and smiled; there was a note of sympathy in his voice that invited confidence.

"Oh, I think not. I suppose every woman has her ideas about marriage," she said. "I wonder if I understand men better than most women, or whether I don't understand them at all! I might tell you that I shall never marry, and you would probably answer me with the usual masculine exaggeration. Your heart would tell you that I was a girl who ought to be shaken while your lips uttered the prettiest of compliments."

"I should say you were uncommonly fascinating, and mean it," he retorted.

"And I would answer you that I could never love a man for the whole of my life. I should always be thinking that when the passion flame had burned itself out my husband would follow the example of most other men. He would drag me through forty years or more of passable indifference, using me as the minimum standard by which to adjust his view of other women."

"Oh, you little cynic!" he cried with the sudden call of friendship. "Some day you will remember those words and wish you could eat them!"

"Then you think I shall marry−−some sort of man?" she said.

"The man who loves you," he answered.

The lights shaped the beauty of her face; there was a world of feeling in her eyes. He put his finger−tips on her arm where it rested on the wicker chair.

Something about her−−the subtleness of her, the little heart that beat to a rhythm he misunderstood−−gave out an emotion which found refuge in his blood. He seemed to grow older as he waited there; he seemed to be talking to a woman whom he might have treated as a child, one to whom some natural instinct in him offered guidance.

"The man who loves you," he said again. "There's an empty altar in your heart, but you'll fill it some day."

"I used to think so. Girls get silly ideas like that from reading novels."

He leant towards her and spoke eagerly.

"You'll find it−−the real love, that is," he said. "It's waiting for you somewhere. Heaven knows it may be in some strange corner of the world, or in some quaint street in our own London, which your footsteps might never tread of their own free will. But you won't miss it−−there's Divine Providence. We call it chance−−an ugly, stupid word that means nothing−−our excuse if you would have it so−−for failing to admit the Supreme intervention. But you'll marry, you'll be happy, wonderfully happy. And a happy marriage, by heaven! it's culture, a divine mould that takes off the rough corners; that makes black appear white, and paints glory into everything. Many people clamber into heaven by a happy marriage."

"And the gamblers," she said. "Who stake everything on the short cut−−−−"

"There's no short cut for you. You're prejudiced. You don't know what things are. Life−−children−−watching them grow up−− appealing to little minds by some big call from our own when we've roughed it, that's gaining, that's achievement. We make men, we throw them out into the world, rough−cast often, because we haven't the power to finish them. But the world's a grand old finishing school; it admits no faults, it flogs to death the shirkers."

She gave a quick intake of breath. But she never moved her eyes from his own.

"I wonder if you mean all you say?" she said.

He laughed.

"Because I'm a bachelor with queer ideas about some things?"

"Not exactly. I was wondering why, with that creed, you have not married."

He dropped his head.

"I once placed my whole faith in a woman," he said. "We all do at some time or another."

"Yes?" she questioned softly.

"My faith brought knowledge." He shrugged his shoulders. "The marriage I had planned would have been one of the world's misfits. I see it now, but she saw it then. She saved us both from catastrophe. A charming woman, forceful, strong, fighting for her place in the world, without an ounce of solid domesticity in her whole body."

"And you blamed her for that?"

"Yes," he said. "I dislike the unsexed female who clambers into the male sphere and leaves her own work in the world unfinished. She is a notoriety seeker. The big heroines of life never enter the limelight."

"A polite way of saying that you dislike every woman who doesn't sit patiently at home and make her own clothes."

"I'm not as narrow as that."

"You are. You're worse. You would save all the adventure of life for the over−estimated male! I've had one ambition in my life. I've wanted−−vengeance." She broke off and turned her head away. He remembered what Lady Chesney had said about the Servian prison.

"Come," he said, "we're getting serious. Let's go back to the crowd and the laughter. There are tears in that violin−−listen."

She was studying the jewelled watch−bracelet on her arm.

"It's long past midnight," she answered. "I shall go home."

"And my cab will be waiting. Can I drop you anywhere?"

She hesitated a moment.

"It's very far West," she said doubtfully, "I think I'll go alone."

"It is not too far West for me," he said. "Come, I will take you." He made a movement to lead her back to the room, but still she hesitated.

"I hate to impose a condition on a friend−−−−" she began.

"Name it."

"Will you let me give the driver the address and promise never to ask him for it or seek it out?"

"Of course," he answered. "We shall meet again, I know it. But it will be in your good time."

"I wonder," she said, and walked ahead of him.

A few minutes later they made their way down the broad staircase together, and into the night air. A footman found his cab, and Paul stood aside while she spoke to the driver. Then he followed her in, and carefully folded the doors.

For a few minutes they sat without speaking, and the cab rattled through the streets. But he could see the outline of her profile whenever they passed a lamp. She was looking straight ahead, her eyes wide open and thoughtful, the flashing tendrils of light shooting through her hair.

"Why did you say that−−about meeting again?" he asked. "We shall, you know."

"Yes. In Servia!"

"In Servia?" he ejaculated. He strove to get a glimpse of her face in the darkness. The even tones in which she had pronounced the words betrayed nothing. And when the next lamp swept past her face was expressionless. She was still staring through the glass ahead.

"In Servia?" he exclaimed again. "Nothing is farther from my thoughts than to go there."

"There is Count Stolpin; he has a wonderfully persuasive tongue," she reminded him.

She had given him the key of the situation, and in a moment the secret was declared. He remembered Fenning's words, his interest in the girl, the two foreigners at the Toledo, and could mentally hear Fenning saying again: "That man is the future king of Servia." He knew now that he trod the very portals of adventure−−knew, too, that this girl beside him had put out a restraining hand to keep him back. And she was going alone. Instantly all the savour of the old humdrum life in London dropped out. The new day had begun.

"You still−−intend to−−go?" he heard her ask slowly from the dark corner.

"Where you go, I follow."

"Even if it is a trap?"

"Even if it is a trap."

She choked down an exclamation, but any words she uttered were lost in the rattle of the cab.

He gripped her arm. "Tell me!" he said, but she did not answer.

A moment more and they were jerked to a standstill against the kerb at the foot of a long row of houses. He stood on the pavement while she got out. Then she was holding out her hand and looking up into his face.

"Won't you alter your mind and remain true to London and success?" she asked in a quiet voice.

He smiled down at her.

"I think I would prefer Servia!" he said.

"Then good−night, and−−good−bye!"

She turned away, and he watched her run up a short flight of steps, thrust a key into the latch, and enter. As the door closed he wondered whether he would ever know the house again, till by the weak light of the street lamp he observed that the steps were painted green, except where a passage about a yard wide was white−stoned up the centre.

For a moment he stood looking at the house, an endless string of thoughts rushing through his mind. Then as he would have re−entered the cab he saw the figure of a man walk quickly out of the darkness to the other side of the road and disappear down a neighbouring street.

He climbed into the cab and slammed the door.

"I would know that man's figure among a million," he muttered to himself. "What the devil was Fenning doing waiting here?"

CHAPTER III. A SCENT OF LILIES

THE Dover express rushed wildly through the night, dragging itself round sharp curves with the shriek of tortured metal as the flanges of the wheels bit into the rails. Through tiny villages it thundered−−villages where solitary lights still gleamed−−swinging now to the right or left, so that the moon, breaking occasionally through the heavy clinging banks of cloud, appeared above the ridge of hills, then vanished, only to dance into view once more, as if playing a maddened game of hide−and−seek.

Paul Cazalet stood in the corridor of a first−class carriage and clung to the window−rail firmly with both hands. His tall lithe figure swung to the oscillations of the train, but he continued to stare through the glass, his mind a slave to the pictures that wove themselves out of the darkness. He put his hand in his breast pocket at last and produced a crumpled card, held it so that the light from the lamp fell upon it, and carefully studied the inscription: COMTE JOSEF MILOSCH STOLPIN S.Y. Diomed.

Turning the card over he saw scribbled on the back in pencil: "If you have courage and seek adventure meet me on the deck of the Diomed, in Dover Harbour, on Friday night. Come alone. Your absolute safety is guaranteed.−−J. M. S."

He replaced the card in his pocket, shrugged his shoulders, and laughed to himself.

"Two nights ago she warned me against keeping this appointment," he muttered to himself, "and just because I am so beastly curious, here I am rushing to keep it. Stolpin will have received my wire, and will expect me. And Jean?−−I wonder why I ever thought twice about her? I wonder if she had not warned me if I would have been here at all!"

He could find no answer to the question, and turning, glanced back for a moment at the compartment he had left. In the far corner an old man, wrapped almost to the chin in heavy rugs, snored loudly, his head inclined till his white beard, bunched up against his arm, resembled a ball of tow. Near to him was a girl of twenty−two or thereabouts. Her lower lip hung limply as she slept, thereby just spoiling the natural beauty of her expression, her right hand was loosely held by the young man in the next seat−−obviously her husband−−and she smiled, just as he too smiled. Cazalet wondered whether in their dreams the twain had met, and in meeting had found recognition.

Opposite them was an old lady, sharp featured, ascetic, leaning stiffly back against the cushions in an attitude of dignity and unrest. In one hand she clasped a small handbag, in the other a brown−paper package neatly fastened and sealed; and, as she slept, her waxen eyelids seemed but partially to conceal eyes that still looked down in custody of her possessions. Against her was a curé, lounging grotesquely in a half−circle like an uncoiling centipede, with his parted lips laying bare a large gold tooth, till any softness there might have been about his features was lost in the diabolical leer that clung around his lips. Paul surveyed the whole group of them. He let his imagination wander till it brought him up at one point; each of these men and women was bent on some definite mission. As for him, the world was wide, and from a yacht lying somewhere in the dark he was to find his path. He turned to the window again, dropped it, and drank in the night air, lunging it till the blood leaped in his veins. Whither? But if she were going−−−−

The train rattled into Dover, swung across points, and fell away to an easy speed that dwindled into a crawl. Lights, wrapped in little halos of fog, seemed like bleared eyes staring at him out of the murk. Buildings, black and ill−defined, rolled past with easy movement. Then came the masts of shipping, the yellow splashes of light falling across pools of water on the damp quays, the rank smoke pressed down by the wet hands of the air. And beyond again the steady rolling of the sea.

The train wound its way along the pier and drew up beside the boat. Passengers started one by one from slumber, blinked, re− arranged themselves, and clutched at the light luggage on the racks. And Paul, carrying his portmanteau, got out and walked back along the concrete path to the "Lord Warden." On reaching the station he left his portmanteau in the cloak−room and went out towards the parade.

The night was pitch dark, for the moon had fallen into a cloud−bed, but ships' lights rolled in grotesque patterns over the black face of the waters. To find a yacht in the harbour seemed to be an impossibility under such conditions. Two men passed him, heads low, pressing against the wind, but from them he could learn nothing. He

walked on till he heard footsteps clamping heavily in the shingle near at hand. He waited a moment, and a waterman loomed out of the darkness, and, climbing to the pavement, almost collided with him. Paul touched his shoulder.

"There's a yacht−−the Diomed−−lying in the harbour."

The other grunted churlishly.

"Know it?"

The man craned his head forward and looked carefully into Paul's face.

"Yes," he said at length, "I do."

"Where does she lie?"

The waterman pointed his thumb over his shoulder to a corner of the harbour, where a single light swung slowly on the heave of the water.

"Out there," he said. "That's it. A white craft." He was staring into Paul's face again. "What do you want with her?"

"My business, I believe?" Paul retorted. "I wish to hire a boat−−I want to row out to her myself."

He could just see the face of the man−−the long, square−cut beard and the small wolfish eyes gleaming out beneath shaggy eyebrows.

"I could help you−−for a sovereign."

"Find a boat and a pair of oars and the sovereign is here," Paul answered.

The man climbed down to the shingle again and walked forward, careless if the other were following him. He made his way to the water's edge, where a boat was lying, and stood waiting there for Paul to overtake him. Then a coin changed hands, and in a moment more a boat slipped quietly out into the darkness. Simultaneously the waterman, clutching the sovereign closely in his hand, stumbled towards a public−house.

The loneliness of night upon the water−−that loneliness which seems even at certain hours in the darkness to drop upon a crowded liner−−disappears in a sense of companionship when other shipping is at hand. Yet the night was very still. The wind was dropping. A spray of stars appeared like a jewelled net across the sky. Boats, swinging idly at their anchors, carried no life upon them. But to Paul, as he glided quickly past, they were as living things that watched him. He was strong at the oar, and in twenty minutes he swung under the stern of the vessel that stood out a white and beautiful thing as he approached. Then it was that he noticed that a boat trailed in the water, and that the rope holding it reached to the deck.

He glanced up and saw a man standing looking down at him. The gleam of his cigarette showed in the dark, and Paul could scent the tobacco. But the man waiting there did not speak until Paul hailed him.

"Ahoy there! Is this the Diomed?" he called.

"Yes. And you?" came the question in a foreign accent.

"Paul Cazalet."

The black figure moved a few steps.

"There is a ladder there. . . . Shall I bring a lamp?"

"No, thanks. I can see it."

Paul began to fasten the rope, and quickly climbed up to the deck. He was looking into the face of the Count, inscrutable as ever, but the expression was one of friendship.

"Come down into the cabin, and we can talk there," said the latter. "We are alone. Knowing you were coming, I let the crew go ashore. We can talk with perfect freedom. . . . It's damned cold."

He stumbled down the gangway, and Paul followed. He had no doubts, no fear of treachery. But the sense of adventure was romping in him. He felt that the hour was good, and that all it might hold for him was only what he would desire.

In the cabin luxury was evident everywhere. A silver electric lamp stood on the table, limning the delicately carved furniture that stood in every corner. On the writing−desk was a pile of papers, a spirit decanter, and a liqueur carafe, with a number of glasses, large and small, clustering around. These the Count carefully moved to the table. Then he drew up a chair for his guest, and sat down facing him.

"Try a cigarette. These are Russian," he said, pushing forward a small silver box. "Or if you would prefer a cigar−−−−"

Paul lit a cigarette from his own case. It was the initial act of caution. He fixed his eyes on the man before

him.

"You are the first man I have ever trusted in my life," he said, as he threw the match aside. "Not until now have I troubled to ask myself exactly why I am here. And, frankly, I don't know."

"I will tell you, even at the risk of appearing profane." The Count smiled. "It is the hand of God."

"With a woman as the Divine instrument," Paul answered.

The Count bent forward sharply. He paused, with his hand on the decanter.

"What do you mean by that? What has a woman to do with your coming here?"

"Really, I don't know." Paul lay back and smoked quietly. "Nothing, I suppose. I act on impulse always. I put your card in my pocket that night on impulse. By impulse I took it out again the next day and carefully studied its inscription, and so, by impulse, I came here. Tell me what you have to say. It is important, since you brought me so far."

"You were a man seeking adventure," the Count reminded him; "and that was the man whose help I needed. Remember, I know of you. I am a foreigner−−yes, but my world is your world, the world of diplomacy, of secrecy, and swift action. I brought you here because I knew you were a man of courage, a man at the loose end of things, who wanted something big to do and a motive for doing it. That's why I brought you here."

Paul nodded.

"A good guess, and I like your candour. I see you've got a map there." He put out his hand towards the pile of papers. "Shall we say it's a map of Servia?"

The Count gave a start of surprise. The shot in the dark had told. He hesitated a little, studying the Englishman as if he would read what was passing in his mind. His failure to do so framed his next question.

"Be as candid with me as I am with you. Tell me, do you know my reason for asking you to come here?"

"You have already implied it."

"I have named you for the man I want, but I have not told you my motive."

"To discover it is why I came."

Paul watched the puzzled expression of the other. Once he looked round as if he heard a shuffling footstep in the corridor behind him.

"Then you know why you are here?" The Count's mood was aggressive.

"Believe me, I do not," said Paul, with a sudden sense of irritation. "My dear Count," he said, "when I can discover a thing in London I don't come to a lonely yacht in Dover harbour to look for it. You know, and I know, that certain people connected with a kingdom in the Balkans dined at the Toledo on a night not a week ago. We both watched them. . . . There, I have shown you my hand: now turn up yours."

For a diplomat the Count was unusually dense, or he would have discovered that he had been tricked by bluff. As it was, he smiled in a way that gave Cazalet a knowledge of victory.

"Ah! I understand," he said. "You saw him too. Possibly you know the story. That is the man they are trying to place on the throne of Servia, and you are here to prevent it."

"And to whom do you refer as `they'?" Paul inquired.

"Russia."

"Russia? What's Russia got to do with it?"

"Everything. There have been stories in the Press, but they are inspired. There are not two people in England to−day who know that Russia is about to bring off the greatest coup in southern Europe she has ever attempted. She wants a Karageorgevitch on the throne, and that man is at present at Geneva−−a little man who hates turmoil and conflict when he can live the solitary life he has known for years. Offer him a kingdom, and of his own free will he would refuse it. But the party behind him−−that party means−−−−"

"Yes?" said Paul, as he paused.

"Murder!"

"Good God!" Paul exclaimed. "What are you telling me? Or are you mad? And you want me to be mixed up in that?"

The Count closed his eyes. The lids, deep and sensuous, were the colour of wax. He nodded his head slowly to and fro; his nervous, delicate hands moved over the papers on the table.

"I want you to help me−−help me prevent the greatest crime of the century," he began in a low, even voice. "I want you to start for Belgrade to−morrow."

The Count stared hard at the man before him, but a flicker of the eyelashes was all the sign he had that his visitor was impressed by the announcement. At length Paul sat upright, pitched his cigarette away, and with the greatest care selected another. Then he leant forward across the table.

"You know what I am," he said; "a gentleman of fortune, if you care to give me so pleasant a designation. I am no man's master, and no man is mine. I care for nothing but the cards Fate puts into my hands. I play the game as I know it−−not always strictly according to rules, perhaps. But the world you and I know, Count, is not run on rules, but on the exceptions."

"A gamble!" the Count exclaimed. "You back your man; he rises or falls. That's our game, my friend!"

"And why not? What does it matter to me if forty kings are murdered in their beds to−morrow? And yet, just because you came to me at a moment when everything was at an end with me, just because we met in that absurdly unromantic manner, I am prepared to believe you. I fancy I shall start for Belgrade to− morrow, and that you will have sent me. But not you alone, Count."

The final sentence passed unnoticed by the Austrian. He had begun turning over papers, letters, maps, and official documents of all kinds with a strange set smile on his face the while.

"You are prepared for danger?" he asked casually at last.

"We are twin brothers, danger and I," Paul replied. "We have ever been; we could not live alone for long."

"And you understand women?"

"As far as any man ever did, yet I have not lived a century. . . . A curious question, Count."

"No; a necessary one." He turned and looked Paul in the face. "Oh, I think I know you well enough," he said. "You would be prepared for trickery. You are no babe reared in a nursery for this kind of work. But beware of any woman who makes love to you, Cazalet. Possibly you will feel the clasp of soft arms, the caress of warm lips with all the sweetness of the world upon them. I know. I've tasted life and found it good. Remember that no one can give conviction to a lie like a woman. It takes a man half a lifetime to learn diplomacy; a woman is born with it as her second nature."

"My dear Count," Cazalet began, "how careful you are to explain to me that a woman is the same in all parts of the world! Drop platitudes. Tell me what you want me to do. More than that, tell me what I'm going to gain by doing it."

The Count got up, and, unlocking a drawer in the desk, produced a little roll of notes; these he pushed across the table.

"That is merely to interest you in the adventure," he said. "There you will find a thousand pounds in your good English money. For the rest, this envelope contains a few rough notes. Tomorrow night at six o'clock you will meet a man in the Madeleine in Paris. You will go there ostensibly for Vespers at six. Just inside the eastern door on the right there is a little altar. You will see a man there: dark, and aged about thirty. You will follow him out. And beneath his coat collar he will show you a little silver badge−−like that. He will tell you all you wish to know. Will those notes interest you sufficiently to carry you so far?"

Paul picked up the bundle of notes screwed up in the elastic band, and threw it across to the desk. But he retained the enamelled silver badge.

"I have sufficient for a first−class ticket to Paris upon me already," he said. "I believe I have even enough for my return passage, though I don't think I'll need it. But I have not yet made up my mind, Count, as to whether I like the colour of your money."

"I rather think, my friend, that in the morning you will find the colour good," the Count replied. "True, they are English notes, but they come from−−−−"

"Vienna," intercepted Paul.

"And you will be at the Madeleine?" asked the other evasively.

He had crossed the cabin and was pushing the notes back into the desk. There was a break in the conversation. To the Austrian it seemed as if his guest were trying to make up his mind. Then the faintest suggestion again of a footfall on the thick carpet beyond the half−open door preceded a revolver shot. The Count appeared to roll against the desk, and drop backwards heavily to his chair, as a burning wave of powder−smoke crawled slowly up through the atmosphere of the room, playing in little ripples about the electric light globe and vanishing into the darkness of the teak ceiling.

In an instant Paul was on his feet, his ears ringing with the echoes of the explosion. He sprang towards the

Count, but he knew by that instinct which comes only with the presence of death that he was too late. A splash of red sprang out at the Count's collar, his lips hung limply, twitching once, twice, as if groping for words that would not come, and his eyes searched the cabin looking for something which he could not find. The invisible presence of death was in the room. Paul felt it; the cold touch of something indefinable, but something that brushed his cheek and left it cold as if icy fingers had rested there.

The door had closed. The smoke ripples still played round the farther corner and fought with each other at the small aperture of the port−hole; the red stain became brighter on the white linen of the man in the chair. And his face grew whiter. The long nervous fingers shot out to touch something in the air and fell back with the drop of the arm loose and numb. The very finger−nails were changing colour before the eyes of the other man.

So Paul waited there, his face blanched, his eyes wide and staring, looking down upon a man who went slowly out to meet death and fought it every inch of the way, till he drooped his head at last just a little to one side, and took a long deep breath and gave up his soul to his Maker with that submission which marks the crossing between two worlds.

Paul knew he was dead; he felt the possession of death in the chamber. And then as suddenly the light in the cabin expired, and the whip of the darkness upon his nerves hurled him to the door.

It was locked. He was alone in the room with the dead man and his secret. But above the reek of the blending tobacco smoke and flavour of burnt powder came the scent of lilies; at first mild and fleeting till it seemed to be a trick of his imagination, then growing stronger as the atmosphere settled.

The strong sweet smell of lilies of the valley.

And almost it seemed to him that he could hear the rustle of a woman's skirt.

CHAPTER IV. THE STRANGER IN THE FLEET

IN moments of great crises the mind often detaches itself from the main flood of things, to dwell upon some trivial detail which has small bearing on the situation. Thus did it first occur to Paul that he was standing dragging at a locked door in the dark, with papers screwed in one hand which were something of a key to the diplomacy of half Europe. That a man had been shot and lay dead, concealed by the darkness a few yards away, did not enter the range of his calculations compared to the importance with which his mind clothed the papers in his hand. And as the seconds passed and he remained struggling at the door and fumbling for a key which reason should have taught him was on the other side, an instinct convinced him that the hand that had fired the shot and cut off the light had been that of a woman.

He groped in his pocket and drew out a matchbox, and proceeded to strike a light. He held the vesta aloft and glanced round the room. Then he picked up the heaviest chair he could see. The match dropped from his fingers and died out, a red spot on the thick carpet. For a moment he hesitated, then hurled the chair above his head and brought it crashing down on the panel of the cabin door. There was a sound of splintering wood, he found the aperture and groped through it with his fingers, then swung the chair against the yielding panels again and again with all the strength his frenzy lent him. The wood scattered in flying splinters, and a sharp breath of night air coming from beyond broke in upon his face.

In five minutes he had battered a hole in the door wide enough to permit him to pass through. The sweat was streaming down his face, and something that was warm trickled along his fingers till he felt it drip from his nail. A smarting pain in the fleshy part of his hand told him that a splinter had cut deep.

His mind was working with the rapidity of an engine. He did not wait, but, stuffing the papers into his pocket, clambered through the broken door. Once in the corridor beyond he felt with his fingers along the wall till he reached the companion− way. Overhead he could see small cohorts of clouds rushing.

He went up on deck quickly. At the rail he waited; nothing moved except a few swaying masts, and the outline of his boat bobbing on swirling currents. Yet there must be someone aboard; he gripped his revolver when a little slithering splash of water imitated the sound of a footfall.

Conflicting desires surged in his mind. The nameless terror of an invisible foe somewhere near at hand produced uneasiness. A few feet below a man lay dead, he could not get the sight of him out of his memory. He had to face things; he must search the vessel. But there were the papers in his pockets; nor was it cowardice that told him that their safety counted before everything.

He beat forward to where the ladder still trailed down the yacht's side towards his boat. He reached it and began to descend when the moon cast adrift from a screen of watery cloud. And ahead of him he could see the little fleet of torpedo boats lying beyond the clustering smaller craft at their moorings.

He paused. Nothing moved. There was no sound except the wind whispering in the rigging overhead and the melodious lapping of the water against his boat. He dropped lightly down, cast the rope adrift and picked up the oars. But when he looked up a small gliding thing had shot out of the shadows at the far end of the harbour and sidled up to a lone torpedo boat that lay without lights almost at the harbour mouth. He could just discern the pigmy figures moving at the ship's rail. Then another figure climbed slowly, laboriously on to the larger craft. He strained forward, staring through the dark. It was a woman.

He was floating idly in the shadowed water under the yacht's side. What a story it was! The two of them talking underground diplomacy in the cabin−−a shot−−a dead man on a deserted vessel, a little boat slipping off into the dark! What would the world say if he were arrested and told the story as he knew it in support of his innocence? It would just close its dim old eyes and laugh! And the woman climbing on to a torpedo boat−− the most imaginative journalist would never dare to print the story.

He dipped the oars deep in the water. The Diomed was slipping into the blackness. Before him was the big world of adventure. He was running away from evidence that would have hanged a saint. The torpedo boat was moving. He could hear the low mutter of engines, the throb of a propeller. And the light closed down. Out somewhere in the dark he heard a man's shout −−he saw the flash of sparks from a moving funnel−−for just the fraction of a second a mast cut across the light at the pier head, and then as quickly disappeared.

The torpedo boat was running for the sea.

He rowed with the frenzy of a frightened man for the shore.

"Damned if I don't think she's a foreigner! What the blazes−−−−"

The words came to Paul from some craft at anchor. Could it be that a foreign warship had crept unobserved into the harbour in order that the crime on the yacht might be carried out? The whole thing seemed so incredible that he would have dismissed it from his mind.

But the scent of lilies of the valley!

He had touched the shore, the keel grating softly on the shingle where he crept gently in to the land. There was no one on the sea−front, the whole place seemed deserted, and he walked hurriedly towards the town.

But suddenly he stopped, as his mind groping backward had unlocked one of the secrets it held captive.

His memory painted a little cameo for him; the night at the Toledo, her face looking up at him and those big eyes of hers. The blue wrap and the perfume−−the voluptuous perfume that seemed to cling about her and make his senses reel.

It was the same; but that vessel driving for the open sea might contain any woman in the world except this one.

A searchlight sprang suddenly out of the dark and rolled in a splendid fan of light over the water. In it Paul could see a small black object, that moved and twisted like an insect driven to frenzy by a ray of sunlight penetrating the darkness of its retreat. He watched it fascinated. He became numb to his own peril, to the sound of stirring in the harbour.

"Ah, the searchlight has found her again!" He was muttering to himself now. "But she'll escape yet. Heaven, what a speed she must be running. The plucky little devil!"

He liked the fight, the small craft running hard before the pack of sleuth−hounds. He watched it till the pitch hid the winnow of sparks.

"They'll never catch her now," he said to himself as he went on. Nor did he pause to ask himself why he was glad. But no evidence in all the world would convince him that he had nearly met the little lady of the grey eyes aboard the Diomed that night. Given as the truth it would ever sound a lie.

CHAPTER V. PICTURES IN GREY

JAMES FENNING stretched himself and yawned. He was conscious first of the strong sunlight streaming through a window in a cascade on to his face, then of the fact that he had a headache. A conglomeration of noises began to settle and sort itself out into its respective denominations on his ears. He heard the sounds of awaking day in Paris−−the low rumble of handcarts, the crack of whips and the growled curse of the cabdriver. He heard the scuffle of feet on the pavements, a boy whistling a popular air from the "Boule Mich," picked up in some gamin slum, and the chirping of roof sparrows pleased with the sun.

So Fenning yawned again. Another Paris day had begun, another day of hot pavements and tropical nights. He was used to these sounds, used almost to the ache across his eyes, and he cursed the Café du Lion d'Or; asked himself aloud if he had really kissed the little Spanish dancer with the wonderful eyes, and got slowly out of bed.

He shuffled his feet into a pair of wool−lined slippers which in colour exactly matched his blue sleeping−suit. Then he sat on the edge of the bed and surveyed himself in the mirror across the room, just as men do when they feel very ill at ease with the world and are slow to admit it. But he smiled at his reflection as he would have done to an old friend. Why does a man feel a kindred sympathy for his own rakish likeness in the glass after a wild night of petits verres, red lips, and fragmentary memories? There is nothing so human in the world as one's own reflection at seven o'clock in the morning on such an occasion; the best of friends lack the same sense of sympathy, the same understanding. So James Fenning smiled again, admired the colour of the sleeping−suit and developed a frantic desire for a shave.

He began to grope round the room for his razor and shaving− pot, wishing that the headache would go. It was then that he noticed the white glove on the table. He picked it up, examined the seams, the creases where it had folded to the hands, and sensed the faint smell of Parisian perfume.

"Silly little kid," he muttered to himself. "I wonder why she wanted me to keep that glove? It spoiled the pair. And her name −−Clarice. Ah, I remember. Heaven! Some girls have eyes! And what was it she was saying about the Toledo−−or was it a new liqueur? I forget anyway!"

He dressed slowly, but all the while his thoughts were coming back with their accustomed range and power. The will of the man, the sheer effort to thwart physical inertia, brought with it a subtle form of strength that enabled him to recover quickly from the effects of the night in the nether world of Paris. But now as he was about to leave the room he stopped and looked vacantly at the door as if he saw something in the room or felt the presence of it−−the presence of the better man−− himself as he might have been−−and unconsciously he spoke aloud his thoughts.

"Jimmy, you fool," he said very quietly, lest the better man should hear, "if you had only run straight, if you could run straight−−−−"

He flung open the door with an impetuous gesture, and stood with his hand on the edge of it, and a draught blowing on to his face. He had reached a line of reasoning which had never disturbed him before, and because it was in revolt with the whole tenor of his life found himself unable to deal with it now. He was conscious of the quirk in his moral fibre, of a power that ebbed and flowed through every vein of him and controlled his action and destinies.

"What's the good of supposing?" he exclaimed. "That night at the restaurant−−I knew then what she might have meant in my life. And she's mixed up in this hell−broth in the Balkans, so I will probably run across her somewhere. I'd sell any woman if I had the chance, just because I couldn't help it. But her−−I wonder if I'd sell her? Oh, I reckon so."

He crossed the dark landing almost to fall into the arms of another man who was standing just inside the sitting−room.

"No, you wouldn't, old man," a voice exclaimed in his ear. "I don't know who the lady is, but it's not in you to sell a woman!"

"Cazalet! Good Lord!" Fenning came to a full stop, blank amazement on his face. "You here in Paris, by all that's wonderful! How does it come about, you who hate Paris as you hate sin, and what has brought you to me at this time of the morning? And, more wonderful still, how did you get in?"

Cazalet dropped into an easy chair, threw his hat on the floor at his feet, and laughed.

"Walked in, Jimmy. You forgot to bolt your door last night. Lively evening, eh, Jimmy?"

Fenning reached for the orange packet of cigarettes on the table, and tearing back the paper held it out.

"I suppose you would call it that. Anyhow, you know what my life is. That's right, burn some of this bad tobacco."

He pushed the tray containing the coffee jug and rolls to one side, and lounged against the edge of the table. His eyes swam to the pleasure of the inhaled tobacco smoke.

"When did you arrive?" he asked.

"About three hours ago."

"Night boat?"

Cazalet nodded. "Haven't you had your breakfast?" he counter− questioned. "The coffee looks cold."

"My breakfast never varies on occasions like these−−four cigarettes and an absinthe at half−past ten. By eleven I am game for anything." He laughed at the disgust on Cazalet's face. "Oh, I know you think I'm killing myself," he said. "But remember the sort of life I have to lead. Most people would call me a spy who gets his living by consorting with the biggest blackguards in the biggest cities in Europe. In some respects they would be correct; on the other hand, sometimes very far from the mark. Many of the best men and women I know flutter through the nether world of Paris. They have no creed except plunder and pleasure, but there is more human nature in some of them than in all the saints of your English middle classes. Lame dogs are either killed or helped over stiles in this world I move in. A curious world, too, Cazalet."

"Infernally curious, I should say," returned Paul.

"But I couldn't live without it. And I love these men and women, boy. Aye, I love 'em. They're human to the core."

Cazalet waved his cigarette towards the coffee−jug on the table.

"If you would only drink convivially with them in soda−water you wouldn't let your coffee get cold so often," he said. "I would like to take you in hand, Jimmy, and put you through a course of training. Remember, I'm no prude. Thousands of men call me a blackguard, but I have a deep appreciation of life, and I hate to see it chucked away. I would, for the good of your soul, give you a month of grenadine, and pull you down to plain soda in six weeks."

"Saints! Did you ever know a man divulge a secret on soda− water? Why, the chilliness of it makes him shut up his mouth in sheer hatred of everybody. And a woman−−the woman who knows the things I want to know−−would talk nothing but inanities if there were no colour in the glass."

"Then it must be a pretty rotten life, yours," Cazalet said. "I thought Fleet Street and Westminster were bad enough. We find some rogues there."

"How long are you staying in Paris, anyway?"

"Only a few hours; then I'm on the move again."

"I remember," Fenning said, with a grin, "that the last time we met−−it was at the Toledo, and you had a shock that night−− but I recollect your saying that you were going to take a short cut to the devil. Is that why you're here?"

"Not a bit of it. I'm going south−−Belgrade."

Fenning lifted his eyebrows with a flicker of surprise.

"For long?"

"I don't know." Cazalet thought he traced a note of curiosity in the question, easily as it had been put. "I came to see if you could help me while away a few hours."

"Where's your luggage?" Fenning snapped out.

"My portmanteau is at the hotel. I wired to England for the rest this morning. I can't go south till it arrives."

"A journey of impulse, eh? You were always erratic, my Paul. Business?"

"No. Call it impulse−−just that," Paul said. "What can you do for me?"

"I can give you the whole day up to four o'clock," Fenning responded. "You hate Paris, I know; but I'll make you worship her. Choose your programme."

"I'm lazy. I want to go no farther than the Louvre, and the finest déjeuner the Taverne Royale can give us to finish up with. It sounds like a common or garden tourist itinerary, but I want to get away from the main

boulevards."

An hour later and they were walking through the Tuileries Gardens towards the Louvre, Fenning chattering on every subject under the sun in his usual careless manner. He gave Cazalet word−pictures of life among the human wolves who haunt the steppes of the nether world−−pariahs, most of them, from the social life of the great city. He dressed them with colour and pagan ideas of virtue all his own, turning them round so that only their better natures were revealed, just as one might turn a puppet to hide the patches in the paint.

Cazalet had never really understood Fenning till now. He had always imagined him a man who accepted just what the gods chose to give him, who picked up his living in precarious fashion in the byways of underground diplomacy, who cared not whether he had money or debts so long as a life of semi−luxury were not denied to him. But now he found him a student of human nature, a man with the mission of humanity, a thinker, who could adapt himself to the haunts of the rich or poor with equal liking. And yet, could he have looked down a little deeper into Fenning's soul, he might have glimpsed the tragedy that lay there−−the tragedy of the man who, finding so much he could love and admire in the poorest human derelicts, was the less able to raise himself above them.

Fenning did not shield himself. He had no self−excuse; indeed, while he was talking, Cazalet fancied once or twice that he had no shame for his shortcomings. But most people have as much pride in their vices as in their virtues. To possess no vice proclaims a lack of knowledge of the world, and there are times in the life of every man when he likes to be thought worldly. In Fenning it might have been a pose; to Paul it was disguised sincerity.

He was silent. He revelled in Fenning's chatter. He might have been looking at the soul of the man who lived for the hour. The warmth of the sun dropping through the full foliage, clustering fresh and wonderful on the trees, stirred him to better feelings. Things about him became interesting. Much as he hated Paris, he began to feel now the sense of enchantment which she provides for others. To his sensitive nature Paris had always seemed an abscess on the heart of France into which all the puerility of a great race drew in its natural course. It was a narrow view. Fenning had told him so a hundred times, but he clung to it as he might to an old threadbare superstition. The artificiality of Parisian life, just plastering over the brutality and coarseness that lay so close beneath the surface, sickened him. Paris, he told himself, was even now but half civilised. Paris bedecked herself with beautiful architecture and every possible adornment of beauty to hide the ugly nakedness of her soul, the lust that lurked there, the brutality. The restless pursuit of pleasure, the cruelty, the whole gamut of crime kept under poor restraint−−all these things garnished up to appeal to the brute passions were as obtruding forces unsoftened by any understanding, or love for a wonderful city and a wonderful people. If he could have watched Paris at work, if he could have dreamed as Paris dreamed, the responding chord would have been struck. But Fenning, by the sheer conviction of his talk, was translating a life of which Cazalet knew nothing. And Paul became light−hearted.

"The little duchess−−how is she?" he inquired during a break in the conversation. "Another memory of that night at the Toledo. I can't forget that night, Fenning, for forty reasons."

"Oh, Stephanie?" Fenning burst into a peal of laughter. "She was a dear, was Stephanie. She went to Monte on Wednesday. Met a wealthy white−haired American at the Ambigu one evening−−sat next to him in the stalls or something−−and she discovered between acts one and two that he would pay her debts at the tables. Wonderful woman, Stephanie! Could convince a man that she had loved him almost from the moment when she first opened her little violet eyes. As for me, I spent pounds in buying her filets de volaille−−her favourite dish−−just to revel in her smile. She had a wonderful smile, had Stephanie, but no soul. She has forsaken the man who bought her filets de volaille for a keeper of Chicago pork yards."

"Jimmy, you are not fortunate with women," Paul said.

"I have told myself a hundred times that I am the luckiest man in the world, till I found one luckier than I. Eternal fidelity−−God! we've sworn it and believed in it−−till someone else taught us a new creed. A deeper pocket, a brighter pair of eyes−−where is your fidelity then?"

"And what is there in a woman of Stephanie's type to interest you, let alone fascinate you, Jimmy?" Cazalet asked. "You who profess to be a student of human nature."

Fenning shrugged his shoulders.

"She interested me. I cannot explain her. I wouldn't like to try. You can't explain a woman who fascinates you; she's the world walking on the world. Stephanie's many moods are like ripples on a pond, blowing this way and that in the cross strata of wind, the absolute shallowness of her at times was to me a big object lesson in life. I

knew she was mercenary. I knew she was shallow. I loved her little tempers, then hated her for them. I studied her as one of a species. I was interested in her −−just that. I never loved her. I knew from the first I never loved her. And then I folded her up in my thoughts whenever I left her, much as one lays away a curio that is interesting, that one values."

"I should hate a woman like that," said Paul.

"No, you would not. When you recognise the littleness of her world, and yet how complete it is for her, you must needs look on fascinated. You cannot help yourself. You are surprised and amused by turns. The most repulsive thing attracts because you must look at it. Stephanie was worldly; to you or me she must be interesting. But the so−called educated sections of society hate a worldly woman because they do not understand her, forgetting she is only the more blatant image of themselves."

Cazalet walked a dozen steps before he spoke again.

"Run your mind back to that night at the Toledo for a moment, Jimmy," he said. "Remember that table at the far corner, and the girl−−−−"

"The girl with the corals?"

"I always call her `the girl in the white frock'−−Josephine stepped out of an eighteenth century miniature," Paul said.

Fenning quickened his pace. He took care to keep his eyes on the ground.

"Yes, the girl in the white frock−−well?"

"You were trying to find out something about her. Did you?"

Fenning shrugged his shoulders. He was on his guard in a moment, the old instincts of conflict and subterfuge that had wrapped him about with an armour all his life choosing his words for him.

"Oh, very little," he answered. "Isn't it queer, Cazalet, how women who are by birth and education mapped out for a quiet life, a domestic life, hear the call of adventure, and must respond to it? She's a diplomatic free−lance, I should say, and that means perdition for a woman unless she knows the ropes. But there's something behind it all−−there must be. She'll probably get tired of it in a few months, and rank herself a failure till she makes a big success as some man's wife. A woman seldom reasons, Paul: she acts on impulse. That is what she has done; but some day the real call will come to her, and she will heed it. She'll love a man with her whole soul. She'll count love for what it is−−the biggest thing in life. I read it all in her face that night at the Toledo. And she's English, too, and pretty!"

"And that's all you know?" Paul inquired.

"Yes, that's about all."

"Then what were you doing outside her house one night about a week ago?"

"Outside her house?"

"Yes. Don't look innocent. The house with the green steps. A house very far West. You were there, because I saw you."

Fenning hesitated. Denial, he knew, was useless.

"And where were you?" he inquired.

"In the cab with the girl."

Cazalet glanced at him, but he observed no more than a quick tightening of the lips and a set expression drawing slowly over his face. They went on together in silence. It was as if something had sprung up from the ground that was unseen, yet made its presence felt and walked between them. And so in silence they entered the galleries.

The common interest of both in Art for a while brought them together again. But in the first gallery their tastes jarred. Cazalet left Fenning staring in silent worship at the Murillos; while he strode irritably ahead till he found his favourite Corots, unaware that Fenning was watching his every movement.

He was conscious of his friend's hand on his arm at last.

"Come away from that grey daub," Fenning whispered in his ear. "Don't you know, man, that that picture just reflects your mood? You can tell a man's temperament by his favourite artist, and yours is very grey just now."

"Grey?" Paul exclaimed. "All the colour in the world can be shown with a brush and a tube of grey paint when a man knows how to use them. Look there!"

He pointed to the picture before him, and Fenning stood looking, preening his head this way and that with the

pose of a connoisseur.

"A tube of grey paint and a mood, Paul. Yes, it's there. Give me colour, but that−−that's wonderful. The man dreamed it on canvas."

They waited together, staring at the little Corot in the corner. It was a small pool, and it seemed to waken to life, the very waters to move, and the leaves to pulse to the breath of day as the eye bore the artist's meaning to the brain. The canvassed figures beside it stood out and breathed and seemed to quiver just as one would imagine life awaking in marble. And these wood nymphs, changed from paint to flesh and blood, were stealing through the gentle wreaths of grey gauze−−the tones that lie upon valley pools at dawn, and rise from them with the morning. The mists were moving! They clambered around the trees, and put their damp breath upon the cool leaves; they caught the fragile reflections that cling to the breasts of still waters−−reflections that stole into long, gaunt shadows where the willows leaned to the heavy overlying banks; and then, with some starting flame of light, rose like a spirit affrighted. The concealed wonder of the thing inflamed Fenning. He half closed his eyes that his imagination might frame the canvas.

"I hate your deep colours. One of your Murillos would kill my appetite if it hung in my dining−room," Paul was saying. "But just give me those soft−limned branches against the mist, that faint glow leaping from slow waters when day creeps on. I have seen it thousands of times in those Normandy valleys . . . Come, Fenning, I'm hungry."

"An artist would say that picture is a meal," said Fenning. "But I am not an artist. I fancy a trout at the Royale. I want the best déjeuner in Paris; then we shall agree." He linked his arm in his friend's. "I cannot argue on an empty stomach," he said.

They went down the steps and back into the open air of the gardens.

"Do you know," Fenning began, shuffling his stride to suit his companion's, "if you are in doubt as to how far you agree with a man, take him into a picture gallery just one hour before a late lunch." He looked at his watch. "You'll probably be bitter enemies for exactly that hour. But you'll vote your friend the best critic over the Pommard. . . . Yes, that trout, cooked in wine−−let us hurry."

"Then you think we'll agree about everything in the world over lunch?" asked Paul, with a laugh. "Jimmy, you gourmet!"

Fenning muttered.

"No, we won't agree about one thing ever," he said aloud. "The girl with the corals. We both think we are the only man she ought to marry. But it's all vanity, Paul. Neither of us is worthy to kiss her little satin shoe. You'll carry the Josephine miniature in your heart all your life. So shall I. We've got to: it's the picture on the altar we've set up. And we know all the time that we could go just one better than the other to make her happy. We would sell our cramped souls to the devil−−at his own price, by gad!−−to give her a moment's happiness. But we'll never get her, either of us. We shall just be lookers−on. Some man will marry her who won't know the wonder of her as we do. But, old chap, we'll both keep her image stuck up to say our prayers to."

It was frank confession. To Paul they were words of challenge. Yet he loved the man beside him for his courage.

"We men are fools!" he said.

"Not fools, Paul−−just slaves. But give a pretty woman her slaves, or she will perish of ennui."

"She isn't that sort," exclaimed Paul. "She wouldn't spoil a man's life. She wouldn't play the fool with a man, because she knows it's a crime. It's not a social crime. Society would call her a brick for turning down an inconvenient marriage. But Society's built that way."

"And we're nothing to her," said Fenning.

"No, we're nothing to her," Paul answered him.

They walked awhile in silence.

"You know about the hundred others. I suppose you would say she was the hundred and first?" Fenning suggested. "You think I'd just class them all together. You would say I was lying if I said I loved her."

"I might say you were imaginative."

"And you?"

"I've met hundreds of women. She's different."

"She'll jilt you."

"I have no doubt. We blackguards don't mate with the angels. But she's pretty big, Jim."

"I know that. Women mess about with men's lives. Don't mean to, but they do. And they make men out of silly idiots sometimes. I'd like to try and live up to that girl for five years without her knowing. Of course I couldn't do it, no more could you. She'll marry the man who's born to grow up good."

"She'll wreck herself if she does," said Paul. "No man grows up good. He cultivates respectability as he might a radish. I don't believe in the clear−conscience bridegroom. If I had a son I'd say to him, `Sow your wild oats, sow 'em double−rowed if you like, but sow 'em, and sow 'em deep. Then go to the woman whom God made for you and say, "I've reaped my harvest; I've learned all the world can teach me, and it's a simple, silly lesson with a big moral. And the moral is−−you!"' I'll tell that to my son, Jim!"

"And what do you think she would say to that?"

Fenning paused and waited for his friend's answer.

"If she were a real woman she'd say nothing; she'd have heard nothing. But she'd know she'd captured a bit of unalloyed heaven on the day she married my son."

"And our little goddess of the corals−−−−" began Fenning.

"She wasn't born to marry a plaster saint," Paul returned.

"But she'll jilt us, Paul−−both of us. Aren't we rather foolish comparing notes like this?"

"And if she does?" Cazalet said.

"Oh, I suppose we'll go on worshipping a girl with wonderful eyes whom we once knew. And we'll get a bit of consolation out of our dismissal−−a man who craves for the woman he cannot have always does. We'll know that we meant a few moments of her life to her. And those moments, Paul, will be our eternities."

They walked on till they reached the Taverne Royale, and each told himself that he could read the mind of the other, each felt a sense of superiority, the growing knowledge of things as he had shaped them out for himself. At the glass doors Fenning stopped and bought a paper from the newsboy as he passed.

"Hear what he was shouting?" he said. He tore back the paper and bent over it. He ran his eye up and down the sheets.

"Wasn't listening," exclaimed Cazalet.

"Here it is. `Murder of Count Stolpin.' . . . You remember that man, Paul. He gave you his card at the Toledo."

"A foreigner rather excited with wine. No doubt a capital fellow."

Paul knew that his cheeks were white.

"Yes, killed on his yacht, the Diomed, in Dover Harbour last night. No clue to the murderer. But a foreign torpedo boat was seen leaving the harbour shortly after the affair must have taken place. Here's a stop−press about a man seen rowing in an open boat for the shore."

"Usual thing−−police bungle," said Cazalet.

"If you had an atom of imagination, you would say it might be the truth," Fenning retorted.

"I prefer to remain unimaginative, and I'm infernally hungry," said Paul.

They took possession of a small table. Fenning remained studying his paper. "You don't understand what it all means; I do. You don't see the fearful significance of it," he said when the waiter thrust the menu card in front of him.

"Why talk in riddles?" Paul said easily. "Tell me what you mean."

"Oh, nothing. Let's order that trout. I'm starving."

"And after that?" Paul said. He leant across the table and transferred the menu to his friend's plate. As he did so he heard the crinkle of the papers in his breast pocket. The sound irritated his nerves, and made him for a moment afraid.

"I'm for cutlets and petits pois," he jerked out. "Yes, I wonder what the motive was? And the man in the boat−−I wonder what he knows? Really our police are getting infernally slack. And the torpedo boat with the woman in it?"

Fenning looked up quickly.

"Who said there was a woman on the vessel?" he asked. "The paper said nothing about that."

It was a moment of stress. Paul took a coin from his pocket and laid it on the table.

"Fenning, are you so young that you don't know that there's a woman in everything−−even a torpedo boat, when there's murder going? See, here's a twenty−franc piece. It's yours if it doesn't turn out that there's a woman

at the bottom of this affair, that a woman is the pivot on which it turns."

Fenning flung out his hand with a gesture of impatience.

"I hate losing money, Paul. Put it away," he said.

CHAPTER VI. THE JEST OF THE DEAD

FENNING devoured his trout moodily and almost without speaking. He glanced up now and then to find Paul's eyes upon him, then with some cursory remark about the cosmopolitan gathering at the near tables, he continued the solemn ritual of his déjeuner. He emptied his small bottle of Graves, slowly ate the last morsel of Roquefort that lay on his plate, placed a black Italian cigar carefully between his lips, and folded his arms upon the table.

"Paul," he said, "I'm ready to talk."

There is nothing that unnerves a man so much as being cooped up in a crowd any member of which may be his enemy. Cazalet had eaten scarcely anything, and his eyes never ceased to watch every person in the room for some sign, some signal that would prove that he was recognised.

"Then let's get out of this place; it's stifling," he replied. He signed to the waiter, and hurriedly paid the bill before Fenning could remonstrate, and they strolled out towards the Madeleine.

"I prescribe an absinthe for you−−you are not yourself," Fenning said, slipping his arm through that of his companion.

"Nerves," said Paul.

"Or murder?" Fenning suggested. "That yacht business−−−−"

"Then why refer to it?"

"I can't get it off my mind. And my nerves are all on edge too. Depression after a Royale lunch−−it's sacrilege!"

They reached a café near the end of the Rue Caumartin, and sat down at one of the marble−topped tables.

"The little green god will put some colour into the streets for you yet," Fenning said, when the waiter brought the absinthe, and placed the glasses with a clatter in the ware saucers.

"For which reason you drink this unholy stuff?" Paul pointed to the road. "Is absinthe going to blind your eyes to sights like that?"

Fenning looked in the direction indicated. What he saw was merely an episode in the one long procession of pain of the Paris streets, a cab from which a driver slashed a tottering, limping beast to a gallop, that he might filch an extra sou from the spruce, overfed youth who lolled back in the carriage in an attitude of smug self−satisfaction on his way to some haunt of pleasure.

Fenning laughed.

"You've got to shut your eyes to all that if you want to enjoy life," he said. "What could you do? Write one of your bitter articles in the English press? It's dead, man, as soon as the paper is out of currency. Knock the man down and be summoned for assault, and laughed at into the bargain?"

"It's a pretty hopeless thing, civilisation, sometimes−−the brute stalks everywhere."

"But if there were no misery, we who have missed it wouldn't find it good to live," Fenning said. "It's all this ugliness that makes the better things more beautiful. You ought to be a contented man; you've most things you want."

Paul picked up the spoon, and, placing it across the glass, began to pour the water drop by drop through the sugar. He watched it trickle down and turn the green−brown liquid to grey.

"As you say, what can I do?" he said. "I suppose we're all brutes at heart. Civilisation has only given us a gentleman's coat to hide it."

He put down the carafe, and sipped at his glass in silence. Fenning had only shown him how impotent he was. The years spent in fighting cruelty with the Press as his double−edged weapon−−what had it brought him, what reform could he ever tell himself he had achieved? And it was a form of madness with him, this crusade against brutality, but his whole life's work would be no more than a drop in the ocean, lost and swallowed up. He could not deaden the cry of the child, driven against its little wisdom to attempt some task which God whispered into its cramped soul as impossible. He could not stem the gasping of the flogged beast that meant nothing to the ill−formed caricature of its Creator who plied the thong.

"You've begun at the wrong end. Stop the torture of humanity and then come down to the beasts," Fenning

was saying. "You're trying, I know, but things will always be as they are. By the way, that speech of yours was even discussed in the Matin."

"It's the last I'll make for many a day. I don't think I ever want to see the House again."

Fenning leant across the table.

"Why are you going to Belgrade?" he said.

"Curiosity."

If Paul noticed the expression on his friend's face he failed to translate it.

"When do you start?"

"To−morrow."

"So soon! And what about to−day? I want to show you some of my wolves, my criminals you will never cure. Come with me to− night, will you?"

Paul thought for a moment.

"Yes, I'll come," he said.

"Then you'll get your fill of pleasure and tell me in the morning that my criminals are saints in ragged clothing. It'll be an experience for you, my friend. Another absinthe?"

"You shall buy me one to−night when I tell you my frank opinion of your friends," Paul laughed.

Fenning got up.

"Come, let's be moving," he said. "How can a café−keeper make his place pay on two absinthes and a table occupied for nearly two hours?"

They strode off side by side. Almost as they reached the corner of the Grand Hotel Fenning felt a touch on his arm and turned. A man was standing there looking uncertainly up into his face. He was dressed in rough cloth, a little out of keeping with the garments of those who jostled him upon the pavements; one might have met him in Montmartre. The hair of his head, coming down in a wave at the back of his ears from under his tweed cap, was marked with grey. And he glanced quickly at Paul with an expression of doubt flashing across his face, looked again, then pulled Fenning aside and said something in an undertone.

Paul waited, vexed and annoyed at the interruption. But something about the man's face seemed vaguely familiar to him. Somewhere in the many episodes of his life he had met this man and had spoken to him, the very tones of his voice told him that. He was juggling with his memory when Fenning interrupted.

"You'll be round at eight, then. I must see this fellow; it's important. You don't mind?"

"As though I should!"

"And you shall watch my menagerie and finish up with a little supper at the Croix d'Argent. I've planned it all in my mind. I'm going to teach you to love Paris to−night, my Paul."

He broke away laughing, but the merriment on his face dropped into seriousness as he joined the waiting man and disappeared down the Rue Halevy.

Cazalet retraced his steps. He had yet an hour to spare, and he spent it at a café table, watching, as he loved to watch, the life that changed on these boulevards even as the hour changed. He could have told the time by the type of women who passed along the great thoroughfare. The clothing of sombre type−−the grey and black−−melted imperceptibly into more gaudy colours. The expression on the faces of the men appeared brighter, happier as the day closed down. Paris threw off her shackles as he waited; she grew smiling and reckless.

He got up at length and walked down to the Madeleine. People were passing up the great steps, old men in solemn black, the younger generation in brighter clothes; widows with heads bowed as if their memories were more than they could bear; a slut−of− all−work in a neatly−patched dress; a Society woman rubbing shoulders with her, and for the first time in the day forgetting that she was better than those about her. Paul, naturally observant, watched the miracle, amazed at the levelling of classes under the test of reverence. He went up and passed through the big doors.

At the bottom of the aisle he stood waiting. The glow of lights, the solemn show, the soft mutter of a bell, the wisp− like passing of figures to and fro against some distant altar, had in them all the mystery of worship of the intangible, of the unseen Force. He stepped to one side with muted footsteps. He bowed his head with the respect that compels, and felt the sense of Power, impossible to define, yet which was everywhere. He was conscious for the first time in his life of the presence of Might very near him. He realised, too, the fraternity that linked to him the common seller of cabbages, or some such commerce, who had just risen from his knees with the settled

determined look upon his face that comes with understanding. Cazalet stood there, vaguely mystified, yet knowing that in the great city of eternal pleasure, of brutality and sin, there yet lurked a sanctity where faith found its sheet anchor, where hatred, lust, and cruelty fell away like a load at the church door, and the greatest sinner entered in with the simplicity of a little child.

Three figures were kneeling at the altar just inside the door. He scanned them one by one; an old man whose knee−joints almost creaked as he knelt, his lips curling in an expression of pain, a woman in heavy mourning, and another whom he seemed to recognise. The hand thrust out along the rail with the large emerald ring on the second finger recalled that of a woman he had once known. Her head was bowed over the rail, one hand covering her face. It was the build of her figure, the delicate slimness of her hands, and the long narrowing fingers that shaped some picture in his memory. And yet had he not felt a sense of recognition for the man who had accosted Fenning in the street? It was merely the play of his imagination; the stress of the last few hours was making him afraid of his own shadow.

He crept a little way up the aisle and sat in an empty chair. He scarcely knew what was going to happen, but adventure seemed to be waiting at his elbow.

A voice was chanting a Benedicite; he listened to the music of it, the melody which the building developed in the human speech. The fragrant odour of incense came floating to him in little waves that stilled his senses; a pool of crimson light was falling on the flagstone at his side from some window. He took in all these things in an abstract manner, when every moment he expected a hand to touch his shoulder. The moments passed, and the worshippers began to go out, and he got up and joined them. A fine rain had begun to fall. Slowly he shuffled his way down the steps, conscious that the mission had failed.

And the first person who greeted him was Fenning.

The two stood looking at each other, a little uncertain, neither for the instant daring to speak. Then Fenning put up his hand to his coat, and lifting the collar showed a small badge of silver and enamel hidden behind it.

Paul drew back a step. "Then he sent you!" he said.

Fenning laughed.

"Fate's a good jester," he answered. "Or shall we lay the jest to the credit of the dead? I've been carrying papers about all day to give to the Count's messenger." He thrust his hand inside his coat, produced a packet and gave it to Paul. "I had no idea you were the man, but just a suspicion crossed my mind when I met that ruffian to−night."

"What ruffian?"

"The man to whom you gave a sovereign at Dover for a boat in which to row out to the yacht. He recognised you. He even believes you are the man who shot Count Stolpin dead in his cabin."

Paul closed his eyes as if trying to recall the night on that wind−swept pavement when he had asked a man emerging from the darkness for the hire of a boat. "Yes, I remembered his face."

"The Count sent him there on purpose to meet you, it seems. At first I thought the man was lying. I did not think you would get embroiled in this business; I never believed you would dare."

"A man would dare anything when he is desperate," Paul answered.

Fenning put his hand on his friend's arm.

"Desperate−−you?" he exclaimed. "At any rate you must hide yourself in Paris or leave it quickly," he said. "I am no alarmist, but I mean what I say. I have told you that the greatest ruffian has his virtue; that man's fidelity to the Count is his. It's an eye for an eye, Paul. He is one of my wolves."

"Then I will get back to my hotel. I'm taking no risks with papers about me."

Fenning hesitated.

"No, come with me," he said. "They will never suspect you in my rooms, but they would plunder an hotel in half an hour for a man they wanted. The papers will be quite safe in my bed. I have an excellent straw mattress. It's there I hide things. And I leave my door open for anyone to walk in and look round. I even provide the absinthe and a carafe of water on the table. They love my hospitality too much to rob me. Yes, you are quite safe there. I'll rig you up in some clothes and hide you to−night in the middle of those who would take your life. Come, we are being watched. That woman on the top of the steps is a spy; we've been playing hide−and−seek with each other for weeks. And she's one of those women who do know the ropes."

Paul glanced back and saw a woman looking down at them. There was an expression of half surprise, half fear

on her face. He grabbed at Fenning's arm.

"Take me away from here quickly," he exclaimed fiercely. "You can't mean that−−it's impossible."

"Impossible? Hurry! . . . You've lost your nerve!"

"That woman−−you know who she is?"

Paul staggered through the gates on his friend's arm. His head was swimming, his feet dragging with the heavy slouch of a drunken man.

"Of course I do."

"You lie!" Paul exclaimed with heat. "You don't know. She's fooled you like the rest of us. We're all dupes. She's Lady Penstone!"

Fenning stared, amazed, into his friend's face.

"Man, you're raving. I don't know that you are not stark, staring mad! You are talking like an idiot. Lady Penstone?" He burst into a loud laugh. "Don't you remember the night at the Toledo? Have you forgotten so soon? The paper−−that little bit Pentelow pointed out to you? The sudden birth of Lord Penstone's heir that robbed you of your inheritance. Damn it, man, you're no good at this game! You're mad!"

A wave of passion swept over Paul.

"Mad, am I?" he burst out. "Don't you think a mercenary brute like I am would remember every feature of the woman who robbed him of a fortune? Do you think I don't know her?"

"Then the whole thing's a fraud, and you−−you?" Fenning began.

"Yes, Jimmy, and I'm going through with it−−I'm going to Belgrade. We'll take our tally of the reckoning when the game's over. I'm going through to the bitter end with it."

"Going through with it when you're probably worth a quarter of a million? And you think you're sane? Little fishes! Men don't do that in their right minds; they fight, fight like the deuce for what is theirs by law. You're going back to prove that will, Cazalet, and open up the biggest fraud the English papers have got hold of for donkeys' years. That's what you are going to do."

"You're wrong, Jimmy−−wrong all the time," Cazalet laughed back. He walked quickly forward now like a man sure of himself, sure of his purpose. "I'm going on to Servia to−morrow."

"But why?"

"Because she said we'd meet there," Paul replied.

"Who? Lady Penstone?"

"No, you idiot. The girl in the white frock!"

Fenning tugged at his friend's arm.

"Run away from a fortune. Just because of a girl! Oh, you amazing male!" he exclaimed. Then he added, as if to himself: "Some of us should be thankful that we're sane!"

CHAPTER VII. WHERE THE CROWS GATHERED

PAUL was quite certain that the coat fitted him vilely. He turned about in front of Fenning's small looking−glass, better to judge the effect. His every pose only increased his irritability. There were great creases running away from the buttons. Then the thing was too long, to begin with, and the shoulders looked as if they had lumps of clay secured beneath them. He turned up the collar, only to find that it completely hid his ears.

"Do you think I am going to wander through Paris in a get−up like this?"

He turned half−savagely upon Fenning, who sat upon the corner of the bed and rocked with laughter.

"Jimmy, I look a fool!"

"Why trouble to explain, dear boy? The thing is so perfectly obvious. How can an over−fed person of your stamp expect to disguise himself as a lath? It's so mighty ridiculous! Of course, they'll think you picked it up at some second−hand shop, and that the Jew who kept it `had' you badly. It's easy enough to dress up a man to look a gentleman; but to disguise a gentleman as a street loafer is not a matter of dress, but of intelligence. You have the, misfortune to be a rogue without looking it. To dress down to you would require a Clarkson."

"Your usual splutter!" exclaimed Paul. He began to unfasten the buttons carefully lest they should fly off like bullets under the strain. "I would refuse to be found dead in a costume like that," he said.

"As you like," Fenning answered. "All the same, if you don't assume a dress in keeping with your conscience, you'll have no choice in the matter of life or death. Remember, Paul, I accept no responsibility. I'm not a walking insurance policy for you."

" Yet you want me to go somewhere−−heaven knows where−− dressed as a buffoon! You want me to defraud your wolves by appearing as one of them."

"Wrong, old man," Fenning answered. "You are one of them. Oh, don't think I have false ideas about you. We understand each other, you and I."

"Too well," said Paul.

"You may be a respectable member of Parliament. Votes made you that, but platform lying brought those votes. You're a fraud; I'm a fraud; but we're going among men who don't burke the truth−−ruffians at heart, maybe, but they are honest in their ideals. They believe in anarchy−−possibly in massacre: it's their primitive way of looking at things. Aye, you shall see my wolves to−night, Paul. And that coat−−why, it clothes your conscience as if it were cut for it."

Paul Cazalet leant against the dressing−table and lit a cigarette.

"You're infernally blatant to−night," he said, irritably. "I am getting tired of this clowning."

"The truth isn't always palatable, even to a political journalist," said Fenning. He got up, put his hands in his pockets, and began to walk the room. "What was that woman doing at the Madeleine?" he asked.

"I don't know. I shall write to England and find out."

"You will write to England after that extremely interesting episode in Dover Harbour? You dear innocent! Of course, you were the man in the boat; you'll give me credit for knowing that."

Paul realised what, in the excitement of the hour, had escaped his memory. Since he had been robbed of his inheritance by a trick, he could not hope to regain it by open warfare. He dared not disclose his whereabouts, dared not make a single inquiry. Few men develop a taste for facing a charge of murder.

"You surely do not believe that I−−−−" he began.

"Shot Count Stolpin? My Paul, you have more perception. You are so disgustingly scrupulous, and even you would have taken better precautions for getting away. You've got a brain; you wouldn't let it play the sluggard while someone cut your throat. Besides, you had nothing to gain, so far as I can see. And you didn't come to France in a torpedo boat."

"Then you believe that story?" Paul inquired.

"And why not? It seems so feasible that the police will probably pay no attention to it. They have not reached the romantic age yet. For a foreign warship to drop in among the craft in Dover Harbour! Good Lord, Paul, your most intelligent constable would never listen to such a tale. He would tell you that the fleet would not permit it. No; they will look, all of them, for the man in the rowing−boat. . . . Be frank, and tell me what happened."

Paul related every incident of that night's adventure, and all the while Fenning strode the room, his forehead puckered as if he were trying to piece together the threads of clues.

"Now," said Paul, as he concluded, "who shot the Count?"

"I really don't know," Fenning replied.

"You have suspicions?"

"At least a dozen, dear boy. I haven't sorted them out yet. And they all want labelling with their respective merits. Come, now. Stolpin knew you were going to keep the appointment on the yacht. He knew more: he knew you had decided to go to Servia. And yet, how did he know? His instructions to me were most explicit; he knew his man. And if I had thought awhile I might even have recognised you from those instructions, except that I never believed you would go so far."

"You thought I hadn't the pluck of a mouse. You believed I was merely piqued by my ill luck that night at the Toledo, and that I'd drop into the same old rut in the morning."

"Of course. The report of that kid's birth hit you badly. I saw that. I thought you would return to Parliament and your wonderful theories about reforming criminals."

"I might have done−−yes, I might have done," Paul said quietly. But his thoughts went swinging back−−back to a night when Life opened out her arms to him, when the tocsin of the greater world sounded with clamouring insistence. He remembered those words in the cab: "We shall meet in Servia." And following them his own answer, "Nothing is farther from my thoughts than to go there." Yet he was going to Belgrade to− morrow.

"That night at the Toledo, Fenning−−the girl in the white frock−−what became of her?" He put the question bluntly.

"You should know. You appear to have been her confidant."

"I don't. I want you to tell me."

"Since you must know, then, she's in Paris."

"In Paris?"

"Aye, in Paris."

Paul grew ashen. He looked at his companion with wide staring eyes.

"Yes," Fenning went on in his cool, even voice, "she's number eleven in my suspicions."

Paul said nothing. The whole world seemed to be twisting round before his mind. He breathed hard. It seemed to him that the subtle odour of lilies of the valley was being pumped into his lungs like chloroform. The atmosphere of the room grew to reek of it, at least, so he fancied. And if he told what he knew −−heaven, if he told that!

The mood passed. His senses steadied at the prospect of argument. He must fight for her, he knew that. And the suspicions must be driven from Fenning's mind before their fragile roots took hold and grew.

"It's absurd!" he cried. "It couldn't be, Fenning. You understand women as well as I; and can you see that girl stealing aboard a yacht and shooting a man in cold blood? That girl, mark you. She had no grudge against Stolpin. Would she commit murder for the sake of ambition?"

Fenning shrugged his shoulders; a wave of smoke from his cigarette, rank and stale, floated out to his companion.

"Some women will sacrifice anything for ambition, advancement; cause any suffering, any pain," he said. "Why should she be different from the others?"

"Because she is different."

"We think so, you and I, since it pleases us; self−delusion is the first symptom of devotion. I have quite an open mind, but she is number eleven in my suspicions. Even you may shoot a better man than Stolpin yet, Paul. When a woman is roused from herself−−then you might as well try to dam the ocean, or climb a poplar to touch the stars. And a woman in search of adventure −−tchut! I know the whole rabble of them. Tell me, to begin with, why you are going to Belgrade?"

"Heaven knows!" Paul answered carelessly.

"I'll tell you. Why does a City clerk on thirty shillings a week throw up his position for a doubtful post at a small increase of salary somewhere else? He burdens himself with anxiety; he may never retain his post a month, and he knows it before he takes the plunge. It's the call of adventure singing through his blood. And you are going to Belgrade in answer to the same call. You have no interest in the political turmoil there, no grievance, no axe to

grind, but you are going. Don't you see that adventure, more than any other impulse, shapes the life of every man and woman amongst us? We hear its call and we go blindly. We must go. Strike out adventure from our lives and we become mere machines, pulsing to a common rhythm; but machines all the time. Adventure makes the accidents of life; the accidents create the failures and shape the successes. Adventure is a big soul−monger; it buys us and sells us according to our own market value. Some have more courage than others: they are worth more. The rest wander along through life in a rut: they don't count. They are the refuse of the big soul−market, and are priced as such."

Paul judged Fenning's philosophy in silence.

"But supposing it's not adventure that is sending me to Belgrade at all? What if it were something more closely linked to my own life?" he said.

"I know what you mean," Fenning answered. "Your own questions have told me. If you want to tell the truth, ask a question with an obvious answer. That's by the way. You are going because of a woman; but love is the most deadly bait of adventure, and you of all men ought to know it. Remember, whatever the means, we are ready to be bought body and soul by the main chance if what we term the right colour turns up. We call it good or bad luck. Men and women are doing it every day; some by the hearth−side, others in the circles of open finance. You are going to do it now for the first time in your life."

"I confess I don't follow you," said Paul.

"You do at heart. Aren't we all gamblers? The woman gambles on her husband's love when she marries; the man gambles day by day for another shilling a week, another fifty pounds a week. But the fundamental force is at the back of it all. It begins and ends in adventure−−the disregarded instinct, the controlling power, nevertheless, that makes both sexes common slaves. Don't think I'm moralising: I'm not. But when I go back over your footsteps for the past few days, do you think I don't see how completely you've been sold in the open market? Oh, never mind! Let's get to those papers!"

Paul produced the two wallets of papers, the one given him by Count Stolpin but a few minutes before he took the lead in his heart, and the second thrust into his hand at the base of the Madeleine steps by Fenning.

"There is no need to open that one," Fenning said, thrusting aside the package worn to the creases of his own pocket. "It contains introductions to a number of people in Belgrade−− letters of mark and so forth. The honour of half a dozen of the principal officers in the Servian army is in that sealed envelope; it won't stand the light of day. But they are useful, these men. Prime them with slivovits and black cigars, and they'll be very useful."

He took up the other package and balanced it in his hand. "Open it," he said.

"By whose orders, my friend?"

Fenning detected the first note of distrust. He looked up sharply from under his heavy black−lashed eyelids. His thumb had forced its way under the ungummed portion of the envelope flap, and he withdrew it quickly.

"You don't think I should betray you?" he inquired. His voice was a little unsteady.

"No, I don't think so."

"And yet you hesitate?"

"If I doubted you should I be content to leave those papers in your rooms? My orders were to open this packet in Belgrade. It is the command of the dead, and as such must be obeyed."

Fenning threw the packet across the table irritably. He got up lazily. "That's the worst of our world," he said; "friendship isn't current coin. Not till you know the depth of a man's villainies do you trust him. You think you don't know me yet, so let my wolves convince you. Come, get into that coat again, button it tight, push this cap down over your ears, and let's call a cab. You can go in evening dress and pose as a peer of the realm if you choose; but you'll be happier in that coat. One suspects a villain as readily in evening dress as in rags."

He held out his hand for the packets, and Paul handed them over and waited while he pushed them into a small crevice in his mattress. Then he sat down again and watched Cazalet dress. In a few minutes they were groping their way down the dark staircase.

In the streets the wind bit hard. The cold was sweeping up from the river. The wet chill touched and damped their cheeks. A rickety fiacre with a stumbling horse lurched past, and Fenning hailed it. He let Paul climb in and stood on the pavement, fingering his cigarette case and muttering something to the driver.

He jumped quickly into the vacant seat, and rolled himself up in a comer like a centipede. Neither spoke, but Cazalet could see his little beady eyes staring straight ahead as the splashes of light from passing gas−lamps

caught them. They swung down an endless network of streets, twisting and turning till the points of the compass became hopelessly entangled in Paul's mind. Now along cobbled alleys they went−−alleys that broke suddenly into gaudily−lit boulevards, and all the while the carriage rocked and bumped in crazy fashion, and the ceaseless thud of the lash on lean flanks never varied its monotony. Spires, blurred and ridiculous in the deceptive light that deformed them, reared themselves into the mist that clung above the blotches of light.

They turned a corner sharply, and a blare of laughter rose at them from a low brasserie. On the kerb beside it−−the pallor of the gaslight striking one side of her face and giving an evil twist to the expression−−a woman stood gibing at two men in evening dress, one of whom was clutching drunkenly at his friend's arm.

The scenes, the sounds, made up a portrait of life that forced itself upon Cazalet's memory. They were rushing into the dark again, where heavy buildings dwindled into lean effigies of modern architecture, where the roofs, thrown as if by some giant hand this way and that, stood out against the moonlight like the jagged edges of a saw. The lights in the streets grew fewer and more feeble. From somewhere came the shriek of a child. And in the darkest corners grotesque, squalid figures clung about forbidding doorways, and turned white, starved faces to the cab as it swept past. It was as if the very air was charged with human suffering, and in the voice of the wind seemed to come the cry of pain.

"Have you discovered what she was doing at the Madeleine?" Fenning's words recalled Cazalet from his dream. "Of course she's a spy, we know that. But the farce of a child? And is her husband really dead?"

"Do you think if I knew I should be here?" Paul argued.

"I think you would, because you mean to see this thing through. There's something of the brute, pig−headed fighter about you. Tell me. If her husband were dead and there were a child she would handle a fortune?"

"Yes."

"Which she might devote to anything. It might pay her way in Belgrade, for instance, supplemented with presents from the Russian bear?"

"I don't know what to think. I hate to think about it at all."

"Of course you do, because you are greedy for your share, and you want the taste of adventure first. Moreover, you hate being tricked by a woman."

"Possibly."

"Well, to put the case frankly, I should say that a very pretty farce has been played in the old country. There was a funeral no doubt, but I would wager there's lead in the coffin. And a few hundredweight of lead will carry a ton of conviction. As for the child who has cheated you out of your heritage−−dear boy, how splendidly you have been fooled!"

"I don't think I care very much what has happened just now," Paul confessed. "There will be a day for squaring the account; it may be tomorrow or a year and a day from now; it does not very much matter."

"You appear to be sure; I'm not," Fenning replied doubtfully. "The plot seems to me so infernally clever. For you and I alone suspect that anything is wrong. We know that something is wrong. But you cannot lift a finger to help yourself.

For all we know, even Penstone may be alive still."

"If I thought that−−−−" Paul broke in.

"Don't put yourself to the trouble. We're in Belleville. And here the game begins. That door there−−under the broken−down lamp that badly needs a coat of paint−−that's where my wolves snarl. And in a moment you shall hear them."

The cab rasped to a standstill against the kerb, and Fenning jumped out. In a moment Paul was at his side on the pavement, his nerves taut and ready for any emergency. They were standing at a black door, down which little streams of rust from the iron clamps had coursed and left their stains. Fenning knocked sharply twice, and waited with a laugh on his face as if to be taken into a very good supper. And he was humming the latest air from the Olympic.

Shuffling footsteps sounded beyond, a lock was drawn back and a grizzled face peered slowly round the aperture. Fenning pushed his way through in silence and drew Paul in after him.

No word was spoken. The door was closed and bolted again. Overhead a red lamp burned, and threw ruddy shadows that capered over the walls and danced a two−step on the glass of the pictures. A few framed photographs hung at odd angles−− around one of them, that of the dead Karageorgevitch, Alexander, some red,

blue and white ribbon had been entwined. And just below was a maroon Serb dress with a bullet hole through the back scorched by a pistol fired at close quarters. The inscription beneath it told of a patriot who had left a memory, On the floor of the large hall a few Pirot rugs were scattered, and at the top of the staircase dark red curtains hung about the entrance to the room. Paul could just hear the melody of a violin playing a low swinging valse, and the sharp mutter of voices.

He glanced at the man who had opened the door. He had the hard, rugged face of a Serb, the high cheek−bones, and the broad forehead with the bronze skin stretched tightly across it. He bowed as Fenning, turning away, went up the stairs.

Paul, as he followed, contrasted his dress with the apparent luxury of the surroundings. But Fenning was holding back the curtains for him; in a moment he would have passed through, but he felt a light touch on his arm and swung round.

"Miss Lorimer!"

He was looking down into her little oval face. And he drew aside, ashamed of his appearance, but the loveliness of her held him captive. He studied her white throat where the fur cloak she wore was thrown open, then her red lips, her eyes like star− flames. She smiled at his dress till he flushed unconsciously.

"Why this disguise?" she laughed.

"Am I not in the enemy's camp?" he said.

"Or the camp of friends? I told you we should meet in Servia!"

"In Servia, little lady. Aye, you told me that. But we are miles from Servia to−night," He took her two hands and held them. "And since we have met−−−−" he began.

"We are not so far away from Servia as you think," she answered. "The heart of her is here."

Fenning had entered the room unobserved, and for a moment the two stood there. Then Paul followed her through the curtains.

The room was ablaze with lights, and the hot atmosphere passed in waves across their faces. Men and women mingled in clusters around little Oriental tables, talking, laughing, and gesticulating. Russians, Magyars, Serbs, Frenchmen, over there a gaudily dressed Turk, here a woman with the wonderful fresh complexion of northern Europe; they were all playing their parts in the great drama. A few in evening dress rubbed shoulders with the natives of the slums of capitals, the roughly clad, their cheeks dug out by suffering. But purpose was written upon the face of each. The sleek cat−like creature who leered up at Paul with bloodshot eyes grasped Jean's hand with a smile of recognition. If she had dined well and he had last fed on a crust at daybreak there was no distinction. Paul caught the spirit of the situation; verily the democracy of the Servian had piped the tune that the patriots might dance to it.

He grew light−hearted; the mood of these people enchanted him like a good wine. Class−hatred was dead; they lived for the moment, rich men and poor, lovers of a country which to some of them was but a vague memory. These men and women−−were they not the wastage of a Balkan nation linked by some mongrel sense of patriotism? The sound of the national airs and a glass of plum brandy would lift them up to heaven.

To Paul it was as if he looked upon a strange country from afar. It requires a national crisis to breed patriotism, and there was some factor at work here, some invisible cog in the machinery that gave him wonder. They might cry out for freedom, but he would not understand them. Was not the little nation of the mountains always free? A king's unfortunate marriage−−would they turn the State topsy−turvy for that?

His eyes sought Fenning, where he was engulfed in the human tide that surged about him. He saw him there, laughing, his head thrown back, his clear white teeth revealed, a slave to the verve of the hour. That he was worshipped it was easy to see. They loved him, these human wolves. A girl, pretty with the prettiness of the South, with eyes in which passion lived, was thrusting a glass filled with golden liquid into his hand, and Fenning drank deep. He handed back the empty glass and a jest with it; she flushed and smiled. There was a new sparkle in her eyes, a fluttering of her lips that responded to the throb of her heart. She loved him, the big nature of him, the heart of him beating to the music of humanity. Paul saw the reflection of her love grow slowly on her face.

He had never understood Fenning till now, and he looked on in silence. Then he found a chair for the girl at his side, and set it at one of the tables. She sat down and looked up laughing into his face.

"You didn't know Servia was quite like this?" she said.

"You are wonderful at reading a man's mind," he rejoined.

"You're interested, amused," she persisted. "At any other time you would have called these people ruffians and cut− throats!"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"And could you blame me?" he argued. "I almost felt a knife− blade between my shoulders when that long−haired rat offered you some iced−coffee! All this, too, in Paris! And I have been wondering why I came!"

Her expression changed in a moment.

"I will tell you why you came." She bent forward and spoke so quietly that he had to lean down to catch her words. "You came here to spy!"

He started and said nothing; he could find no words to answer her. For she had thrown down the glove of conflict, and he knew that he must pick it up.

CHAPTER VIII. IN WHICH SOME HEADS ARE CRACKED

THAT his life lay in her hands he knew in a moment. The very words she had uttered, the half−veiled threat in them, told him that Fenning had brought him to a hot−bed of anarchy, to the very heart of the enemy, and it needed but a word from this girl and these brute beasts would turn. She then was the daughter of revolution; her own words confessed it. He looked at her, and there was no prayer for mercy in his eyes. His only thought was one of curiosity. What would she do?

"How long has it taken you to arrive at that conclusion?" he asked carelessly at last. She was still smiling at him, and for the first time it seemed that there might have been all the cruelty of the world crowded into those big grey eyes.

"It was not a very hard riddle to solve, was it?" she said. She whipped out a little filmy handkerchief and passed it across her lips. "The Count commanded you and you came."

"Hardly," he replied. He stood away from her, his arms folded, his mouth puckered and angry. "No, hardly. The Count is dead."

"I am aware of it. He was shot in Dover Harbour twenty−four hours ago. The papers are full of the story; to them it's a most wholesome scandal."

"To me a cold−blooded murder," he flung back. "You can't disguise murder as scandal except in the newspapers. Let us flavour the newspaper reports with the truth, and say that he was shot by a woman."

"You know so much?"

"Possibly I know more." He looked at her quizzically, but she did not flinch. It was not a challenge, but an attempt to force his self−importance. "Ah, here's Fenning. He sponsored me. And all your taunts will be like water on a duck's back. No one ever convinced Fenning yet that he had done something he ought not to do."

Fenning came up to the table with a waiter at his heels. He was flushed with excitement, and his eyes were burning like live coals.

"Miss Lorimer," he cried, taking her hand. "If I had known you were to be here−−−−" He glanced up at the waiter. "Oh, what does this person want?" he said petulantly to nobody in particular. "Of course we will have something," he added. "Yes, a bottle of Duminy. They keep the most delightful wines here because we haven't the money to pay for them. The patriots drink slivovits, and think they are on the Teratsia at Belgrade. But it's so horribly plebeian when one is debating thrones. Yes, Albert, a bottle of Duminy. You'll find one if you grovel long enough in the cellar−−and coffee in an hour." He gave a naïve glance at Paul. "My friend here has never seen anything like this in all his life," he said to Jean. "He'll be telling me presently that I brought him here under false pretences. He expected a tea−meeting, and discovers himself in a bomb− factory."

"Where they make bombs that don't go off," broke in Paul bitterly. "The damper the squib, the more talk about it."

"Pray Heaven your hosts don't hear you," said Jean.

"And why not? Would you have me take them seriously? As I understand it, they are here to enjoy themselves. To me it is a conversazione in Wonderland."

"Wait, my Paul," said Fenning. "Keep your ears primed, for François is going to play. If you have not heard François you have never heard melody. He's a trimmer on the railway at twenty−five francs a week, and he makes music drop in tears from the strings of his violin in his spare time."

Paul glanced down the room and saw a cadaverous−looking creature climb slowly to the platform with an old instrument tucked beneath his arm. He stood there for a moment facing his audience, his long lean fingers toying with the strings of the violin. His coat was ill−cut and green with age, his trousers bagged to the bend of his knees. He might have been a street player dragged in from the pavements.

"Berthold of the Opera House heard him once by accident and raved," Fenning explained, as the waiter brought the champagne and filled the three glasses with crowns of shining foam.

"Who is he. and where did these gay dogs discover him?" Paul asked.

"Only Providence that watches over such sparrows could tell you," Fenning rejoined. "He is always here, yet we know nothing about him. They have never heard his music elsewhere in Paris, for he will only play to patriots.

But persuade him to play from a public platform and he could coin a statue of himself in gold in a week. He is a droll, is François." Fenning tapped his forehead significantly. "Genius," he said, "just that."

The thunder of applause broke over the crowded room as the violinist lifted his instrument to his shoulder with the tenderness of a child. But he never smiled, the set expression about the mouth never changed. He bowed, leant forward, frowned. And Fenning holding his glass in his long, tapering fingers clinked it against the others. "To you, Miss Lorimer, and you, Paul." For a moment he hesitated, the glass half way to his lips, then swallowed the wine at a draught.

The first notes burst from the violin.

"The Draga March!" someone cried and laughed. "The humour of the man!" A growl of sarcastic mirth rolled in a wave round the room. Hard by a Serb coupled an oath with a queen's name, and spat on the floor.

"May I inquire what this most excellent joke is?" Paul ventured in a whisper. "I hear a march divinely played, but I see no cause for laughter."

"It's the Draga March." Fenning bent low across the table. "They've gone mad on it in Belgrade; it's almost a national air among the Royalists. It was written to the Queen. The army marches to it when it wants to, and they get drunk to its lilt in the cafés whilst they talk scandal. Oh, the Draga March is a capital cause for levity, I assure you. It makes patriots of all of us," he mocked.

Paul sat silent in amazement. Yet the wonderful melody of the thing, played as this man played it, made him want to rise to his feet and shout. It had in it all the passion of a restless people, the whole fund of rapturous song run riot. He could hear in it the tread of marching troops, the big thunder of winds down the mountain passes of the lonely Servian land.

Then someone shuffled his foot on the floor, another followed. A murmur sprang up from a distant corner, and was carried round the room in an echo. A moment more and the fixed silent figures at the tables were moving, feet were beating on the floor, fists banging on the table−tops, a glass was overturned and fell with a crash as the last chords dropped into silence. Lowering his instrument from his shoulder the player stepped back, the flush of excitement on his face. He had played as no other man could play. And he had had his jest.

Shouts of mingling execration for the tune and of applause to the man who had played it rose above the peals of laughter.

"Draga−−to the devil with Draga!"

A woman had shrieked it, and the mob took up the cry. Oaths in many tongues were spat out like bullets from a gun. A jester, frenzied with passion, rushed up to the violinist as he climbed down from the platform and bound his arms to his sides with a broad band of red, blue, and white ribbon.

Fenning was in an ecstasy. He rocked with laughter and clapped his hands like a child.

"How the wolves gambol!" he cried. He glanced at Paul. "Would you ever have believed, dear boy, that there was so much gaiety in all Belleville?"

"Or so much tragedy," exclaimed Paul. "And all this hatred for a woman most of them have never even seen!"

Jean said nothing. She was leaning back in her chair, her eyes closed beneath lids as white and delicate as wax. Her face had paled, so heightening the colour of her lips. And in the midst of the din and turmoil she remained calm, indifferent almost to what was passing around her.

With a quick excuse Fenning got up and rushed into the midst of the jostling mob. He leapt on to a chair, his face pallid with excitement, and called for three cheers for Draga till a dozen hands tore him down. Paul marvelled at the madness of the man. If only these dolts knew that at this very hour their idol had brought in as their guest a spy!

He turned to Jean. When he touched her hand that rested on the arm of the chair it was cold.

"You hate all this?" he said in an undertone. "You're very much of a woman at heart; I discovered as much long ago. And you haven't even touched your champagne."

The weary expression faded from her face. She took a sip of her wine and smiled at him across the rim of the glass.

"Why should I be?" she said. "I hate nothing that makes for freedom."

He knew it was a boast. She had stifled her woman's heart, but her words did not convince him. He remembered Fenning's remark of the morning−−that she was a woman out of her sphere.

"Then why not add to the excitement by throwing me to the wolves?" he said.

She answered the question with her eyes, but no word passed her lips. She held his life in the hollow of her hand, and she would give it back to him. He felt mean and contemptible; he longed for a breath of the open air. He got up from his chair. "If I could get out now−−−−" he began.

"You would never reach the door," she answered in a whisper. He dropped back and forced a yawn.

"It would be so much more pleasant to die than endure this babel," he said, with a show of courage. "I hate playground politics, and you look bored to extinction."

"I am bored by the clamour, not by the sentiment," she answered him, and her voice was brave and strong. "François should never have played that march. It always drives them to madness. Did you ever see such folly?"

He followed the direction of her eyes and laughed. Someone had raised the violinist shoulder high; another had found an ice−bucket, and placed it inverted upon his head in ridicule of the crown; a third had unwound the tricolour and made him a sash of it.

"Draga! Draga! * bas Draga!" So the virago had shrieked again.

"How frank the woman is!" exclaimed Paul. "And the noise! The proper thing to do here seems to be to shout to perdition a woman who is probably sleeping most comfortably in her bed, and tell yourself you are freeing a country. It is magnificent, but it is not anarchy!"

Fenning came hurrying back. He flooded his glass with champagne from the bottle on the table till the foam ran over.

"My good Paul," he began, "you are about to hear oratory. Faidherb is going to speak, and when Faidherb has swallowed five absinthes he could run Europe. But they tell me he ordered the ninth an hour ago. Already, dear boy, I fancy him reorganising Mongolia."

"So we will prepare for a very maudlin and senseless diatribe," said Paul. "Courage then. Let Faidherb begin."

The excellent Faidherb climbed the platform laboriously. He was a short, stumpy man, who seemed to have been rolled by Nature with some giant rolling−pin that left him with curious angles and half−finished contours. His face was lean, though his hands were red and fleshy. A tangle of jet black hair hung limp and wet upon his forehead; one corner of his mouth was twisted with an ugly curve, as if at some time he had received a vicious blow there. His ears clung like useless ornaments to the side of his head, and when he spoke he displayed irregular yellow teeth set sumptuously with gold.

The voice that leapt from the man was like the squeal of a bird. For three minutes he stood uttering words that meant nothing. And he played with his fingers as if trying to marshal facts that flittered beyond grasp at the tips of them. Then he told an anecdote of Belgrade; another, and flavoured it with a story from the kitchen of the Konak. Faces that were studying glasses turned one by one towards him; the ash of cigarettes dropped away and did not grow again. And slowly and carefully he drew in the web of his argument. He told them in forty words that Servia was dying, and convinced them in a hundred. He pictured the wildness of her mountains and the great open freedom of her lonely valleys. He taunted them with the cramped life of her cities and townships, the narrow boundaries of citizenship, and the heavy hand of the Obrenovitch that was making for decadence. Paul half turned in his seat the better to catch the words.

The speaker paused. Fenning leaned across the table again.

"A dynasty that does not understand the people−−there's theory enough for all your preaching, Cazalet," he said. "God! if I were king!"

Paul laughed. What, then, was the creed of this man who could be swayed to either party by a few fiery sentences?

A prolonged pause made him glance at last towards the platform. Faidherb was standing rigid. His eyes stared over the sea of upturned faces. Some looked furtively around to discover the cause of the break in the speech.

"What is the matter?" Jean touched Fenning's arm. "Why does he wait?" She had grown white; her very lips seemed to tremble.

"There's a spy in the room!"

The words sped from the platform like lightning through the chamber. Chairs were flung back and overturned; men and women rose to their feet, a tide ready to hurl itself against whatever object opposed it.

"You must get out. They will tear you pieces!" Jean stifled a little scream.

The mob forced itself this way and that. Paul felt himself almost lifted from his feet in the press and carried towards the door. He caught a vision of the pale, frightened face of Jean. He put out his arm in an effort to prevent

the maddened beasts jostling her. And they were being forced back and back−− they were at the door. He tried to speak to her, to shout to Fenning a few yards away; but the howling of the rabble drowned his words.

He must get her out, but he knew not how. A drink−maddened Magyar pitched a dead weight against him, and with a blow of his fist Paul beat him to the ground. Another caught, staggering, at Jean's dress to save himself from the battering fists behind him; he swung round and forced Fenning almost into Paul's arms. They were thrown hither and thither like shingle in a riot of boiling breakers. Fenning, beating with the fury of a maniac at every upturned face, was laughing and spitting taunts with every blow he struck.

"You frightened curs!" he shouted, as he drove his knuckles home like steel against a man's eyes. "Strike, Paul; and strike again! They only need the whip when they show their teeth!"

The devil in the man was flung loose. The flail of blows never ceased to fall, beating and beating against coarse flesh. And they stood, these two, fighting with the hellish hatred of a million fiends, linked by the common desire to shield the woman behind them−−the woman who never winced or uttered a sound.

Some invisible force pushed the crowd forward. A man fell headlong down the stairs, half−stunned by a terrific upper−cut from Paul's fist. Then from out of the rabble another leapt high in the air, and the light shone for a brief instant down the blade of a drawn knife.

"You spy−−you spy!"

He shrieked the words at Fenning and fell upon him. Paul leapt too late. Something had come between them, and even as the knife fell Jean was almost in his arms. He saw the start of blood at her shoulder as she lurched forward.

Fenning caught her when she would have dropped. There was murder in his eyes−−a curse on his lips.

"She's hurt!" he cried. "Take her, Cazalet−−get her down the stairs−−to my rooms. Leave me−−to settle−−−−"

Paul picked her up−−a feather−weight, she seemed−−and he felt the blood roll slowly over his hand. He stumbled down the stairs. Something that was red and warm was still trickling through his fingers. He would ever remember it, and the scent of the perfume that rose from the folds of her dress. He would remember her little white face, the closed eyes, the torment that puckered her lips−−then the faint smile that slowly shaped itself there.

He was through the door, and climbed with her in his arms into a waiting cab. He flung an order to the driver, and the man flogged hard at the horse.

He saw nothing of the streets as he passed them. He was almost unconscious of the fact that she was leaning in his arms; but the sweet scent of her hair was in his nostrils.

"She did it for him−−she did it for him." He whispered the words to himself. It was all he could remember.

And in the days to come he was glad that she did not hear.

* * * * * *

They still tell of that fight in Belleville. How a giant at the head of the stairs flew at a welded mass of eighty men, and, like some awful instrument of war, beat with the whirling regularity of a machine at anything in his path; beat and beat again, laughing as the blood started and ran, as men fell stunned and broken; beat and beat again, with fists through which the bones showed.

They would have killed him. Already they had torn his coat in ribbons from his back. But a woman forced her way to the head of the staircase−−a woman who laughed in derision, till some slunk away and listened with frightened faces to what she had to say.

"Fools! Dolts! Imbeciles!" She was beside herself with laughter and mingled rage. She hugged the banisters and turned a mocking face towards the struggling crowd. "You idiots!" she shrieked again. "Your spy has gone!"

They made way for the broken specimen of humanity that, crouching, half fell, half leapt down the staircase, and stood at the bottom leering up at the horde from the doorway. He bowed in mock courtesy, yet his every attitude was a jest.

"Friends, patriots−−good night!" His words were smooth and gentle; they knew he was mocking them. "And you, Lady Penstone, my debut into your society will ever be remembered. From my heart I thank you!"

The door opened and slammed. He was gone.

CHAPTER IX. THROUGH THE NIGHT

THE light was burning in an upper window when Fenning reached the doorway. He stood for a moment fumbling with the key in the lock, his strength waning, and the blood trickling in a tiny stream from his wounded face.

He pushed open the door, and, drawing himself inside, closed it softly after him. For a moment he clung to the banisters, breathing hard. He wondered if he would ever reach the top of the stairs. How far away that streak of light seemed where it came from under the door. Then he began to stumble upward.

At the sound of dragging footsteps the door above opened a little, and Cazalet came out. He went down a few steps, and gripped Fenning's arm fiercely and dragged him up.

"The brutes! They've hit you badly!" he exclaimed.

Fenning leaned against the balustrade. The lamp hanging on the wall far down the corridor showed blood upon his lips, but he was smiling.

"They go mad like this sometimes, my Paul. You cannot herd with beasts and expect never to feel their teeth. And yet I love 'em−−aye, I love 'em. And I would lead 'em into Belgrade if money did not mean so much. I think they've damaged me rather."

He closed his eyes. Cazalet thought his mind was wandering. He half carried him into the small sitting−room, laid him on the couch, and forced some water between his lips. Then he moistened a handkerchief in the jug and began to wipe the blood from the battered face. Fenning winced with pain, but did not utter a sound. "How is she?" was all he said at last.

"Splendid! She's sleeping now. Gad, it'll take a month of Sundays to get that eye right."

"Yes, they rather liked that eye," laughed Fenning. "It had an infernal attraction for them. . . . You got a doctor for her, of course?"

"Certainly. He's cleansed and bound the wound. Nothing serious, he says. A splintered button saved her. A week, ten days−−−−"

"Thank God!"

Fenning held out his broken knuckles for Paul to rinse them over a basin. A layer of ointment was put on from an open pot, and Cazalet proceeded to bind them up in swathes of linen.

"I thought they'd killed her," he said. "They nearly did, Jim."

"Yes, Paul, they nearly did." Fenning pointed to the bedroom door. "She's in there?"

"Sleeping on your bed. We shall be able to move her in the morning. The doctor is coming to see about it at ten."

Cazalet drew him across to the door of the bedroom.

"Listen!" he said in an undertone. "You can hear her breathing. I left the door ajar in case she needs anything, or the wound gives her pain. What drunken pigs they were! She's suffered a lot, Jim."

They stood there, the two of them side by side. When Paul looked at Fenning he saw that a smile had crept round his lips.

"I'm glad we got her out, old chap," Fenning muttered. "I don't know what would have happened to us if−−−−"

"Don't talk about it," said Paul. He pushed his companion back to the couch. "You've got to sleep there," he said. "You need rest. You stood most of the racket, you know. And I'm going to watch−−just here. See?"

He took up his position in an arm−chair outside the bedroom door, but Fenning came painfully back to him. He lowered himself without speaking to the floor till his back rested against the wall.

"No, partner," he grinned; "there's no drones in this hive. We'll both watch. Remember those brutes may not have done with us yet. They let me go because they thought they had enjoyed a fight with the wrong man. But they know that the three of us are mixed up together somehow. They might even come here and make awkward inquiries."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Paul. "What about her?"

"There's a brace of revolvers waiting in that drawer in case the door bangs. I don't think the beasts would

reach the head of the stairs unless they climbed over a mountain of dead." He closed his eyes and opened them again. "But I just loved that fight, Paul," he said.

Cazalet was silent. Motive, he knew, could make a man love anything. And she had saved this man at his side; he would always remember that. So he envied him, just as he might a comrade to whom the angels had come and placed a gift in his hands and left his own empty.

Once or twice he glanced at Fenning. His head was turned upwards, and the candle on the table opposite was playing on his white face. He saw his lips twitch with a spasm of pain now and then, but yet they seemed to smile. The room was very still. He could hear the heavy breathing of the sleeper in the chamber beyond; once he heard her mutter a name in her sleep, but, though he pressed his ears against the crevice, he could not catch the word. Fenning was lolling back, his eyes closed, his lips apart, his breath coming in long gasps. Minutes, then hours seemed to crawl by. There was no progress of time except when the clanging of clocks proclaimed it. A beetle came floundering through the open window and fell a helpless thing in the candle flame. And presently there was a creak on the stairs as of a man's stealthy footsteps, and Paul crossed to the door and opened it. But only his own shadow mocked him on the walls.

The night crept on. The sounds beyond in the great city hummed away to a whisper. In the room behind him he could still hear the even breathing, the rustle of the bed−clothes as the sleeper swung out one arm, and turned with a little mutter of half−waking pain. Fenning was sleeping heavily. His head had dropped to his chest; the colour was slowly breaking in his cheeks again.

The candle guttered and died down, and a faint steel grey began to outline the curtains at the window. And lounging there, it seemed to Paul that soft fingers were touching his eyelids as if the wings of sleep were fluttering in front of his face. He fought against the inertia, the growing sense of helplessness, then dropped back in his chair.

Suddenly he sprang up with a cry. He felt the touch of someone near him, a presence, it might have been, that had come into the room. He was on his feet, but Fenning was still sleeping; he had leaned over on his side so that his face was nearly level with the floor, and long blue marks were beginning to show on the white flesh.

Paul walked across to the window and looked out. There was no life in the streets, no sound on the silent stairs. He watched the day grow up and outline the houses where in

". . . . the long and silent street

The dawn, with silver−sandalled feet,

Crept like a frightened child." He went back to the chair till presently he heard the rustle of clothing in the room beyond. Jean came through the doorway. She had slipped on her coat and stood clutching the curtain and looking down upon the sleeping form of Fenning, bending once to listen to his breathing.

She turned and her eyes met Paul's.

"We must let him sleep," she said. "He was our hero last night. He saved your life and mine."

"You are right," Paul answered. "He saved your life and mine." He wondered if she had read what was passing in his thoughts: had divined the insensate jealousy of the man who slept there. He turned his head away. "Yes−−he saved us−−your life and mine. We ought to thank him," he repeated.

He had risen, and was standing before her. He felt a swift desire to clutch her hands. Some power was fighting with him, urging him to draw her arms to his shoulders till her fragrant lips touched his own. He needed her now, realised the great emptiness in his life that only a woman−−this woman−−could fill.

He would never forget that moment; he would live it again through all the years to come. Afterwards he remembered the things he might have told her, he shaped the passionate phrases that might have carried to her soul some sense of his wild reasoning. But what little had he done for her? To Fenning had gone the glory; it was of him she was thinking now.

"You offered your life for his last night." He was smiling and pointing to the sleeper. "God has loaded him with great treasures," he said.

He knew it was open confession; he saw her eyelids flicker as he muttered it. There was no need to fight longer against something that was stronger than himself. Some day he might laugh at the incident, and the sentiment that garnished it. Some day, perhaps−−but not now.

They sat there in the half light, and talked in whispers. And still Fenning slept. But as Paul spoke to her it was with the knowledge that he was the intruder; that he might be speaking to her across a gulf. The sanctity of the

chamber, the heart of her, had been the gods' gift to another.

He led her back to her room and told her quietly and firmly that she must sleep. At the door he paused and held her little fingers to his lips, nor did she draw them away.

Then he closed the door upon her, and went quickly across the room to the cupboard in the corner, and took down his coat. He felt the two envelopes in his pocket where he had replaced them before Fenning's return. Taking up his hat, he crept silently downstairs.

And still Fenning slept on unknowing.

* * * * * *

The Orient express bore Paul Cazalet southward as the sun grew upward and strengthened through the mists. With him he carried the memory of her warm white fingers against his lips, and he asked no more of the day than that.

CHAPTER X. ONE, NICHODIM

PAUL had risen early. He wandered leisurely through his toilet, and made his way down the creaky wooden stairs to the stuffy sitting−room below, where a scant breakfast of strong coffee and coarse meal rolls had been placed ready for him by the slatternly maid of all work.

In the small hostel he was the only personage beside the fat Serb keeper, his wife, and the slut who had but just left the room. In this he was fortunate. What his mission was or why he had come appeared to be no concern of theirs. He was a foreigner, so they left him severely alone; possibly they did not understand his pronunciation of the Slav tongue as he knew it, and they looked vacantly at him when he chose the easier course and addressed them in French. He had shrugged his shoulders and turned away. As for madame, she scolded the slattern for loitering or for her curiosity in a foreigner who didn't matter.

And so with the hostel−keeper. Before the hour of ten had struck he had begun to drink himself into that state of sotten inertia which made up his day. His wife and the slattern busied themselves with the housework, and laid the wooden tables in the courtyard with spotless cloths and knives and forks for visitors who never came. When informed that a foreigner had taken up his residence he merely bowed his head and drank deeper. If the stranger brought money−−good; if he could be relieved of it−−excellent. Madame might be trusted to see to that. So he drank again and found the liquor good.

Paul finished his meal, crossed to the window set high in the wall, and throwing it open wide, looked out. The pigmy panorama of Servian life stretching out before his eyes interested him. The rough cobbles set diagonally across the street, the white− washed houses with the russet roofs hurling back the flare of the sun−−everything spoke of change. Men and women were passing slothfully to and fro. Army officers in well−cut uniforms of grey strutted up and down with an overflowing sense of race−pride. And around the stalls by the roadside groups of figures clung: men in black or maroon coats trimmed vulgarly with gold, women with large brass head−ornaments−−their skirts dragged high from the slobber of their feet−−dug their hands into the open sacks of scarlet paprika beans, and haggled with the stall−keeper, then went off grumbling, their purchases under their arms. They moved slowly and doubtfully, these people, as if all the burden of the world hung around their shoulders. And for the welfare of these folk who had no interest in life save themselves, one half of Europe was prepared to quarrel with the other half. Paul closed the window and smiled. Had he, too, come so far for these? No wonder Fenning had mocked him.

He sat down at the table and began to go through his wallet, and from a little budget of sealed letters he produced one which the Count had given him in Dover Harbour. It was addressed to M. Nichodim, 44 Rue de la Save. He fastened his wallet again and strapped it beneath his vest. Then he went in search of one, Nichodim.

He made his way down the precipitous streets to where the River Save flowed green and turgid to meet the heavier waters of the Danube. The by−ways narrowed as he walked till they became no more than alleys−−alleys where scarcely a breath of wind seemed to break the mingling odours of garlic and bad drainage. He saw there the blending of many races: the sleek dark−haired Serbs, smooth−skinned Jewesses haunting the entrances to forbidding doorways, decrepit Turks hugging the steps of the kafanas and sucking at their narghilis. Old men, young men, children, the offspring of a dozen races, moved objectless hither and thither, as if waiting for the day to grow old, that to−morrow might dawn and become even as to−day.

For an hour Paul explored the passages that drew back from the river till at length he found the street he sought. And hardly had he taken a dozen steps down it than he saw the number 44 scrawled over the doorway of a house uglier and more wizened than those about it.

He opened the door and went in; the shabby sitting−room was empty. For a moment he stood and waited on what might be the very threshold of Adventure; then he knocked softly at the door beyond. A moment later and a small man with black hair just changing to grey came like some silent sleuth−hound through the door, his little wizened face leering up into that of the Englishman before him.

"Monsieur Nichodim?" Paul inquired.

The other looked at him without surprise.

"The same," he said in French.

Paul pushed the letter into his hand and waited while he read it.

"A small matter, monsieur," he said lightly, as the other carefully folded the paper and put it in his pocket. "Can we talk here?"

"But yes, m'sieu."

He held open the door for Paul to pass to the inner room, then came in and closed it after him. It was a small chamber with a little window that looked as if it had not been opened for years, and through it a ray of light, dodging between the chimney stacks, came percolating in. Paul took the big chair in the corner. A small wood fire was burning dimly in the grate despite the heat of the outer atmosphere, and leaning forward he began to warm his hands against it.

He looked up at last and caught the small ferret eyes of Nichodim fastened upon him. And the expression he saw there was one of curiosity, almost of doubt.

"You have come far," Nichodim volunteered, fidgeting with the papers that lay strewn across the table.

"Possibly. Dover Harbour is a few leagues away. Your Belgrade is not easy to reach when−−−−"

"When one carries documents?" the other fenced.

"Or shall we say the life of a sovereign in one's wallet?"

The little shrivelled creature: splayed out his hands. "Who shall say? Yesterday we were strong; to−day we are weak. The murder of Count Stolpin has hurt us much. He would have saved Servia."

"For the Austrian wolf to devour−−a most estimable salvation," Paul laughed. "M'sieu, you know your Belgrade; you know what they call Austria here: the thing that does not sleep but acts."

"The wolf that closes only one eye," Nichodim interposed.

Paul nodded. "The Count came to me; I did not seek him out," he said. "He gave me a mission, and I, a man very tired of things in my own country, accepted it. Let me tell you now, that nothing on earth would turn me from my purpose." He unfastened his vest, released his wallet and spread out four envelopes on the table. "For you, m'sieu," he said.

Nichodim examined them one by one, then began scribbling on a paper at his desk. After a while he rose to his feet, pushed the letter into an envelope and sealing it passed out of the door. He returned in a moment, however, and sat down at his desk again.

"You know why you have come," he said. "You know this is no child's play?"

Paul half rose from his chair petulantly. "If you think I am a fool, say so now!" he exclaimed.

"Pardon−−ten thousand pardons!" M. Nichodim was upset, his dignity injured. He became a mountain of humility. He ventured to talk to himself, and so loud that the other could hear it. "No, the Count never made a mistake−−it is well−−it is good." He rubbed his hands together with a hissing sound; then he leaned across the table.

"The streets were very quiet when you came through to−day." He was speaking in quite a different voice now. The nervousness of the man, feigned or otherwise, had dropped away. His nerves were braced: every fibre strung. "There was no sign of agitation among the people. In the cafés there is no sound, you do not hear even the whisper of discontent. But yesternight a band of scoundrels, who have power behind them, sent an ultimatum to King Alexander to abdicate or divorce his queen."

"But what do you want with me−−that's what I'm here to know?" Paul demanded, irritated by Nichodim's nonchalance.

The little man crossed to where Paul sat and placed his hand on his shoulder.

"We want you to take another man's place," he said.

Paul nodded and smiled.

"How simple−−if the other man doesn't disoblige by turning up," he said with a laugh. The situation was developing into a comedy.

"Oh, we have seen to that. He is locked up tightly enough in the monastery at Stranova. You have to represent him in Belgrade."

"He is respectable? He has no vices−−no past that you are going to overhaul with your muck−rakes?"

"On the contrary; I believe this youth is everything one could desire: a student, a lover of religion, of books. To be mixed up with a throne would be his last wish in the world. But let me explain, in a dozen words. They mean to force the King and his Queen Draga from the throne, the−−−−"

"Pardon me, and who might `they' be?" Paul inquired.

"That you will soon discover. For the present let the word stand for a European Power."

"We will presume, Russia," said Paul without raising his eyes.

"So, if you like it. And they want to put another man on the throne. They cannot draw the ex−king Milan into the embroglio. They would had they dared, but the barrier was too strong against them. I am speaking now of three years ago. King Milan is dead, but he leaves a son."

"King Alexander of Servia," Paul interpolated.

"Precisely−−and another."

"Another?"

"Yes, Captain Galatz of the French Army, now buried in the monastery of Stranova as a monk. M'sieu, you have everything, as you English say, in a nutshell."

Paul began to pace the room.

"You seem to have slipped the main point somewhere," he said.

Nichodim bent down till his lips almost touched Paul's ear.

"If this son appears among these would−be regicides, as they presume he will, what then?"

"The devil!" said Paul.

"Cunning fellow, you!" Nichodim shook with a little chuckle of satisfaction. "Yes, they have summoned him from Paris. He was on his way here, lured by the bait of a woman. We saw to that−−the Count and I. We intercepted his arrival and lodged him most comfortably at Stranova. There he remains, behind bars. And meanwhile these scoundrels−−men who hold high honours in the Servian army−−await his coming. The Count went to England to find his substitute. He failed in Paris."

"I see." Paul stopped and looked across at the man before him. "And he found me."

"Yes, he found you." The little man sank into his chair and gave a chuckle of laughter. "Yes," he repeated, "he found you."

"It sounds amazingly easy−−for you," Paul; said.

The cat−like creature grew grave at once.

"I am a patriot. I would save Servia from the hands of those who would destroy her," he said. "This youth, this Captain Galatz, on the throne−−Europe would never acknowledge him. Where did he come from?" He shrugged his shoulders. "And his mother?" Again came the expressive shrug of the shoulders. "And what would you have of such a court as that? For such disaster these maniacs demand the abdication of a king. The farce of it!"

"Aye," said Paul, "the farce of it, with myself as assistant buffoon!"

Nichodim grinned, though he scarcely understood the phrase.

"We want no patchwork kingdom here," he said. "The Obrenovitch dynasty has done much for Servia. And Servia in the hands of these madmen−−ach! We are lost! The tragedy−−you see it? These ruffians hold the upper hand; it is for this great nation we shall work. Draga−−they hate her, the people spit at her name. And the rich, will they bow to a woman who was once a peasant? They say their prayers to the good God to help them, but they mean to help themselves."

"To the fattest portion they can grab," Paul broke in. "It's a way we have in England."

"You will help; you will be the saviour of a great nation," Nichodim conceded impressively.

"You seem very certain of your point," said Paul. "But I confess I am still puzzled. I play another man's part−−good. You lock him up while I masquerade as his shadow−−good. But the game does not end there. You must move your pawn on the board. What do you want of me?"

"Information."

"I imagined it. You invite the flies into your parlour while I play the spy."

"It is so easy. As Captain Galatz you will be welcomed by these pigs; they will tell you their plans. And you report to me."

"And you are−−what?"

The little creature looked up into Paul's face and narrowed his eyes. For a moment he failed to understand his man. His fingers began to fold themselves together; he looked furtively around the room. A wayward sparrow cavilling on the window− sill attracted his attention. Some moments passed before he spoke again.

"You English are so dull," he exclaimed petulantly.

"True, when it comes to understanding the ways of a spy," Paul retorted. He gripped Nichodim's arm. "I am not here to bandy international compliments with you; we will leave that to our respective governments. Tell me what you are, or I book my return ticket to London to−night. I'm not a man of mysteries. I can be dishonest but outspoken."

Nichodim withdrew a few paces behind the table.

"A letter from me and you are a persona grata among these conspirators," he said. "Colonel Paschnovich would treat you as the very ruler of Servia. Give him a chance and he would place a crown upon your head."

"A paper one that would crumple at the first breath of wind. So you−−you are one of these?"

"I would help my country," Nichodim explained by way of excuse. "If you understand diplomacy then you would know that we do not stand on ceremony. You are the Count's choice, and the Count never made a mistake. See you here." He went across to a cupboard, unlocked it, and from the steel safe within withdrew a gold cross set heavily with turquoises. He put it into Paul's open palm with a laugh.

"A mere gew−gaw," he said. "But it is proof of your identity. It belonged to King Milan−−his name is even now engraved at the foot of it. It will carry you unharmed through the ranks of these madmen; they will trust you, believe in you−−you, Captain Galatz. Remember they have never seen their hero, and they are reserving a throne for him. And this, m'sieu, is your passport."

"If I could believe that you did not lie!" Paul began. "Almost you tempt me to test you."

The fires of triumph lit in the eyes of the other.

"I want no more than that," he answered. He began fumbling for his cigarettes. He felt that the ground was good beneath his feet and longed for the taste of tobacco. He rolled some black hashish in a film of paper and placed it daintily between his coarse lips. Then he pushed a letter towards Paul across the table and leisurely struck a match. "Captain Galatz−−your introductions to Colonel Paschnovich," he said. "They meet a week hence in the passage in the Rue d'Or−−number 22, at the house of Lazar the Jew. Walk in−−kill your nerves and play your game. The good Lazar shall expect you−−I will see to that. So! You English love sport−−here it is at your grasp. And the notes in that safe−−−−"

Paul struck the table sharply with his fist.

"To the devil with your notes!" he said. "I don't understand your game yet. It seems that you play it blindfold, but sometimes I prefer the light of day. I will touch your money when you've washed it. For the moment leave me alone. I take your letter, yes, and from to−night I am Captain Galatz of the French army, with a taste for a throne. I want a juggle with fortune, and you shall clear up the mess we make, if you like."

He picked up the letter and put it in his pocket. He was still staring at Nichodim, who watched him through his shield of tobacco smoke. He went towards the door, but of a sudden he turned.

"My friend," he said easily. "Let us suppose for a moment that I had turned you down−−had thrown your own dirty work in your face−−you with your secret in my hands. . . . What then?"

Nichodim dropped to his chair and lolled back in it with a smile upon his lips. Putting out his hand he struck a bell on the table twice.

Instantly the door opened, and scarcely before Paul was aware of their presence two men were in the room. He noticed that each held a revolver, and, turning, he peered into the levelled muzzles. With a laugh Nichodim waved his hand, and as quickly the men disappeared.

"Rather like inferior pantomime, isn't it?" asked Paul.

The other evaded the question.

"You see," he said, the ugly smirk spreading wide on his face, "we take no chances here. I should have given you credit for knowing as much. The issues are too great to brook defeat. And the man who pulls the strings must always have at hand the means with which to do it."

"By murder, if needs be?"

"Scarcely. You know the Kalamegdan gardens? Ah, I see you do. The children play on the grass there; in the quiet woods lovers plight their troths. The birds sing, when the evening comes down the finest bands of the city take up the music of the day. So much you see, so much you hear. But beneath there, down, deep down below−−−−"

"Yes?" said Paul, and the expression of his face never changed.

"They keep men there−−in the dark. Once they get in they never come out again."

"I know my Belgrade better than you think, m'sieu," Paul replied warmly. "And your State prisons are the disgrace of Europe."

Nichodim came nearer and thrust his leering face upwards.

"You English are too kind to those who would stick a knife in your back. You wait till the deed is done, and then crush out the reptile. We are different here−−we kill the reptile first. Some day we will go to the Kalamegdan together. You shall see not men there but beasts. They dig their long finger−nails into the slimy walls, sometimes they beat their brains out." He shrugged his shoulders. "An order from me−−−−" he was saying.

"Tell me−−you rogue−−an order from you−−−−" Paul gripped his arm till he winced with the pain. Nichodim wrenched himself free; his voice was uneven, threatening.

"And you would go there−−now! And the Kalamegdan keeps its secrets well."

Paul opened the door. In the dim corridor he could see the gaunt figures of the janitors as they waited.

"Monsieur Nichodim," he said, "you are the most delightful scoundrel I have ever met."

He passed out into the street, while the cringing figure in the doorway stood watching and wondering what manner of fool he was.

CHAPTER XI. THE PASSAGE IN THE RUE D'OR

THE moon swung low above the tops of the mountains, and threw a coverlet of silver across the face of the river. Some would have said that Belgrade slept. A few spots of light here and there−−a weak gas flare at the street corner alone strove to keep slumber from the eyes of the city. A cart rumbled over the cobbled roads, at the very water's edge a group of dark figures crouched over something which they were searching with the aid of a lantern. The wind stirred, a muffled roll of laughter came from a remote corner in the city's heart, the river lapped against the stone steps. And straight into the sheet of light sprang a boat, rowed swiftly by two oarsmen, who, directly the light struck across them, steered the craft nearer into the shadow.

The boat passed on. It carried no lights, end those aboard it spoke no word. But crouching in the stern, a heavy shawl over her head, was a woman. She listened to the steady dip of the oars, to the panting of the men who strove at their task. And sitting almost at her feet was a priest, his face hidden as he crouched with his eyes fixed on the water.

With a sharp turn the boat drew into the steps at the foot of a narrow street, and grated against the stonework. Then without a sound the men laid down their oars and jumped out, while the priest got up slowly and drew himself laboriously on to the steps, as if he were afraid of losing his balance. He held out his hand to the woman and pulled her up beside him, and so the two together passed into the shadow of the street.

Once beneath the light of a lamp the priest turned and glanced into her face. He traced the first outline of fear there; she who had never shown fear of anything was trembling now. He felt her arm quivering as he held it lightly to lead her across the street.

"The passage in the Rue d'Or−−you know it?" The words came from her in a pant.

"A little farther along on the right−−just where that lamp is." He pointed ahead. "I am going too fast, I am tiring you?"

"No, no," she muttered as he carefully suited his stride to hers. "We have not much time. I was afraid to come at first. I−− but it is the only chance−−to beg, to plead."

"Afraid?" The priest laughed. "Afraid when−−see there!" The gaunt shadow of a man drew silently into the blackness of a doorway; they saw his white face gleaming in the murk as they passed him. "Afraid−−with your sentinels watching like that? Madam, be brave!"

"If it had not been for you−−−−" she began.

"You would have known nothing of this meeting? I am here to serve you; you need not be afraid of danger."

"No, not when I am under the protection of the Church."

The priest gave a quick laugh, and looked into her face. "Madam, you would compel me to tell you the truth," he said.

In a moment she had come to a standstill, and, turning upon him, caught his arm in sudden fear. Her face was close to his, the big black eyes staring at him, and in his nostrils was the perfume of the Houbigant about her.

"The truth? Tell me−−tell me what you mean!" She pressed one hand to her breast and closed her eyes. Her lips were shivering.

"You should know the truth, since you have trusted me till now, and you must trust me to the end. You spoke of the protection of the Church, madam; but do you think the Church would lend its protection so far?"

"So far? Yes, the Church would do that−−for the Queen."

The priest hurried forward again, and she had perforce to follow him.

"The night is primed with ears," he said. The even footfalls sounded on the rough paving, the man's strong and steady, the woman's faltering, speaking their fear in a shuffle.

"I think the Church would not go so far even for the Queen," he said in an undertone. "Not till to−day, madam, have you recognised the gravity of the situation. This meeting to−night is to force your abdication. You wished to attend it; you had your own reasons. And you were not afraid. You who have fought fear all your life and won, could know no fear when you were playing for your throne. Colonel Slana asked me to devise a scheme for your safety. Madam, there was only one. You should come under the protection of the Church."

"But if the Church would not protect me? I do not follow your reasoning."

"Madam, it was so simple. A priest had to be found. I am the priest, though I have been no nearer to holy orders than the cloak I wear. That is the story."

She gave a smothered cry and seemed to stumble. He clutched her arm firmly and held it till she shook him off.

"Who are you, and what are you, that you should trap me? God in heaven−−Colonel Slana did this?"

"This is no time for argument, madam. He is the most loyal servant you have, and would keep the sword from your breast with his own. He trusts me; is not that enough? Do you know so little of him that you think he would take risks? He is even now dining with the King, and concocting a most wholesome explanation of your absence at the table. The King trusts Slana, you trust him, and I trust him because he is paying me handsomely for this night's adventure. And believe me that if I failed, if any harm came to you, I should not receive a single franc. . . . And, madam, I love money."

"He will have to answer to me." She spat the words out in a passing frenzy of spite.

"He will be glad to do so if you achieve your mission," the other returned. "And here is the passage. It is dark, but I can grope the way with my fingers along the wall. Follow me closely, please. The door is just under that lamp at the end. I know, for I have explored it carefully in daylight, without my cloak of penitence then, or this most useful wig."

They were in pitch darkness, but he could hear the rustle of her cloak behind him, and her quick breathing as she stumbled along at his heels.

"Stop!"

He just heard the stifled exclamation and turned. As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness he could define the outline of her figure where she stood leaning against the wall, her hands to her face.

"You are faint?" he asked quickly.

"No, no−−a little afraid−−after all, the threats−−to go among them like this−−to be torn to pieces maybe! Did ever a queen sink to this before, I wonder?" She was a little hysterical and whimpering like a child.

"Some queens have risked more for the man they love," he answered her, and led her forward again. And when they waited at the door he saw by the faint flicker of lamplight across her face the lines of determination growing about her lips.

He forgot for a moment that she was Queen. He touched her hand with his own, and smiled into her face.

"You are a brave woman," he said.

* * * * *

Within the room fourteen men were staring into the face of one who had come among them a stranger.

"Abdication or death. Those, Captain Galatz, are our terms." A grizzled army colonel with a heavy sensual face, and the thin cruel lips of a wolf, struck the table sharply as he spoke.

"Yes," echoed the young lieutenant who sprawled languorously, his hands folded round a glass of Negotin. "Those are the terms −−abdication or death!"

The cloud of tobacco smoke whirled higher, a glass tinkled where a trembling hand was trying to fill it from a decanter of crimson slivovits. Someone in a moment of bravado had thrown a revolver across the table, and it lay with the butt in a swimming pool of wine, beside an overturned glass.

"You are not generous in your alternatives."

Paul calmly flicked the ash from his cigarette as he spoke. He looked down the line of red, drink−sodden faces. The very atmosphere of the place was false. Every man amongst them was a coward for all his idle boasting; Paul knew human nature well enough to realise it. Their merriment was forced; they drew nervously at their cigarettes, and congratulated themselves on having found their catspaw.

At any other time he would have laughed at the situation. That such as these should sway the destinies of a kingdom as he assuredly knew they did! They had torn a woman's reputation to shreds as he listened. They talked of murder and honour in the same breath. And these men had set themselves up as the judges of a monarchy.

"Generous? Would you show generosity to such a −−−−!" The colonel pitched an expletive into the air, and followed it with a gulp of cigarette smoke. "She came from the gutter; she shall go back to the gutter. And you, sir, you shall wear the crown of Servia."

"I am not sure that I desire the burden," Paul returned. "I have had no training for kingship."

"We shall be at your hand to advise you."

Paul bowed. They could not have told him that he mocked them. He was fingering the little Milan cross and tapping the rim of his glass with it.

"And the King−−what of him?" he asked.

"He will reject the terms, of course. He will fight for his throne and for his Queen. If he would have remained to rule Belgrade alone we might have made terms. I will not flatter you, sir, to the extent of saying that in this case we should have called you from Paris to rule us. But he is bound to that woman, body and soul. He would walk out of Servia in rags before he would let her go."

"I rather like the man for that," said Paul. He watched the anger spring to the face of some, and smiled. "You know, a man who will stick to a woman through a perfect hell on earth when he has raised that woman from the gutter, may be a fool, but never a knave. I do not defend Draga. You tell me that she would drag him through the mud before the eyes of his people. You tell me that she is without honour or scruples, that she lives a life of brutal persecution of those who will not fawn at her feet. You may be true. I am not here to judge. But at least give her the credit of having put the character into the man the turned him from a crass youth into a figure of strength in a few weeks. He has fought for her; he will fight again. But no man fights for an entirely worthless woman; she must have at least some virtue that condones her faults."

He flung the taunt at them boldly, fearlessly.

"If you want virtue you must look for it with microscope in the Konak, he! he!"

The lieutenant chuckled at his jest. The Negotin was good, and he drank again. He had expected an explosion of laughter and met only scowls. But Paul's defence of the woman they hated was not the savouring necessary for a poor joke.

A thin, pinched figure of a man, with sunken, sallow cheeks and ruddy hair, rose to his feet and leant across the table, upsetting his glass as he did so.

"Captain Galatz, I think we misunderstand each other," he said, with heat.

"On the contrary, my friend, I should say that we understand each other very well."

"When we brought you from Paris it was not to champion a king's mistress."

"I would suggest accuracy, and substitute the word `wife,' since he has married her," Paul returned.

"You cavil. The whole of Europe knows what Draga was."

"And I can give you proof. The−−−−" A grey−headed veteran of the Turkish war had risen to his feet, but the speaker waved him down.

"We are not here to exchange confidences. Captain Galatz, if I understand him, declines the crown of Servia."

"I do, most assuredly. My reason? You would never give it to me."

"And why not?"

"Come, gentlemen; let us each put our cards on the table." Paul leant forward in his chair. "Do you think I don't understand you? Your motive in getting me here was to put up a candidate for your throne. But you wanted a candidate−−nothing more. You wanted a man who would shield another while the `kitchen' work was being done, and then politely withdraw into the background. In your hearts you have named your king, but it is not Adolph Galatz. Your future king prefers the atmosphere of Switzerland. He has no desire to be drawn into a political maelstrom of this kind. If you lose, you lose; if you win, he may or may not accept your throne. That is how I read your cards. As for me, I am quite content with the situation. You want me to play a part. You want a dummy to push along while you spring−clean the throne. Really, gentlemen, I don't know why I have come so far for so execrable a cause; but, having come, here I remain. I have a keen desire to see this thing through. I may even enjoy my stay in Belgrade. The air here suits my appetite marvellously!"

The words were sprung with sarcasm, but they heeded it not. They wondered at the honesty of the man. Someone filled his glass with plum brandy; another sent an open cigarette−case swinging across the polished table. It was a moment of conviction.

The colonel was on his feet again. An old wound across his cheek−−the relic of some brawling days−−had grown scarlet against the pallor of his face. The bushy eyebrows narrowed, and a new fire came into the eyes.

"You hear!" he cried, and there was a note of triumph in his voice. "Captain Galatz is with us. For me, I want no better leader in Belgrade. I will go further, and say that I want no better king."

"Nor I," said another.

"We are patriots; it is a question of honour! That a country should be dragged to perdition at the whim of a

woman!"

"A harlot!" cried a third, and flung his empty glass on the table in a paroxysm of passion.

The fevered blood of those about him was whipped to a torrent. Some rose to their feet. Others sat leering at their fellows in sullen assent.

"Draga!"−−the colonel spat out the name−−"we have only one sentence for Draga, and that−−−−"

He had not seen the heavy thick curtains at the door drawn slowly back, nor a woman's white face staring in at him; but in a moment more he was conscious that a woman had stepped into the room, and she stood, one hand grasping the curtain, the other limp at her side, her head thrown back, and hate−− ungovernable hate−−blazing at him from her sloe−black eyes. Her cloak had fallen away from her shoulders, revealing the white summer dress that lay beneath. Some of those at the table wondered at the strength on her face with a wonder akin to admiration. The weaker cowered, and the others glared upon her in unspoken challenge. There was a glitter in her black hair; from the jewels at her throat sprang a thousand points of fire.

She came slowly into the room as the speaker faltered. For a moment the silence of death fell upon the assembly. No one spoke, no one moved. The blood drew away from the faces of some, leaving the flesh white and flaccid. And out there in the darkness beyond the curtains they could see the dim form of the waiting priest.

She came to the table; then she smiled−−a smile of courage, almost of conquest.

"Draga!" She uttered the name fearlessly. "What of her? You were speaking of her, Colonel Paschnovich. Tell me what you would do with Draga. For Draga is here!"

CHAPTER XII. A KINGDOM OF DUST

PAUL rose to his feet and put a chair for her at the head of the table, while the others could only stare as if waiting for her to speak and to mock them. The bravest felt a little afraid; they knew that at the moment she was stronger than they.

There was no sound in the room except the rustle of her dress as she took her place; then she let her eyes wander at will from one to the other, studying each face as if she could read what the brute expression reflected of the mind. Beneath the lace−film her breast was heaving, and her hands resting on the dull polish of the table moved aimlessly about till her fingers entwined in a grip of strength.

"You were speaking, Colonel Paschnovich," she said quietly. "Will you proceed?"

The soldier's face hardened. He scowled at her from beneath his shaggy eyebrows.

"If it is your wish, madam," he answered, brusquely. He leaned towards her. "I wonder why it is your pleasure to be here?"

"To bargain with you," she replied, with a smile.

"We do not bargain to−night, madam. May I, therefore, in all respect ask you to withdraw?"

"I shall remain," she said, meeting his eyes.

"Then you may hear the truth−−and find it unpalatable."

"From you, colonel?"

"So, madam. It is the duty I owe to Servia."

"Your duty?"

"To tell you that you must leave Belgrade−−and not alone. The King will accompany you."

"By whose orders?"

"It is the nation that speaks. And if you refuse you will go−− by force. I have nothing to add to that."

Someone growled assent. The answering anger in her eyes belied the smile upon her lips.

"And if I go alone−−if I wished to go alone?" she said presently.

"You will not go alone. The King will not permit it. A month ago we were fools enough to believe he would."

"It was your wish then to drive me from my husband's side; to−night, your conspiracy has taken a deeper turn: it seeks the overthrow of both. How little you know of your King! How little you know of me!"

She spoke softly, yet the taunt bore home no less severely. And beyond the door the priest was waiting, listening. An ugly flush began to creep over the colonel's face; but for a moment they stared at each other in silent combat, the woman tapping a finger−nail restlessly on the table. She lifted her head.

"Cannot you see what Servia means to her King?" she exclaimed. "The desire of his life. Her destinies his one thought throughout his day. He lives for Servia; he dreams of Servia; the love of her has given him strength, courage to battle for her."

"Mere prattle, madam," the colonel snapped. "We are not here to extol your husband's virtues. With respect I again suggest that you might find the atmosphere of the palace more pleasing to−night."

"And I refuse. You shall hear me. Who are you to judge a king −−you who have never known the trials of a crown?" The sudden storm in her voice dropped away. "If I were to go−−−−" she began.

"It would achieve nothing. When a man rules at the dictate of a woman−−−−"

She leapt to her feet.

"−−private life would suit Your Majesties so much better," Colonel Paschnovich finished.

"If his work is only just begun? In time−−−−"

"He will wreck a nation." The colonel lifted his glass and sucked at his wine. Then he leaned back in his chair and half closed his eyes as if argument had lost its flavour.

"It is because I know his ambitions, his purpose, that I have come to you," the Queen retorted. "I need no pity for myself. I do not resent your hatred of me, harsh though it often appears. I am a daughter of the people, and for that you have no forgiveness. Your King cares nothing for your taunts or your threats. If he knew that I had come to you−−and come to plead−− he might deem it cowardice he could never condone. But for myself I do not plead. I am only a woman who loves her husband, and, because I love him, because he is everything in my world, I am

prepared to renounce position, power, and go alone from Servia should my going ease his task or help him towards achievement."

She broke off and caught her breath in a sob. They looked at her, furtive, doubtful. A chair was shifted on the wooden floor, a glass tinkled.

"It is our misfortune that he was born to wear a crown," she went on, and it seemed as if she were speaking more to herself than to them. "Often it has been a crown of thorns to him, to me. The world is very hard to a woman who loves a man above her station; it has no pity, no helping hand to offer. It could never understand that what it called my heart of stone was only a woman's heart after all, ready to love freely those who from the start have preferred to he my foes. My every action has been misunderstood, my every motive misconstrued. But with Sasha I would have been happy even in the most lonely places of the world, for I have never desired anything more than his love for me."

In her earnestness she had called her husband by the pet name she had always used. To some this little touch of affection would have lent the colour of sincerity; but to those assembled her words were little more than a confession of weakness, of failure.

"We appreciate your readiness to leave Belgrade, madam," Colonel Paschnovich replied, "and the sooner you go−−−−"

Her hands clenched and her eyes burned with passion.

"And if I go, what then? What guarantee have I that you will not overthrow the dynasty that is working for Servia? Don't you know the thing of torture you have made of my life? No woman can withstand these continual threats against her husband, the ceaseless persecution in public and private that has been remorselessly carried on. I married Sasha, believing that I could help him, as he tells me I have helped him. Yet sometimes in communion with my own conscience I know that I have failed. But this continual warfare destroys a woman's confidence in herself. She cannot fight her husband's battle for ever alone; she needs allies, firm friends who, understanding that her love for her husband is the one thing that counts in her life, will help her. That is what I have sought and what I have failed to find−−those friends. And since it would seem that I am bringing my husband to destruction I will go, and go alone, whether he permits it or not. Nor will I go from fear of you, but simply because I love him too well to be a stumbling− block in his path. If you are men, you will give me a guarantee that my abdication shall allay this hatred and conspiracy."

Colonel Paschnovich nodded once, twice. He put out his hand, and lit a fresh cigarette carefully. Then he lay back, his bloodshot eyes fixed on the ceiling. A few yards away someone tittered; another gave vent to a little cough of derision: signals these which told the Queen who waited there that her world was crumbling to pieces before her eyes.

"On having realised that you are a menace to the welfare of the country, you are to be congratulated, madam," the colonel said sullenly at last; "but we give you no guarantee. As a monarch, your husband has signally failed; as a ploughman, he might have been a success. Plain words, but the occasion demands them."

The insult wrenched to pain every fibre of her, and they saw her face change even as they looked. The expression of womanhood, the touch of sympathy around the mouth melted away into bitterness. She stiffened, and the nails of her fingers bit into the palms.

She had played her game−−played it and lost. In more sober moments they might have detected by her every gesture the character of the woman. She had come from the people, proud in her conquests, a king's mate, the foremost woman in the land−− she who had once been almost a gipsy. To unbend such pride were a task more difficult than to break a steel bar in the fingers. Yet out of it the love of a woman for the man she had married emerged triumphant, and pride−−self−opinion and all the attributes of her position−−were scattered to the four winds. A woman born at the top of the hill might go down if the whole kingdom of her love lay at the foot of it, but for one who had climbed every retraced step was a torture.

Paul looked at her, amazed. He alone could read the thoughts that passed in procession through her mind; he alone realised what her words had cost her. He was drawn to her in a sudden flood of sympathy, and by impulse rose quickly to his feet.

"Madam−−−−" he began.

She silenced him with an angry sweep of her hand, and a deep colour began to swell beneath her dark skin.

"So then, cowards, you shall hear my last words!" Her lips, rich and full, quivered with the passion of battle.

Dignity, self−control were swept aside in one great wave of emotion. The wild blood of the gipsy was rushing through her veins; it governed her, and set her whole frame trembling. She was no longer a queen, but a woman driven to conflict, fighting for everything that was of worth to her, and ready to fight to the last hedge, the last ditch. "I am still Queen," she exclaimed, "and as Queen I shall remain in Belgrade. For my husband's sake I was prepared to make the greatest sacrifice a woman can make −−desertion from his side in the firing line. I would have risked his contempt, his loathing for me all the days of his life. I would have destroyed his very love for me if it would have helped him or made his way easier. Yes; I would have gone down to the lower depths again for Sasha. But not now−−not now! You have had your choice, you have made your decision, and you shall abide by it. You have drawn me closer to his side, and given me new strength to fight for him." She half turned towards the curtains, then with a smile of contempt flung all the hatred of her life into her last taunt. "I have marked you every one, and there are still prison cells that shall make room for traitors!"

An empty threat, her heart told her. What would her resolve avail? A blow at the people. For a moment she surveyed a tottering throne, a kingdom sinking into dust.

She swayed towards the curtains and wrenched them aside. Fear, rage and hate−−the whole gamut of emotions−−swung fourteen men to their feet, and Colonel Paschnovich drew his sword and darted towards her as if he would have cut her down where she stood. But in a moment the priest had stepped between them, to force the Queen into the passage.

"Back!" he cried. "Back, you rogues, in the name of the Church!"

They stood huddled together like driven sheep. And in the turmoil no one heard the cry that left Paul's lips. He took a step forward and stared into the eyes of the priest, but the latter had turned away with a laugh.

Paul knew that a word from him and the woman would never have reached the street. One thing alone kept these men from committing murder beneath his eyes, and that−−fear of the black−robed figure who stood smirking at them from the aperture. And if he denounced the priest as a sham the power of the Church was gone.

His admiration for the woman, her courage and self−sacrifice, decided his line of action. Without a word he hurried down the passage in front of them and opened the street door. When she had passed out he put his hand for a moment on the priest's arm.

"You have played a clever game to−night," he whispered in English, "a very clever game, Fenning. And, you deserve your victory."

Then he shut the door from the inside with a bang, and took the precaution of drawing the key and slipping it into his pocket.

CHAPTER XIII. THE LURE

COLONEL SLANA had just completed a late dinner. He lounged heavily in his chair, looking aimlessly at the wall in front of him, and sucking sensuously at a rich cigar. He was alone in the room except for the ghosts of dead things that seemed to flutter through the uncertain atmosphere, and dance in wonderful disarray across his eyes.

The memories pleased him. His thick lips puckered in a smile, the narrow rat's−eyes grew narrower and closer yet. The iron−grey hair had been carefully brushed back, and the moustache as carefully tended. The entire pose of the man and everything about him suggested one responsive to the senses, who loved pleasure, who loved luxury, and won his golden hours from life and carried the memory of them for years. He was a sensualist of that order which is guarded. He would throw no dice with scandal and chance what odds turned up. He valued his military reputation and his close friendship and confidence with the King and Queen too well for that. But he ate and drank well; he would rather go hungry than touch coarse food or wine, just as there are men who clothe their senses with a dignity which will cause them to endure self−sacrifice rather than offend it.

So Colonel Slana, chief of the bodyguard on which the monarch depended for his safety, ate well and loved well, and revelled in the passion of voluptuous music, and liked fine colours and perfumes about the rooms he inhabited. He was, in short, an exquisite of that rare type which combines military strength and brutality with the slender sensitiveness of a neurotic. His after−dinner cigar with the final sips of his wine to flavour it was a process of worship, a solemn ritual so zealously followed that the very presence of half−dead flowers in the room would disturb the celebration by grating on the eye.

Ten o'clock had just struck, but the night was very still. Long red curtains were drawn across the room which hid the open French windows in order to repel the draught, for although the first flush of summer was on the threshold of the world the nights were damp and chill. Far out in some distant square a band was playing; he could just hear the lilt of it, and the swing of the melody, wavering as the wind moved, pleased him the more. He remembered the tune now. He had danced with one of the most wonderful women he had ever seen only a month agone, how her hand had quivered on his arm when the violins sang that rhapsody. Yes, he remembered every twist and turn of it, and, remembering, poured out some fresh wine and drank in silence to that woman's eyes. For the toasts that taste sweetest as we swallow them are those to a day that is past and has found its halo, to a woman's face we piece together only in fragmentary memories.

Outside in the courtyard the trees fluttered, their leaves cavilling with the passing breeze. He could hear distant steps on the gravel of sentries going to their posts, a violin or two winging a song across the night from the royal apartments. He took these things in vaguely, even as the mind records little details while one is but scarcely conscious of them. Then the door opened almost behind him, and the priest came in unannounced.

The Colonel got up quickly and half pushed his guest into an easy chair set at the corner of the table.

"Ah, mon brave," he exclaimed. "So you're back again. And the Queen?"

"Where, but in the royal apartments, very tired, and not a little bad−tempered. Excitement plays the deuce with a woman's nerves. As I left her she was mercilessly chiding an official because the court bootmaker had sent up two extra pairs of boots in the hope that she would buy them. This morning she would have purchased the lot; to−night she has rejected the entire parcel for the man's impudence. One ought to study the moods of one's clients before one's shop window."

"Dined?"

"Not precisely. I have no appetite for food, but I am monstrously in need of a drink."

Colonel Slana pressed a bell under the table, and a flunkey appeared. He ordered liqueurs and a fresh bottle of wine, and waited almost in silence till the man brought them. The latter was opened and the glasses flushed.

"We really had quite a good time," said Fenning as he put down his empty glass, and they were alone again. "Forgive me if I slip off these garments. The night is infernally hot."

He got up and threw off the black cloak he wore and removed the close−fitting wig. Then, sweeping his hand across his cropped hair, he sat down and took a cigarette from the box at his elbow.

"You know, you have the most astounding set of rogues in Belgrade," he said. He spoke in French with the

easy lazy accent of a man who realises the wonderful possibilities of expression that tongue possesses. "Really you should exterminate the vermin. I had the greatest difficulty in the world to persuade them not to cut the Queen to pieces before my eyes. Truly a wonderful set of rogues."

A swift flash of alarm spread over the face of the other. "You mean that?" he said.

"As I live−−yes." Fenning leant across the table, and looked the other squarely in the eyes. "Has it ever occurred to you what a brave woman she is?" he asked.

"Of course. But for her−−−−" the Colonel began.

"Yes, but for her the throne would totter to−morrow. I know that well enough; you know it; the world that knows anything at all knows it too. But nevertheless, my friend, if you do not put some of those fools in the Kalamegdan you will see tragedy in Belgrade yet."

"So you are afraid of a handful of cut−throats. Why, if they attempted to give trouble, the army−−−−"

"Yes, what about the army? It would come out at their call to−morrow. Do you know so little of Belgrade then that you put your faith in uniforms with the hearts of traitors behind them? If so, my colonel, you have much to learn. Beyond these closed doors what do you hear? Nothing. Go into the streets, the cafés −−you hear only mutterings. But don't they carry some warning of the storm to your ears? Here you are in a little castle of your own attached to the palace. There are big walls beyond, the doors are guarded by sentries. No one moves in the gardens, the fountains play in the moonlight, there is no living thing in the shadows. So! But a sense of security is the most fatal prop in the world; one day it bends in the middle and breaks. You follow me?"

The other laughed.

"Admirably. And to−night has warped your nerves. The Queen treats the matter in far too serious a spirit because, being a woman, she has her moments of fear. She has convinced you that there is danger. Yet no one can penetrate here, let alone enter the palace."

The Colonel drank a fresh glass of wine and laughed.

"You seem to know a good deal about the underworld," he added, brushing his lips with his tongue. "But there are some things you do not know. You would probably smile, for instance, if I told you that those traitors have been completely duped."

"I don't think I should. But why talk about it? I do not invite your confidence. This wine is extremely good, by the way. May I−−thanks!"

He replenished his glass from the decanter the other held out.

"I'm fearfully sleepy," he said when the glass stood empty again. "With your permission I will go back to my hotel. It was a good thing for you that I brought that letter from the Count, eh?"

"I agree with you. The Count was a wonderful patriot."

"Yes−−for an Austrian! A kind of isolated patriotism I seem to have met before. It generally ends in big concessions or planting an army in your neighbour's vineyard. And, if I may mention it, colonel−−as I have shortly to be going−−might I trouble you for a small amount? I have tried very hard to drown my mercenary soul in your good wine and failed dismally. Money is a fearful drag on one, but a necessary millstone borne without over−estimating the weight. My fee for to−night's work I may say, incidentally, is ten thousand francs."

Fenning spoke casually, and pulled slowly at his cigarette, without looking at the other. Then he examined the ash of it and broke it carefully against his plate.

"Ten thousand francs. You must be mad! I have put aside for you a wallet containing one thousand."

A look of pain and surprise crossed the Englishman's face.

"How damnably inconvenient," he said quietly. "I am really afraid you must find nine more wallets."

Colonel Slana flushed. The look in Fenning's eyes did not reassure him. He read his man quickly, and knew that no bluster would save the situation.

"I have only a thousand here. I could not obtain more, even if I desired, without approaching the King," he said guardedly. "I am not quite sure what he would say, but I have a shrewd idea. He might invite you to leave Servia, or remain−−a prisoner."

"A pleasure, I assure you. But we will not have to go to the King. Dear lord, no, we will not trouble His Majesty. You see, you obtained nearly double that amount from him this morning for secret service purposes, bribery, and a few other things. In England we'd call it corruption, and dirty business at that. I will go further, and say you have half that sum in the house even now."

The Colonel was on his feet in an instant.

"What do you mean? You lie. Some spy−−−−"

"Possibly. Some infernal spy. A nasty word, but we have no time to hunt the dictionary for a better." Fenning spoke slowly with the old accustomed drawl. And he was enjoying his cigarette because it was the best tobacco.

"Who are you, sir? Who are you?" Colonel Slana burst out.

"You wouldn't know my name, so you cannot flatter me. My name is Fenning−−James Fenning, but more generally called Jimmy. A man always very short of money; a fine diplomatist; a man who knows more about Belgrade and the present situation than you do. Drinks a little−−inherited vice that−−lives by his wits, loves a good dinner, but a good bottle of wine better. Seems to secure by some means−−heaven knows how−−the confidence of most people, and is really very useful when he's paid in proportion. Hates cant, considers women mere pawns in a game, has a smattering of rather polished manners. Brought an introduction to you stolen from another man's wallet, and signed by Count Stolpin. The poor fellow is dead, and cannot repudiate his signature now, nor identify his apostle. That's James Fenning."

He looked across the table with an air of ease which proclaimed him to be very well at home with everybody and the world in general.

"Then you're a spy. And if that's so−−−−"

The Colonel's hand went under the table as if to ring the bell, but Fenning spoke again.

"I wouldn't ring that bell. You will only create a scandal. Let me talk to you for a moment. You know, it wasn't a bad idea putting up a dummy for Colonel Paschnovich and his rabble to worship. Quite an excellent idea, really. You kidnapped the other man−−what was his name? Oh, yes, Galatz. Stuck him in the monastery and ran out this other fellow as substitute. You did not want me to know this, and you really wouldn't like anyone else to overhear it, would you?"

"Overhear it?" The Colonel brought his fist down on the table with a crash. "What matters! Do you think I am going to let you walk out of this place−−a free man?" he asked.

"I rather think you have to. The money, I believe, is kept in that safe in the corner. My information is generally pretty sound. May I trouble you?"

For answer the Colonel slipped out a revolver and laid it beside his plate; a second later Fenning placed a Colt at the stem of his glass.

"A duel in the garden−−moonlight−−if need be a band to play. The King watching from the window at the first shot, believing that they have called for his crown already. Fine, Colonel, fine! And with a girl looking on, too! I was ever a lover of romance."

"You fool, you utter fool!" The Colonel thought he had found humour in the situation, and lolling back in his chair he laughed heartily. "I grant you that you are clever, my friend," he said. "But, you know, we don't let men like you walk at random in Belgrade. In Paris or London, yes, but in Belgrade, no. If I ring this bell−−−−"

"You won't, because we are not alone in this room!"

"Not alone?" Colonel Slana flung his chair aside and gripped his weapon. Simultaneously Fenning did the same. For a moment they stood looking into each other's faces. Then the Englishman moved a foot forward as stealthily as might a cat, and, springing at the man before him, struck the revolver from his hand with a single blow.

"Now sit down−−and talk," he said.

Colonel Slana, gripping his wounded wrist, dropped into his chair with an oath. The suddenness of the attack, the subtlety with which Fenning had lured him into the net−−that and the wine fumes playing around his brain robbed him of his presence of mind. Once his hand went to the bell under the table, but the look of security in Fenning's eyes made him involuntarily withdraw it again. And Fenning, sitting on the corner of his chair, watched him with a laugh about his lips, and the hand that held the revolver balanced on the edge of the table.

"The point is this," he said. "I hate making a row. I hate trouble because someone always gets hurt. And really there is no need that we should quarrel, since as friends we can be of service to each other. Remember you are the administrator of a pretty piece of trickery. You have engaged an Englishman to pass himself here as Captain Galatz, son of the dead King Milan. You have for the moment fooled your enemies. But when I tell you that that Englishman is my friend, and that it was through my instrumentality that Count Stolpin selected him−−ah! You follow me!"

"Your friend?"

"Yes, my friend, Paul Cazalet, one of the cleverest political journalists in England, a man headstrong, with the love of adventure running like fire through his blood. And it was I who brought about the meeting between Cazalet and the Count. Moreover, at my instigation, a rumour was circulated through the London press to the effect that the birth of a child had robbed Cazalet of his inheritance. Of course, there was no child. But Cazalet was the one man needed, and, believing himself thus ruined, it was easy for the Count to bend him to his will at the proper hour. The entire scheme worked without a hitch." Fenning gave a deep sigh of satisfaction. "Yes; I think I have been rather clever over the whole thing. You, my dear Colonel, have played only the most insignificant part. I might almost say that you have had nothing to do with it at all."

The Colonel sat mute as if stupefied. That the other spoke the truth he had proof enough. How else did he know the Englishman's name? He was appalled by the depth of the plot into which he had unwittingly fallen; even as the seconds ticked themselves away he grew steadily afraid of the man before him. For here, within the security of the stone walls of which he had boasted, and within a few yards of the King himself, was a man who almost had it in his power to bring about a cataclysm involving even the throne.

The peril of the situation, the thundering of his own heart decided his next action. He got up slowly and, taking a key from his pocket, unlocked the safe. He threw the massive doors back, and began grovelling among the contents. Then he turned and pitched some packets across the table. In the sheer terror which possessed him he forgot the presence of another person in the room. Had he listened or been able to stifle the beating of the mighty forces in his brain, he would have detected some movement behind the curtains.

Fenning took the packets and opened them with the care of a man who suspects a trick in every movement of his adversary, and as cautiously he counted the money they contained. His fingers were nerveless; his. every pose calm and collected. He had no fears, no thought but for the moment. Then he put the packets in his coat and helped himself to another glass of wine.

"A health unto His Majesty!" he cried, lifting the glass. "In England we'd drink it with musical honours!"

The Colonel returned to his seat, the ease of the other inspiring him with a new sense of security. He would have his man arrested in the morning and brought into this very room a prisoner. And the Kalamegdan had never told its secrets yet.

"I don't know who you are, but I give you credit for a clever piece of knavery," he said, and bowed his head over the rim of his glass.

"Damn it! this is thundering good wine," Fenning exclaimed. "You must excuse me. I will fill again. I fear I am rather an expensive guest to entertain; but I have rendered you a good service. For aught I know I have to−night saved the crown of Servia. I might even boast that I have saved the Queen's life. I rather think she will tell you so after the coffee in the morning, my Colonel." He moistened his lips from his glass and smiled. "You know," he said, "I think Her Majesty rather likes me. In any case, you must not forget that you are my sponsor to her. It was so fortunate that I came to you with the introduction I did, else, my friend, I believe that even you would have mistrusted me. And mistrust is such an unpalatable thing with good wine."

The Colonel's hand carefully crept across the table; a moment more and it would have closed over Fenning's revolver, but the latter noticed the movement and drew the weapon a foot farther away from him.

"Aye, a good revolver this," he said, examining it. He threw back the breech and displayed the cartridges. "Look at that. You won't find another breech like that on the Teratsia. And I bought it from an American in Paris who was very drunk. One louis! Let me empty it, and you shall have it for two. . . . Yes; it was a catastrophe that we should have been overheard to− night, but unfortunately a necessary one." He paused a moment, and, still gripping the revolver, half turned as if he could detect some movement behind the curtains. "Let me tell you−−−−"

"The devil! I have no time to waste words with you, but tell your story. In any case it can have no bearing on the main issue." Colonel Slana's eyes blazed with anger.

" Possibly. But I think you already regret that most excellent dinner we ate at the Regent last night. The volaille, I remember, was superb; the asparagus−−what flavour! And the wine−−dear heaven, what wine! There were lights and glamour, and fair faces−−a wonderful band out in the trees. You saw a woman there; you were interested in her. It was my purpose that you should be."

"A woman? Yes." A quickening interest sprang to life on the Colonel's face.

"She was pretty, You admired her. It was a reckless thing to do, my Colonel. Or, having done so, you should have condoned the offence by avoiding wine. I believe you even asked me for an introduction; moreover, I believe I was able to give it without your having the faintest suspicion."

"Suspicion?" gasped the other.

"I am devilish clumsy at explaining things. But she is my friend, and, as it happens−−it is perhaps rather unfortunate in this case−−she is one of the principal spies in Belgrade, and she is in your rooms now!"

"You lie!"

Colonel Slana clung to the edge of the table; he was almost on his feet when Fenning waved him back.

"Of course, if a spy were found in your rooms, Colonel−−−−"

"A spy? She could never reach here. The place is too well guarded. And what would your object be?"

Yet even as the Colonel spoke he felt a growing suspicion of the scarlet curtains that were moving to and fro in the wind.

"Let me close the doors," he said. "I have no wish that we should be overheard."

The subterfuge was too apparent to be misunderstood.

"There is no need; the night is hot," said Fenning. "You ask me my object. You do not know me, you don't really, or you would be well aware that it is my custom to have an object for most things I do." He spoke calmly, as if he had the whole night in which to explain himself, while his antagonist sat fretfully watching him, the sweat beading his hot forehead. "Imagine for a moment how easy it would be for you to ring that bell and have me arrested! You have felt so inclined more than once within the last half−hour, but you are so excellent a host that you have always restrained your hand. In a few moments you are going to let me pass out through those curtains to the square beyond."

"You−−you−−a spy−−−−"

"Scarcely that. But you daren't ring that bell. If a spy−−and a woman, too−−were found in your rooms! My dear Colonel, what would His Majesty say? His confidence shaken, his faith in you gone. Verily you might find the air of Belgrade unsavoury! So you see you must let me go out and my colleague with me: you cannot touch either of us. You are too afraid of scandal. You have too much respect for your official position. And there are several pairs of eyes in Belgrade that might shed crocodile tears at your downfall. A few red lips that would laugh perhaps. These butterfly creatures−−dear Colonel. You were ever fond of the summer."

The taunt in the last few words struck the man to life. He was beaten, beaten on every point, but some slumbering sense of dignity awoke in him. He leapt towards Fenning, then came to a full−stop before him, and stared, his lips taut and white, his hands clenched.

"A woman here? God, I would kill her!"

A smothered cry arose from beyond the curtains that shielded the open doors−−a low cry of fear. Then a movement followed as if the person hidden there was about to withdraw to the open air beyond. For a moment the curtains swayed−−it might have been by the pressure of hands−−and Fenning stepped up to them and tore them aside.

A woman stood there, the graven image of fear. The colour had drained from her cheeks, and the look in her eyes−−Fenning knew he would never forget it. It reminded him of the same expression he had once seen in the eyes of a young and lovely woman whose lover had abandoned her to the underworld of Paris −−eyes that were refused the mercy of tears. For a woman weeps only for a broken play−thing−−seldom at the realisation of a misplaced trust, since the latter is too great a disaster for tears.

Jean waited there, careless of what was passing in the room, ignorant almost of the presence of the other man. She could only look at Fenning. And it seemed to her even then that there was some crudity about his face which she had never observed there before, as if the ugliness of his soul had put its shadow over every feature. She grew conscious of it vaguely−−this new ugliness in him. And she was dead to fear, dead to any emotion save that of loathing, of utter abandon to the hatred which comes to a woman only when a man has spoilt her life.

"It was for this−−you needed me here to shield you. I was to be the lure?" Almost she was incoherent.

Her words fell upon Fenning like the first blows of the lash. He became as suddenly conscious of a sense of shame, a thing he had never known before. From any other woman the taunt would have meant nothing. But she seemed to be beating−−beating upon an open wound. He sought the only refuge−−that of confession.

"Yes, it was for that." He turned his eyes away. "You were the lure," he said.

CHAPTER XIV. BEFORE THE DAWN

PAUL almost collided with her as she turned the corner. But for the moon swinging high above the roofs he would never have seen her face. Yet the little figure, hurrying forward with bent head−−could he not pick it out from the whole crowd of the world's peoples spread before his eyes?

The street was deserted except where a sleepy zaptieh, armed to the teeth, patrolled a dozen yards of rough pavement at the far end of it. A few lights still winked at the night from the palace windows; the distant laughter of drunken men filtered up from the coffee−houses in a neighbouring quarter. For the rest Belgrade slept.

He stopped, and half turned when she would have passed him, and she shrank back with a quick mutter of fear.

"Miss Lorimer!"

She answered him with a cry of recognition. She was panting, her eyes wide open and staring, as if some horror had approached her from the dark.

"You told me we should meet in Servia," he laughed; "and, bless my soul, when we keep the appointment you are afraid of me!"

"It's not fear. I−−−−"

The brave eyes smiled at him, but her words failed her.

"I know," he said. "It's these infernally dark streets. They would hang the urban council for this in England. How's the shoulder?"

"It was nothing very serious." He took an ungloved hand. She was cold, and trembling. "It's cured. I was foolish to faint that night−−that night in Paris, you remember."

"Will I ever forget it? For me it was Paradise," he said.

She looked puzzled.

"Waiting outside that door, knowing you were safe in there," he explained. "That was the one great thing that mattered−−you were safe."

"I came to Belgrade with−−−−"

"Jimmy Fenning," he broke in. "I can guess as much. Jimmy was ever a gallant to a pretty woman. If you had seen him to− night!"

"I have only just left him," she answered simply.

"Left Fenning? Tell me."

"No, no. I don't wish to speak about it. . . . All men are beasts!" she flung out.

He swept aside her little play of anger with a laugh.

"Friend Fenning is in disgrace. I do not know what he has done, but we will consider him whipped and put in a corner," he said. "Now tell me why you chose Belgrade: why you are here."

"And you think I would discuss it with you−−you who are the candidate for a throne?" she asked, catching his mood.

"Fenning told you?"

"He told me many things. . . . And he made me wonder why I ever trusted a man."

"Women are always doing that," he parried; "and you are going to do it again. You're going to trust me when I urge you to leave Belgrade tomorrow. I want you to return to England. Belgrade will be no place for a woman when the storm breaks."

He spoke seriously and, taking her arm, drew her nearer to him.

"Will you go, little girl?" he said. "You asked me once not to come here, and I disobeyed you. But now I am going to ask you to go back. It is a duty you owe to yourself."

She looked up.

"Go back? Why talk about it? You tell a woman she is frightened of danger and think it pleases her."

"It pleases her more to know that a man is so anxious for her safety as to warn her."

"You would send me back?"

"I would take you back but for a duty I owe to people I have never met before in my life."

"We're wasting a lot of time arguing," she said shortly.

"Is it ever a waste of time to argue with a pretty woman?" he answered. "If I were kind to you I would have you arrested as a spy. Would you be herded with fanatics when the madness takes them? At least, you would be safe from the mob in a prison cell."

"Possibly. When you are King−−−−" she said.

He grew serious in a moment. He knew that she had mocked him. She was gibing at him as might a child at a puny monarch with a paper crown. He bent forward till his face was close to hers, and now her eyes were very grave, as if a quick realisation had come to her of what was passing in his mind.

For a while he hesitated. He could find no words to answer her: no words that would tell the worship his heart dictated. He watched a wisp of hair play over her face in the beat of the wind, and her little white fingers come up and brush it aside. Even as he waited she seemed to assume a place of greater import in his life than she had done that night in Paris, and to bring fulfilment of things predestined. She was the woman chosen for him out of the big gamble of Adventure; so he reasoned. And she needed him there in the loneliness of a strange land. He believed he read that need in her eyes as he looked at her.

"There is only one kingdom I wish to rule," he said softly as he bent over her. "If you would go back to England! Ah! if you would do so much for me that I might follow and find my kingdom there!"

"When your place is here?"

"Not if you called me from the other side of Europe. If I told you−−−−"

"There is no need," she broke in quickly. "I know−−I know!"

"You know? Jean!"

The sound of her name on his lips was like a rich note of music, or it may have been as a clarion call which broke down the walls of reserve and spoke of the complete surrender of himself. The future grew rich with promise as the minutes passed. It was as if the curtains of To−morrow had been drawn aside that he might see when he had dreamed only of Yesterday.

She had turned her head, nor could he observe the lustre that had crept into her eyes. The wind across his lips had in it the taste of sweet trees. Overhead the jostling leaves of the ilex whispered in little rising tones of melody, and her face was scarred with the fretted light falling through the thick foliage.

"You cannot tell what you have been−−have meant to me," he said. "Hitherto my life has been full of striving, but little attainment. I had big ambitions always before me like beacon lights which I was ever trying to reach. And then that night at the Toledo−−I thought that the dark had blotted out those beacons for ever, till you came to me. You made me go on."

"I?"

He felt the quickened clasp of her hand on his sleeve as he had done that night in London.

"Yes−−you," he answered her. "Though my feet had stood on the very edge of the precipice you guided them into the sweet meadows. I was facing disaster. I had reached that grey hour which waits for every man somewhere in his life. But with you came the sunshine: the colour appeared in everything again. I felt myself answering to some outside influence. A woman can do that for a man. He may not recognise it immediately, for he is often just a child, self−confident, too self−reliant, till gradually he learns that some greater power is moulding him in spite of himself. It has been so with me. In all my world of broken ambitions−−of things that might have been−−there has been only one ruling force." He spoke steadily, with the strength of a.man who has come to understanding. "I never knew it till now, though conscious long since of its presence, its indomitable working. And that power, Jean, is you. I believe every man is sent to earth to find his way by devious paths to his affinity, and he feels that influence subconsciously long before he ever sees the woman who has caused it."

She was staring at the white walls of the palace as if she did not heed him. He bent a little closer to her, and gripped her wrist beneath the sleeve till his fingers bit into the flesh.

"It has been a curious winding path," he said. "But it has led me to you. And now−−how small everything else appears−−the conflict of powers for this bubble throne, a dozen forces intriguing to tear a queen from her husband's side without pity. I am like a man who looks through roseate glasses that hide all the ugliness of things around. An hour ago this place was to me a den of beasts; now I only know that the night is beautiful and Belgrade is my city of dreams. That a woman could mean so much!"

"You care−−like that?"

The question was sprung with surprise−−almost dismay.

"So much that I urge you to leave Belgrade. I have only fear for you here. To−morrow a group of men may shout the doom of the throne, and the army will cry the echo. The blood of a nation which has slept for years is slowly waking into action, and when this happens you will be less than a pawn in a big game. And after all, your mission here−−what good is it going to bring into your life? You will have gained nothing, unless it be that you have learned to know the world better, and found only sadness in the discovery."

"Sadness!" she echoed. "There is no sadness in freedom."

"A nation's freedom that may cost you yours. You will go−− you must go."

"I shall remain."

She set her lips as she spoke.

"Interfering in other people's quarrels can become a very uninteresting pastime. I have already discovered that," he said. "I would like to give everything up to my love for you, to work for it, to start a fresh life in England for you−−with you. Remember that when a man drops love out of his life he sheds the only garment he has borrowed from Heaven. And some day, Jean, if not now, you will come to understand, and feel glad because I told you."

She looked up smiling into his face.

"Perhaps," she said. "But I have no love for England now. I want to remain in Belgrade. And it is glorious adventure−−to me it is all my life. Nor is this the moment for me to turn back. I gave my trust to a man only to find to−night that he has abused it. You cannot expect a woman to run away from defeat. I'm stubborn, mulish!"

"Adorable!" he exclaimed.

"The thing I want most in the world to−night is to cry quits with the man who has spoiled my faith in him. I would like to put all the gall into a letter to him and post it before regret came with the morning. Now speak the truth, and tell me I'm a vicious little beast!"

"Spitfire! There, will that please you?" he laughed. "And walk along with me, little Spitfire! My arm in yours−−so. That zaptieh has his eye cocked at us. He would love an international complication by arresting us, with himself as the hero."

He strode beside her, a song in his heart, and the scales of blindness covering his eyes. For if he could have analysed dispassionately every word and mood of her he would have found her to be a woman standing at parting ways, smarting under the whip of something that was hurting her pride, ambitious still, careless for nothing save a little victory, indecisive though it might have been.

But withal she was glad that Paul was at hand; she was glad of his friendship; it acted as a balm to her suffering faith in his sex. And she was subconscious of a little note of selfishness. She knew what he had offered her−−love, big and sheltering and strong. At the moment it struck no responding chord, but only a thankfulness for the sense of security it brought, companionship in a desert waste. It was like a cup of water when she would have fallen by the way, and she could go forward now, revived, encouraged.

"That he should have made you suffer," he began. "Fenning was never kind to women."

"Kind to women!" she echoed bitterly. His words drove her to decision, and broke her pride so that she could bend and kiss the hand that had hurt her. "Kind to women!" she said vehemently. "He has been very good to me. He sheltered and shielded me; he nearly gave his life for me. A woman never forgets a thing like that−−big things like that. You think I don't understand him, but I do. He has been brought up in a hard world, and he told me once that no one had ever turned a hand to help him. He had just had to fight, to live by his wits, by artifice and subterfuge. Yes, he gave me the whole story. I remember, he was sitting by the window in his rooms nursing his broken hand−−it was the day after you went−−and he told me, not out of self−pity, but with a brave courage that didn't care. If I had said that I was sorry for him he would have taken the insult to heart. So I just listened, and said `Yes' and `No,' and pretended I was watching the traffic in the street. But I heard every word, and I think it helped him, telling it to me.

"Don't you see how a man gets hardened in a school like that?" she went on. "He has disappointed me to−night, that is all. I should have known that no man could endure so much without growing to the belief that a woman counts for very little. Self−defence is his natural armament. You cannot expect a man in his world to know much about sympathy; it's stifled out of him before it can ever take root."

"You are throwing my own arguments in my face," Paul answered. "I have always declared that a man's

environment shapes the man. I have preached that doctrine and stuck to it through thick and thin. Prison makes the criminal commit more crimes, rough usage begets cruelty in the sufferer. So I have said, and so I have believed. And yet I thought better of Jimmy. I felt sure he would win out when it came to a big test. I even gave him credit for being the exception to the rule, the very man who could have laughed at me and proved my precepts wrong."

"I used to think so," she answered him. "I thought so that day in Paris, when he told me about himself. He told me he could never run straight. Yes, that was the expression he used. I think he meant to warn me against himself. And I thought of what you had said−−the speeches you had made about the criminal taint and the impossibility of crushing it out by brutality. You made me do what I did."

"What was that?"

"I made a resolve that I would stand by him just as he had stood by me that night in Belleville when I was hurt. I meant to try your doctrine of influence."

"He cannot be cured; he can't run straight; it's in his blood. That I should come to confess that!" he said.

It was his first doubt in his own argument. Yet she scarcely heard him, so low did he speak. And with slow reasoning he began to survey the case of Fenning. If he loved this woman his affection would have offered some defence against the inborn taint of the trickster. He had failed the first time−−but would he fail the second? There was just that possibility−−would he fail the second time? Should he not be given the benefit of the doubt?

She did not know the thoughts that were passing in his mind. She was looking down the long street, and could he have seen the expression on her face he would have said that she bore for him no more than a feeling of sympathy, but for the man who had fooled her a love that passed all understanding.

"Take me home. I hate Belgrade to−night," she exclaimed suddenly. "The Hôtel de la Croix−−will you take me now?"

They walked down street after street in silence. He said good− bye to her in the ill−lit doorway.

"Here I am back at my prison," she said, and laughed. He waited until the door had closed softly behind her, and then turned towards the west of the city.

And ere she snuffed the candle in her little bedroom, Jean threw herself beside her bed in the abandon of prayer. There was a God somewhere, and she wanted Him to help a certain man.

But only Fenning's name was mentioned in the supplication.

* * * * * *

Paul heard the news in the café on the following evening. Of Jean he had seen nothing. The band in the gardens had just finished the Draga March; he sat tapping his fingers to the lilt of it on the marble−topped table. He paid no attention to the idle chatter, but he was compelled to listen to the little wizened man with the white moustache at the next table, who was talking treachery in French to his companion.

"The dogs!" he was saying. "They have arrested a woman. An English girl−−the prettiest spy in Belgrade. Slana has sent her to the Kalamegdan. Slana never takes risks. And they'll kill her there, the cowards!"

Paul got up without a word, and walked away towards the Hôtel de la Croix to make inquiries, muttering to himself as he went. "The pretty English spy−−in the Kalamegdan prison. The cowards!" he cried. "The damned cowards!"

The words seemed to follow him as he disappeared into the darkness.

CHAPTER XV. MONSIEUR THE ROGUE

THE dawn was stirring above the city when Paul arose. For him the night had been a torture that appeared to have no end. He was a man whose moods quickly produced strong exhilaration or depression, and the latter, deepening with the darkness, had faced him with the futility of the situation. Hour by hour he had lain in bed staring with hot−rimmed eyes at the grim shadows thrown over the ceiling by the small oil−lamp, his mind running the whole gamut of a fantasia of thought, choosing a hundred different courses of pursuit, only to abandon them as quickly as they had been chosen. He became the slave of his imagination and abandoned himself to it, just as people of strong impulse become hypersensitive to the slightest set−back, and suffer it even as others suffer the pain of a physical hurt.

Half dressed, he opened the window and looked out. The light was touching the roofs dimly, shaping their contours till the ugliness of the mongrel architecture became still more ugly, and slowly the coming day moved the languor from his senses. He grew restive; his blood would answer no call save that of action. His pulses quickened to the sounds of the morning, the rumble of a handcart over the rough cobbles below, a siren rasping from some slow−moving vessel out on the broad grey river, the half−hearted tramp of soldiery down a distant street −−all had their separate appeal.

He watched the light grow up and drank in the wet chill air. And he remembered that the light as it strengthened was creeping through the window of a small cell where a girl prayed with lips tired of prayer for help she believed could never come. He could read her mind, and became conscious of some form of mental telepathy between himself and her; felt, even as she felt, her impotence against the Juggernaut of Circumstance which had crushed her. Yet he was free and the day was here.

As he put on his coat he remembered the letter in his wallet. His first impulse had been to go to Nichodim with threats to expose the entire plot, to surrender his part as a puppet prince unless the release of Jean were assured. And Nichodim would have answered him−−with a cell. Or Slana? A jest at his tender English heart, and would he have a glass of wine to rouse his courage! For Slana took no risks, and there is seldom mercy where there is risk. But the letter in his wallet, given him by Stolpin with others that night in Dover Harbour−− the letter to the Queen? Here at hand lay the key to open the gate.

Just before midday he presented himself at the palace, and in a quarter of an hour the bead curtain that covered the door of Draga's private boudoir was held aside that he might enter. He passed into an empty room. The atmosphere was aromatic with scented Russian tobacco, and in a small ash−tray upon a polished rosewood table were the butts of two cigarettes.

He stood still and glanced round the chamber. It was plainly yet tastefully furnished. The walls were panelled with bronze silks, a divan−−heavily cushioned with the same colour−−was thrown across one corner. The pictures were crude and chosen for the blending of their colours rather than for artistic skill, and on all the tables were photographs, some framed, other propped against odd pieces of eggshell china and glass ornaments−−photographs of Alexander, her husband. In a far corner, hastily thrown into a chair, was a piece of needlework in a square frame with a newspaper lying beside it. The concentration of these impressions convinced him that the room was furnished by a woman for her comfort and not for regal display. It was a room a Queen might scorn, but a woman could love. And Draga was a woman, but, so Belgrade would have him believe, never a Queen. Her tastes were not regal, her senses dulled to that realisation of sovereignty which creates the personality of the ruler. Yet she was strong with some subtle form of strength which those about her did not understand while yet they knew she ruled.

The door at the end of the room opened and closed; and Paul, turning, found himself looking into the eyes of the Queen. She half raised her hand in surprise.

"Your face is familiar to me, monsieur. Is this a trick?" she asked in French.

She spoke slowly, fearlessly, though but a few hours before she had named him for one of a gang of revolutionaries.

"The trick, madam, was performed last night," Paul answered her. "The letter you hold in your hand identifies me. Last night I played the part of impostor−−to your enemies."

Removing the needlework from the chair, she sat down and pointed him to a chair facing her.

"You are vague, monsieur. I do not understand."

"It is proposed to put a son of King Milan on the throne," Paul ventured, rushing to the point at once.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"One hears rumours. Belgrade demands such chatter; it is the city's dull season."

"I am that son−−for the hour that the play lasts," Paul replied. He watched her eyes widen as he spoke. "Captain Galatz, of the French army; a worthy fellow, probably quite happy with his books in the monastery where it has pleased those who pull the strings to place him while I play his part in Belgrade."

She carefully studied his face, a listless expression on her own.

"And you?" she said slowly.

"I am Captain Galatz−−so they have named me. Last night, at that house in the passage in the Rue d'Or, I was tempted to tell you. For a moment I forgot my part. I was tired of being associated with cowards. I forgot I was playing a coward's part, and that the actor cannot choose his lines."

"But who are you?" she interrupted petulantly. "Who are you?"

"A plain Englishman, madam, Paul Cazalet, as that letter tells you. Some have named me for an adventurer, some for a genius, others for a fool. On the impulse of a moment I started on the errand which brought me here; where that errand will end I do not know. Almost, I might say, I do not care. But I am here to serve you, to serve His Majesty."

He spoke earnestly as if he were expounding to her the whole mission of his life. A smile crept over her face. He had seen women smile like that before, but without the same sympathy, the same attraction.

In the cafés they had marvelled at the fascination of Draga; to the ignorant, who were informed upon things no better than the swineherds in the mountains, it was a form of witchery which had absorbed a king and would overthrow a throne. It was a judgment come to Servia for not maintaining the prestige of Kossovo. That ancient battlefield was their source of glory that never failed them. They were ever patriots over Kossovo; it was the world's battle. And Draga−−what did she know of such pride, such race−honour, she who was once a gipsy? She was a woman of coarse instincts, lacking beauty, even dignity; so they had told him. The fools! A few hours ago he could only wonder at her courage, faced as she had been by a gang of desperadoes; his colleagues the men he could have spat upon. Every woman has her big moments when she really rules. And in all his memories of Draga this would be hers. The subtle wonder of her, the simplicity of manner, the melody of her voice, the deep sloe eyes that had brought a monarch to her feet−−all these things were sensed by him in the abstract and convinced him of the strength of her personality.

"I am grateful to you," she said. "Colonel Slana should have sent you to me before. He is a strange man; he tells me but little of his schemes, though I must admit knowledge of this one. Yes, he should have sent you."

"There was no need. It was not for gratitude I came," Paul said.

"To report yourself, perhaps? If so, why not to His Majesty?"

Paul shook his head.

"No; not even to report myself."

"I am curious, m'sieu."

"Some mad acts are being perpetrated in Belgrade, madam. I learned last night that there was such a folly as over−zeal. It is usually the fault of the most trusted, for the knowledge of trust can give one an exaggerated sense of duty−−can even inspire mistakes. It is easy to err like that when one is slave to a cause."

"Yes, I suppose so. The more we strive the greater our mistakes. I, too, have learned that. You speak of someone? Colonel Slana?"

"Yes, Colonel Slana. A most admirable servant−−a zealot to the core. And he has sent to the Kalamegdan an English girl because he was afraid of her."

"M'sieu!"

"Yes, madam; it is true."

"Colonel Slana is afraid of no one," she reminded him.

"He was very much afraid of this girl last night if he thought it necessary to arrest her in the small hours of the morning. And Heaven knows why. If she had deserved her punishment I should not be here. His action is unwarrantable."

"You have seen him−−have questioned him?"

"I preferred to come to the fountain−head. The Colonel knows my mission. In everything else I am in accord with him. To have argued with him would have been useless. One does not find many drops of blood in a man of iron."

He spoke hotly, disarming judgment of his criticism.

"Colonel Slana is a disciplinarian," the Queen said.

"Perhaps. But discipline, madam, is a sense; one learns it, feels it by example, by the knowledge of strength, not by the act of a bully. When so many openly conspire; when one hears treason at every street corner, in every café, it is cowardice to shut up a girl whilst traitors walk free. It is comic−opera justice. Men would laugh at it."

"What is Colonel Slana afraid of−−you can tell me that? What is there about this English girl that he fears?"

"Very little, madam."

The reply came from the figure who stood holding apart the bead curtains in the act of stepping into the room; and, turning, Paul saw the look of malice on Colonel Slana's face as he waited there. His heavy eyes were half closed, and beneath the grey moustache his lips were working. He returned the Englishman's bow with a stiff bend of the head.

"May I come in?" he said.

"Come, Colonel. We want you. You know Mr. Cazalet?" The Queen advanced as if to introduce them.

"He called upon me a week ago. He has been in close touch with me since then. He gave me a letter from Count Stolpin. I am familiar with his mission; I have done my best to aid him. Yes, madam, I quite approved of the Count's choice, though I would have preferred a stronger man. You want candour, Mr. Cazalet; you have it."

"And congratulate you upon the lateness of it," replied Paul.

"You seem unusually anxious about this girl," said the Colonel, with a laugh that was half a taunt.

"And you uncommonly afraid of her, mon brave."

"But you have placed her in the Kalamegdan prison−−you have good reason?" asked the Queen.

"Yes. I wish to investigate her movements. They are somewhat obscure. I might say that they give cause for suspicion."

"You suspect her, Colonel?" asked the Queen. "Suspect her of what?"

"Of being a spy, madam."

"You have proofs, of course?"

"I have my suspicions."

The Queen gave a gesture of impatience, of petulance.

"Suspicions! We live on suspicions; we look for the hand of the traitor everywhere," she said. "My husband would shut up every traitor in Belgrade. Only this morning−−because of the article in the Zastava−−he said he would have every revolutionary in Belgrade arrested. He would banish half the officers in the army, if necessary. I convinced him of the futility of it all. To arrest on suspicion, Colonel, is to declare the weakness of one's hand. You must set this girl free."

"Madam, I cannot."

"You still suspect her?"

"Yes."

"You had her searched?"

"Yes."

"You found papers, proofs of some kind, perhaps?"

"No. madam."

The sullen answers came like shots from a gun. Stepping forward, the Queen looked hard into his face.

"When did you find cause to suspect this girl?" she inquired.

"Last evening."

"You were informed of her movements?"

"No; I was informed that she was one of the principal spies in Belgrade."

"By whom?"

"By the priest who accompanied you to the house off the Rue d'Or."

The last sentence, flung out, it might have been, as a challenge, compelled Paul to silence by its import. The

intrusion of Fenning at this stage had a meaning which he could not, dared not, translate. And was it, then, for this that Jean had shielded him? His mind offered a dozen different explanations, and belief in any of them would have suggested treachery of one man to another if that man were innocent. Yet he remembered with ceaseless insistence the words Fenning had uttered that morning in Paris: "I'd sell any woman if I had the chance, just because I couldn't help it." The idea was impossible. Men did not sell a woman−−pitch her at the first opportunity into the common melting−pot of humanity−−on the temptation of a moment, where there was respect, love.

Fenning had loved this girl. There was that night at Belleville−−he had watched outside the door of Jean's room. And Paul had read the expression on his face then−−the fear that she was suffering, the love for her−−yes, love for a woman who might build him again into some semblance of his former self The whole man was a riddle inexplicable, astounding. Argue it from a dozen points and the one fact remained: that he had loved this woman with his brute nature, with all that was crude and untamed in him, but with a strength that might carve a beautiful statue out of reluctant stone.

The seconds floated past, and all the time Paul's mind worked in some deeper psychological study. To a normal individual the action attributed to Fenning was impossible; but the blood−taint−−the big enemy, indestructible, rolling through a man's veins, enslaving him, moulding him step by step for its own issues, evolving out of him a creature under subjection, crushing down the while all will and moral fibre−−this was beyond the pale of his reckoning. He had supposed Fenning to be a complex type of man usually misunderstood. The outward appearances of him allowed for certain degrees of honesty, integrity and moral grit. He was a man loved by men, ofttimes adored by women for all his occasional display of weakness. But underneath there now appeared the creature within, growing till it controlled the whole creation of what had been a man, changing one's perspective of him while yet one looked. It was the moral evolution of a man who was going under. Blood−taint was creating its own kind all the while, a big tide gaining and never receding under the wind of Opportunity and Circumstance.

For such a one Paul had always felt a sympathy, sometimes childish in its extreme. But in the space of a few moments he had grown to hate Fenning. His precepts should have made him cry, "I am my brother's keeper, I will make him whole!" Instead, he wanted to destroy, to kill the man, weak though he might be, who had injured the woman he loved. His principles, as applied to himself, were as a house built on sand. In a moment's space he judged his theories and found them wanting; in a moment's space he learned that so long as there were big forces such as love in the world, brutality would continue, the strong trampling over the weak; crime would go on, prisons remain filled. For years he had fooled himself; for years he believed he knew better than centuries of mental development.

The Queen was silent. She, too, was thinking.

"This priest−−is he reliable?" she asked, putting her thoughts into words.

"He did what was required of him−−I can say no more," Colonel Slana replied evasively.

"And you had only his idle remark on which to condemn this girl to prison?"

For a moment Colonel Slana hesitated. His mind, attuned to every strategic movement, to every cunning, worked coolly to response. An expression settled slowly over his face. It might have been of resolve or knavery. He felt himself to be in the position of a man who holds every trump card in the pack. He could afford his pose, his nonchalance; he was about to justify them. The pale blue eyes seemed to retreat into the surrounding network of wrinkles.

"I will be frank, madam," he said at last. He spoke with the condescension of a man ready to depart from his accustomed rule and explain the motive of his action. "She was introduced to me a few nights ago, this girl. I had heard of her; I sought the introduction. A charming girl, very. Beautiful, with wonderful eyes. She taught me during the first few minutes that her eyes were her stock−in−trade. She was reserved, yet she appeared anxious to cultivate my acquaintance. I have met such women before."

He glanced away, smiling to himself.

"Yes?" ejaculated the Queen.

"Oh, well, it might have ended there. A few pretty words, a smile or two, a glass of wine−−the common coin of a friendship that is never more than an episode. But, as it so happened, a member of your own household−−Mademoiselle Stengel, to be exact−−warned me that this demure English girl was suspected in Paris of having murdered Count Stolpin, that she had come here in the pay of Russia. Such a rumour, and from such a

source too−−−−" He bowed. "You would not have had me disregard it, madam?"

"Certainly not. Go on."

"This rumour was subsequently confirmed by what the priest said. He declared her to be a spy. I resolved to test her−−to find out what manner of woman she was, and if her reserve was merely a form of disguise. I discovered that she was prepared to pay any price for information."

"What do you mean?" broke in Paul quickly, with growing dread.

"I mean, m'sieu, that I invited her to come to my private rooms last night as a friend. And she told me."

Paul lurched forward. He clenched his fists, urged by some dominating force to batter the sardonic grin from the face of the man before him. He felt choking, as if a band of ice were about his throat. But for the presence of the Queen he might have killed Colonel Slana where he stood.

And yet in after years he marvelled at his self−control at that moment. He had not spoken or uttered a sound, because there was nothing he could say. To declare the lie was merely to state an obvious fact. He rather remembered the emotions that passed in rapid succession through him. At first an intense loathing of the man obsessed him−−the loathing one might feel for something that is bestial.

Then he thought of Jean. He had heard the reputations of women dragged through the mire in many places, in low brasseries, at Society dinner tables. And at such times he had felt momentary revolt, no more than that: just something that ruffled him, even as a breeze might ruffle the surface of still water, and, passing, leave it placid as before. But this was a blow that struck at the very heart of him, that seared him as might a white−hot iron, and left a burning pain. "All men are beasts," she had told him once, and he had laughed; but now he knew that in the heart of the most polished gentleman stalks some beast in a gilded cage.

"Of course, if she is a spy−−−−" the Queen began.

"Or this man a liar," Cazalet burst out. "In any case, I can insist on a thorough investigation. If it is refused, then I must return to my country at once, and demand protection for English girls from being tricked into gambling with their reputations by this man. Ah, that touches you, colonel."

"By what right−−−−" Colonel Slana sprang forward in his fury.

"Right? By the common right of friendship. There will be a full inquiry. Her Majesty will not refuse it."

"On the contrary," she replied. "Return this afternoon, Colonel, prepared to give me the fullest details. We will go into the matter then−−if need be, in the presence of the King."

Colonel Slana knew that he was dismissed. He bowed and walked out with the easy grace that never deserted him, nerveless, self−confident. For a second they stood watching the curtains through which he had passed fall into place. Then the Queen turned to Paul.

"What is she to you−−this girl?" she asked quietly.

"A friend, madam."

"A friend? No more than that?"

She read the expression on his face. When she spoke again it was in a low voice, tender and sympathetic.

"I will do what I can," she said; "but I cannot recommend the King to set her free till inquiries have been made and her innocence proved. So much is due to Colonel Slana. Yet if I could−−−−"

"If you could, madam−−−−?" Paul asked as she paused.

"One trusts an Englishman," she answered him. "I would set her free to−day. Would you give me your word that she left Belgrade?"

"Then you still mistrust her, madam?" Paul counter− questioned.

"How much of Colonel Slana's story do you believe?"

"So little of it that, release me from my mission, and I will undertake to remove this girl from Belgrade; if necessary, she shall go by force."

"By force? Then she would remain?"

"That I cannot say," Paul answered. "She belongs to that type of woman who is not turned from her purpose at the dictates of a man. She distrusts men. She believes that behind the masculine mind is a motive in everything. She had never had cause, so far as I am aware, really to trust a man; she has sought self−dependence, and followed it blindly. It has led her into many mistakes; it may lead her into many more. Frankly, madam, I do not really know how I should get her out of Belgrade; but I would get her out of it if it were your wish. So much I will promise in return for her freedom."

"That is as you please," she said. "If she has not actually broken the law, then she shall not remain the law's prisoner. That is my point. To herd up one's enemies, innocent and guilty alike, on the national waste−heap−−the foolishness of it! Freedom of speech and thought−−a long way round to internal good, but the only sure way. To live one's life as one wills−−ah, if we all had that freedom! It does not come from the throne, but from the spirit of the race. In Belgrade we are learning the lesson at the wrong end. If a man hates us, shall we gain his love by shutting him up in the Kalamegdan?"

Paul shook his head.

"It is the common creed here," he said. "You imprison a man for expressing his opinion, and permit the newspapers that create those opinions to pursue a campaign of calumny unchecked."

"Yes," she agreed; "that is so."

"It is your custom in Belgrade. In England we do it more delicately," Paul said with a laugh. "Our newspapers lead a man to the borderland, but no farther. If he steps beyond it he does so at his own peril; but, nevertheless, the Press is shaping our deeds, our thoughts, our very mode of life. We hate a politician because we are told to; we adore another for the same reason. We pay a halfpenny a day for our political zeal, for being told how to live, how to think. We do not want our own opinions; we seldom have the courage of them. We follow some man who, sitting in an office, writes what he thinks, and several hundred thousand minds will think the same to−morrow morning. If he has a disordered liver and the gall runs through his pen more freely than usual, then thousands have a liver to−morrow−−a mental liver, to give the complaint its proper name. The Press has its moods, yet we are not afraid of them, nor heed them; we just bring our own opinions into line. It is so much easier; and, after all, is not the Press our friend, and a brave fellow!"

His philosophy amused her. She thought for a moment, then said: "And if we suspend the newspapers−−what then?"

"Revolution, madam−−red, blood red!"

"You believe that?"

"Most certainly. A man with a disordered opinion of everybody and everything gets rid of his bile by agreeing with his morning paper. It is his daily liver tonic. It is as necessary to the modern mode of life as the very bread he eats. He must have it, it is part of him. Take it away, and he would break out into a revolutionary and a cracker of heads. He would strive for an ideal which the newspapers teach him is impossible. But temper your papers with reason−−if you can in Belgrade."

"You speak like the cold northerner you are," she answered him. "Impulse plays a greater part in our lives than in yours. We love deeply, we hate deeply; that is the sum total of everything. We cannot adjust our lives to the circumstances that occur in them as easily as you do. And so in Belgrade. The army may be affected, but it is the mood of the moment. I believe−−it is my faith−−that the heart of Servia beats true to the throne. It is swayed by impulse, by the passing opinion of the hour. One becomes an object of national hate before one is aware that enemies exist. But to do one's duty and be judged by it−−that is my prayer. The people will understand, but not yet. And nothing will be achieved by forcing them to understand by brutality. Ignore your enemies, and they disappear; I have always believed that."

"I trust so, madam. But the people's mood is dangerous."

"Dangerous to−day, but the mood will pass. These things always do; they right themselves by some process of evolution. Sometimes I am impatient; I cannot see the end. Yet one can do no more than work and wait. Maybe I cannot demand love, but I can earn it. . . . And so with this girl. Her name−−tell me."

"Jean Lorimer."

She spelt it carefully after him.

"You would like to see her?"

"Most certainly."

"Then I will give you a permit addressed to the Governor of the prison."

She went to the table, and he listened to her pen scratching on a piece of paper.

"I will mention the matter to His Majesty when I am sure of the facts. Meanwhile, you are at liberty to find out all you can. You would like to see Mademoiselle Stengel? She is my new lady−in−waiting. An estimable girl in her way."

"There is nothing I should like better," Paul said. "To find out how she came by the absurd notion that Miss

Lorimer had anything to do with the Count's murder. The thing is preposterous, unthinkable."

The Queen handed him the note and rang the bell. In a few moments Mademoiselle Stengel had entered the room.

Paul gave a little cry. The woman he least expected stood beside the table.

"Mademoiselle Stengel!"

He muttered the name foolishly, fighting with his amazement, grasping at self−control only to find it elusive. What was she doing here−−Mademoiselle Stengel, lady−in−waiting −−she, Lady Penstone?

He smiled inanely. His mind was framing things, bare notions of things undreamed of before, opening up fresh possibilities, doubts, dreads. He clutched the back of the chair.

Mademoiselle Stengel−−Lady Penstone. Something was shouting the two names in his ears, beat by beat the hammering continued to the same monotonous rhythm.

Flushed and angry, she stared at him. He had bowed. And the Queen was watching the play of the little drama, curious, uncertain.

"You two have met before?" she said.

"I believe we have," Cazalet replied. "The name−−I forgot the name for a moment."

The other woman was looking at him. It remained for her to speak. She came forward doubtfully, and glanced at the Queen. Then she fixed her eyes on Paul−−eyes from which every expression seemed to drift. He watched a wisp of sunlight coming through the window flood the glory of her hair.

She smiled and put out her hand. "Yes, we have met before. We used to call you Monsieur the Rogue. Do you remember?"

For a moment he did not reply. He was amazed at the easiness with which she handled the situation. Monsieur the Rogue−−yes, he remembered that. It was during lunch at Penstone Castle. Lord Penstone had detailed to his young wife some of the charges brought against Paul in one of the newspapers. And Paul had laughed at the nickname she had given him. Yes, he remembered that.

"It was a happy thought of yours, that name," he exclaimed jestingly. "But I wonder if I really earned it? I suppose I did. And for the moment I had forgotten I was ever dishonest. To forget one's vices, ah, if we could only do that−−and be for ever creating new ones!"

The Queen was smiling. The Englishman had forgotten his ill− humour and found an old friend. How small and kindly the world was after all! So ran her thoughts.

"Monsieur the Rogue! A good name," she said. "And they tell me that there is no roguery like that of an Englishman in search of adventure. He wants to speak to you, mademoiselle, about some absurd rumour." She went to the door and turned. "Goodbye, Monsieur the Rogue!" she laughed back at him and disappeared.

CHAPTER XVI. "WHEN LAST WE MET"

HE knew that she was studying him with the care of a player who mentally checks the position of the game before making the next move. But of a sudden she turned and walked quickly from the room, and Cazalet followed her in silence. She hurried in front of him down a long corridor hung with skins and scarlet rugs, secured to the walls at odd angles and without regard to order. From the quaint corners above the windows the heads of big beasts peered at them out of deep shadows and half lights. He wondered at this blending of gloom and luxury, the reflection of a crude sense of comfort which, in an English house, would not be tolerated.

In the small reception−room they entered the same disorder was present−−barbaric, irritating. Glass and metal ornaments were everywhere, without reason or distinction. Above them were heaped weapons of various ages: old Oriental swords, a French bayonet from the campaign of '70, clustered with rust at the hilt; crude Serb knives, and, hanging at an impossible angle in one corner, a British cavalry sabre of the Waterloo period. In the centre of the room was an old table, richly carved, but one leg near the window had been broken and harshly mended with an iron band.

Paul closed the door and came forward.

"I wonder," he said, "when we are going get tired of this game of spoof−−you and I."

Lady Penstone faced him with a little smile.

"If it pleases you to be facetious, at least talk so that I can understand you," she said.

"I will. What are you doing here?"

"I might put the same question to you."

"And you would get the truth."

"Which is often misleading," she declared. "I suppose you are here because I happen to have entered the Queen's service?"

It was a question he could scarcely disregard. To him it was full of significance.

"No," he answered her. "I would tell you if it were. This is no moment for us to play cat and mouse. Moreover, my curiosity would never have carried me so far; it needed a deeper interest than that. I don't know that we have had so much sympathy for each other that one should draw the other across Europe. Indeed, I did not know you were here."

"You probably made a very good guess that I might be."

"I fancy that the last time I thought about you I condemned you to the North Pole. Servia had not entered my calculations. I confess I was not enamoured of my lamented uncle's marriage; there was no reason why I should be. You stepped into my life from somewhere in Europe. I knew no more than that, I was never told any more. And remember what they said about me in London: I was mercenary, unscrupulous, a spendthrift, a political ruffian, and a bad writer. Some of those things were true."

She seized the opportunity his words offered.

"They failed to say that you would hound a woman down."

"For once they refrained from telling a lie. Chance brought us here in some common cause; that does not make me a hunter. I will be frank, and ask you plainly why you are here."

"Oh, that is easily explained. My father was in the service of the Servian Court for a quarter of a century. I have always had friends in Belgrade, friends at the Court. Is it so surprising that I should want to come among them again? When the Queen heard of my less−−−−"

"She knows you are a wealthy woman?" Paul broke in.

Lady Penstone gave a shrug of the shoulders.

"She knows I was not left in penury. Not that Her Majesty chooses her friends for their money or the lack of it. But that is beside the point. I have answered your question. Now tell me about this rumour. Belgrade is full of rumours, and explanations of them are not often found in the palace. But I will help you if I can."

Cazalet smiled at her tranquillity. Her last words were uttered in a tone of rebellion, of protest. The change of attitude proclaimed a slight weakening; her desire to fend his questions placed his chances in the ascendant. If she had nothing to hide she would have met his curiosity with candour, so much is the common law of argument.

As the seconds passed he began to gain some insight into her thoughts, to interpret every little disguise of nervousness. Yet to all appearances she was quite calm, she was not afraid of him. He read the strength on her face as he looked at her, the strength in her eyes, the strength of her thin lips, and watched the slow moving of her supple fingers over the polished wood of the table. If she dreaded what he might ask of her she was aware of no lessening resolve, no atrophied purpose.

"This is rather more than a rumour, it is an actual statement of fact," he answered her. "So much a fact that an English girl has been sent to the Kalamegdan prison on the strength of it. You know to whom I refer. You had your reasons for associating this girl with the murder of Count Stolpin. And those reasons−−what were they?"

"Really, I don't think I had much to do with it," she laughed. "One hears things. I merely repeated what others said."

"With a purpose?"

"Yes, of protecting the throne."

"Or yourself?"

It was a shot in the dark; it missed its mark by a hair's breadth.

"Why myself?"

"A woman who plays with diplomacy sometimes burns her fingers. It is rather more difficult than juggling with the heart of an old man."

Deliberately she allowed the taunt to pass.

"Diplomacy has never had much meaning for me," she said. For a second she hesitated, then with the quick intellect of a woman grasped at the first impulse to trade on the weakness of her sex.

"Cannot you understand what a hideous position mine has been?" She hurled the words fiercely at him. "I loved my husband. Of course, you would never believe me, but I did. I am a young woman possessing, so they tell me, a certain amount of charm. I am left alone in the world, I want friends, the society of those who understand me. I have money−−money that will enable me to take my place among those in the world to which I once belonged. No doubt it might have been expected that I should be involved in the political vortex; a woman never escapes so long as they can make of her a means to an end."

"A means to an end?" he repeated after her. "Yes, I understand that. And the means to the end in your case−−your case and the case of this girl−−what of that?"

"This girl−−what is she to me? Is there anything in her life that can link it up to mine?"

"I believe so; I am sure of it." He approached nearer to her, and looked coldly, almost brutally into her face. "Would you have me believe that, given the chance, you would set her free?"

"No," she declared. "No, no, no. If she is a menace to those who have helped me when I most needed friends, what is she to me but an enemy? Am I to caress the hand that would strike down those who care for me? I know little about her, and I do not wish to add to that knowledge. If I helped you to free her she would probably be the first to turn against me. Oh, I know my sex very well. I am not a saint, I do not pretend to be, and I have no extravagant ideas about charity or the human kindness of woman to woman. And after all, if the girl was in my way−−−−" She threw out her hands. "You are a man, and you have never had the reputation for sparing your enemies. But you demand that much of me."

"A partial confession that you helped to fill that cell in the Kalamegdan."

"If you like. She was a menace. And what would you ask of me then−−I, a woman alone?"

"Alone? . . . The child?" he said.

She drew away from him as if stung. The dread she had felt of him silenced her. She could have answered him a torrent of words swept in a mad jumble across her mind−−but she was glad afterwards that they remained unuttered. She half turned, and pulling a small cambric handkerchief from her bodice, pressed it to her eyes.

"We are only just beginning our settlement−−you and I," Paul said. "There are many things we will have to discuss when we go back to England."

"I shall never go back."

"I rather fancy the Law will compel you to return. But that is not a question for the moment."

He paused, staring at the fluttering handkerchief she held to her lips; for the first time had come to him the reek of perfume, powerful and aromatic. With recognition there came back a whole torrent of memories. He remembered the night on the yacht, and the same perfume mingling with the rising stench of powder in the

corridor. It had impressed itself upon his mind, just as the picture of Count Stolpin lolling back dead in the chair had done.

The strong sweet scent of lilies of the valley!

How dull he had been. The clue was here, the small piece of cambric in her hand held it.

"You can threaten me, my brave coward!" she cried. She clenched her hands and leant towards him with passion in her eyes. "Go home to England and tell them how you hunted a woman across Europe to rob her of her inheritance. Give them a glimpse of your mercenary soul! Get the newspapers behind you −−you will make a splendid hero−−the man who went to Belgrade to steal!"

"And the woman who went to the Court−−to spy! What shall we say of her?" he answered. "The question of money does not enter into our adventure at all just now. What motive you had in trading on an old friendship with the King and Queen, to worm your way into their confidence and steal the secrets there, I do not know, nor is it for me to judge. At present only one thing in the world concerns me−−the English girl in the Kalamegdan, indirectly placed there by you to draw suspicion from yourself. I have learned a good deal since I came into this room."

"Then I hope you will leave the better for it."

She opened the door and stood aside for him to pass.

He made a movement as if to do so, but paused before her and stared into her face.

"Do you remember the last time we met?" he said quietly.

"I have no wish to remember it. Penstone is a dead memory to me."

"Ah, but we met since then. You have not forgotten, you cannot have forgotten. It was such a short time ago. It was on the yacht in Dover Harbour!"

He passed down the corridor alone. But he heard the cry she only partially choked back, and it told him all he wanted to know. To him the mystery of the yacht was a mystery no longer.

CHAPTER XVII. THE TOMB OF THE LIVING

CAZALET stood in the street again, and paused a moment, uncertain of action. The traffic passed him by in its endless stream; the glare of the sun beat down upon his head. Faces that seemed familiar to him appeared in the crowd and disappeared before he could give them a thought; yet, had he considered a moment, he would have remembered that he was watched, as is customary with all foreigners, from the moment he entered Belgrade, and a daily record kept of his movements. For was he not in the city where the undercurrent of all Europe flowed, where cohorts of Austrian and Russian spies moved and worked, plotting, informing, bribing, with crime as the substance on which they lived? They came and went, these strivers in silence. They had their day, and dropped out as secretly as they had come. They spent their money and made their friends, laughed, ate and drank, when to−morrow their haunts might know them no more. No one inquired; they had been the comrades of an hour−−and the Kalamegdan prison never divulged its secrets. A man went quietly through those heavy gates a political offender, guarded by two grey−frocked police, and looked up at the sun for the last time as they closed upon him.

This was Belgrade−−Belgrade, the glittering white city of the South; Belgrade, where the world seemed to stir but slowly, the city of eternal secrets. The trains came rolling with the thunder of giant surf over the great Save bridge. Zaptiehs, indolent in the heat of the sun, lolled at the street corners, with eyes that seemed to sleep and yet were ever conscious. Dark, forbidding alley−ways and dirt−strewn lanes breathed of a heaving life hidden away in secret courtyards and stunted houses, where the very roofs bent over to conceal more securely the things within. And from everywhere came a thousand odours of burnt coffee, garlic, the stench of spirits and refuse, that seemed to move in the sweep of the wind. And the medley of sounds−−the cry of children in play or pain; the rasping wail of a hawker in rags, crouching beneath the shadow of the walls to protect himself from the sun, and clutching a basket of red beans; the yelp of a dog; the fluttering of clouds of dust over pieces of newspaper strewn everywhere; and−−far down in the bowels of this under−world−−the shriek of a woman in agony. Insects buzzed; horses floundered past, sweating and gasping in the heat, over the cobbled roads. By night the same sounds continued, with only a few lamps to hurl patches of light into this Hades where men and women lived and moved and struggled for the common right to live. Here, in these man−made caverns of iniquity, the average spy lived his little life, jostled and laughed with the patriot or robbed him as he wished, side by side with the festering sin of the city.

This was Belgrade as it moved past Paul's feet. For him the mingling sounds and sights had no appeal; he looked down the street, but saw nothing there. He was on the threshold of some action the nature of which but dimly appeared to him. The Queen's letter in his pocket−−surely there was the chance he sought. To gain admission to the prison−−with such a letter there would be no difficulty. To see the woman he loved−−the woman who shaped the thoughts that flowed in an endless tide through his mind, to set her free. Yes, if he could only do that −−set her free! The thing obsessed him. The chance was at his hand, but a blank wall of difficulty lay beyond. Failure, and she might rot in these underground caverns for ever; success, and he would throw ambition to the wind and follow her to the uttermost end of the earth. His mind was beating to the rhythm of thought. There must be no chance of failure.

He left the city behind, and walked out through the narrow road that led to the mountains. A company of soldiers came swinging in towards Belgrade, their trousers white with the dust. There was no shelter from the sun; the very earth crackled beneath the glare; and now the houses became fewer and dwindled into whitewashed huts, set like bright spots against the background of russet mountains, grey−capped, as old men might be who had sat and watched the world grow old.

Turning a corner sharply, he came upon a village, and on the large sun−baked plateau before it saw a group of figures. They were dancing and singing, the lilt of their voices came floating down to him on the wind, and, unobserved, he went nearer.

They were dancing the Kola−−men and women, grouped in a circle and clutching each other's belts; but one end of the Kola remained open, where the kolovogya, or leader−−a young Serb of twenty−four or thereabouts, who grasped the belt of the young girl at his side−−threw himself this way and that in sheer reckless abandon, his

head flung back, his hair floating in the wind, his eyes afire, and his lips apart as he shouted the refrain. He might have been a figure from a bacchanalian picture. For a while Paul kept his eyes upon him, the centre of a wreath of movement. Around him a string of figures swung with the grace and ease of a well−rehearsed ballet. Three steps to the right they moved, then three to the left. And the wild song rose and fell to the echo of pattering feet; a cluster of colour swirled through a cloud of dust and disappeared into it again. Now a shout, and the whole company swung round like a gigantic centipede; the end of the broken circle swept over the ground as might the arm of a reaping machine. Then, changing hands, the dancers would re−form and dance as before. Some would have termed it hardly a dance, but rather a quick−step, which, if exaggerated a little, would have been a leap, crude and graceless, with the dancers answering to the pull of invisible wires held taut by some unseen master.

Paul crept a little nearer. From the shelter of an old stone wall he could see without being seen. The sounds and colour fascinated him. He might have been looking at some giant kaleidoscope in which the paramount colours were maroon and white, merging through the eddying clouds of brown dust. White skirts faded into yellow and slipped away into the dust−fog. But the upper circle of maroon−−the maroon of the women's tunics −−never faltered; it was strong, predominating. And above it again came a white ring from their caps, with wonderful jets of white flame, like slender splinters of lightning playing about the throats of these women where the sun fell aslant on the necklets of silver coins they wore. The coins were jingling to the rhythm of the step, the whole blending into a subdued melody, almost a whispering.

"Zveka, zveka, zveka!" Forward they came three steps. "Zveka, zveka, zveka!" And they were retreating again. The song grew and sank as they moved; a woman's cry of pleasure broke the lilt of it. After a while he could catch the words:

"Ogrlitse: Zveka, zveka!

Moye artse: yeka, yeka!"

The maroon circle bulged and dropped away, the white upper line thinned down, footsteps grew tuneless and scuffling, a laugh, a panting joy−ridden cry, and the dance was ended.

So they had danced while a girl beat out her knuckles against the wet walls of a cell; and so the heart of Servia had ever sung while tragedy gnawed at the core. A dynasty tottering and a nation dancing to the tune of pleasure, though but a few leagues distant a Queen fought with only the battle−cry of duty to aid her.

He turned and retraced his footsteps down the long road.

* * * * * *

The moon was in full flood across the river, and the hour of ten was striking by the clocks of the city. Cazalet, hesitating for a moment, glanced up at the great gates and the stone walls of the Kalamegdan prison. There was no sound of life anywhere except for the muffled tread of a janissary in a distant corridor, and two peevish lights flickering against the draught in the Governor's quarters. For the rest, it might have been a palace of the dead. Piles of cannon−balls−−trophies from the ancient Turkish wars−−lay at intervals in the forecourts, and beside one of them he perceived the figure of a sentry, his rifle grounded, and the muzzle of it under the fork of his arm, resting in a semi−slumber.

Cazalet approached and touched his sleeve, and the fellow looked up quickly.

"I wish to see the Governor," Paul said.

The man stared at him, then pointed over his shoulder without a word, fumbled with his rifle, and readjusted his attitude into one of greater ease. But he half turned so that he could watch the Englishman's movements from the tail of his eye.

Paul approached the door, and hammered with the carefully− polished knocker. There was no reply. He knocked again, and, groping for the bell−hanger, started a bell clanging harshly in the heart of the building. Minutes passed; he might have been asking admission from the dead. Then slow footsteps sounded on the flag−stones, the door opened a little, and a uniformed official with heavy eyes leered out at him.

The Governor was away, and would not return for two days; he could see no one at this hour of the night. To Paul the curtly− delivered verdict came as a benison. The atmosphere of sloth that pervaded the place was accounted for: the Governor was away.

"I must see someone in authority to−night. My mission cannot wait."

"It is too late. At eight in the morning−−−−"

"I must see someone to−night. I have a letter from the Queen."

The man straightened up, and his mouth twisted into an ugly smirk. A letter from the Queen−−it was of small import. A letter from the King, and he would have grovelled at the word. Still, it might be as well to consult someone. He would go and see.

He said as much, and closed the door in Paul's face. In ten minutes he was back again; the door was opened as cautiously, and he beckoned his visitor inside. Holding a small iron lamp in his hand, he ambled down a long corridor, turned twice to the right sharply, and, knocking at a door, held it open for Paul to pass into the lighted room. This chamber appeared to stand in the centre of a small square, from which corridors, stone− flagged and damp, seemed to run in all directions. Far down them Paul could see a lamp hanging to the wall of each−−puny lights in the throats of deep caverns.

He entered the room, and the door was closed silently behind him. The air reeked with the stench of spirits and strong tobacco smoke which could find no outlet. For a moment he stood blinking his eyes like a bat, then he looked at the coarse−featured man coiled in an easy chair at the table, whose bearded chin rested on his hand. To Paul he resembled a wild beast; the long, unkempt mane, with silver threads showing in the damp blackness of it; the small, bloodshot eyes; the coarse, ugly hands, knotted with rheumatism, might scarcely be human. The flabby mouth hung loosely, showing a row of yellow teeth, and the clothes were dirty and drink−stained. A glass, half−full of deep red brandy, stood in a little sea of overturned liquid which had a scum of tobacco−ash and lapped at the corners of some playing−cards. At the other end of the table were more cards, strewn in disorder, as if they had been hastily thrown down, and near them a second glass of brandy, almost untouched. Someone else had been in the room; for, as Paul pulled the vacant chair round towards his man, he felt that the leather back of it was warm.

He explained his visit and produced the Queen's order, and taking it the Serb stared over the edge of the paper at his visitor with an expression of drunken curiosity. He was unused to callers at this hour, for the outside world forgot the Kalamegdan when it could no longer see its gates, just as it seldom remembered that within these dungeons it was ever night.

The fellow bent over the letter and studied it carefully, then held it up to the light to see the watermark. Even though his wits were wandering amid the fumes of the spirit he retained some watchful sense that helped him to a show of dignity.

"You want to see this woman−−when?" he asked shortly.

"Now," replied Paul.

"She will probably be asleep." He grinned. "You would not disturb her?"

"The chances are that she will be awake," Paul replied, and knew that he spoke the truth. "I will take the risk of that."

"What do you want with her?"

He shot a look of suspicion at Paul as he put the question. He was in a mood to like the Englishman, and he would have the prisoner roused and brought into the room if Paul desired it.

"There is no need," Paul answered. "It is good of you, m'sieu. But I only require a few words with her in private. It is the Queen's desire."

His eyes studied each point of the room as he spoke. So far there had seemed no chance of escape, the windows were tightly closed, and, from the manner in which they were barred, looked as if they had never been opened. Nor had he been able to take sufficient note of the network of corridors without to observe any means of egress or hiding. He would have to grasp the moment when it came and grapple with the chance of it.

The Servian scrambled to his feet unsteadily. He was a huge fellow, and he stood looking aimlessly about him, as if his fuddled brain were trying to follow a certain line of thought. The puckers on his forehead suggested that the task was difficult. Then he went to a board, and took down a key from a cluster that hung there.

"I might send someone with you−−but no, I'll come myself," he said. "You are one of the Queen's friends, and we always study them; yes, we always study them here." There was significance in his words, and a meaning to the grin that spread over his face, but to Paul both were unintelligible. "You see," he went on. "The Queen sends all those she loves here. The signature on the warrant is always that of the King, but we know whose hand it is that guides the pen!"

This was the sentiment of Servia, the creed of a nation. If the King erred it was the Queen who made him; any action that irritated the people was not the will of the King, but inspired by the woman who was once his mistress

and now his consort. It was the penalty the nation must pay for permitting the union, and the nation told itself that it had been a fool.

"Political prisoners, eh?" Paul suggested.

The Serb was pleased that his meaning had been understood. He was inclined to be discursive.

"You know what women are," he said, sobering up as a draught of air cooled his face. "They're all alike, cats−−just cats! And so at the Court; they fight−−fight like mad beasts. The losers come in here. We get all the husbands−−that's the Queen's idea of justice, to put the husband away and leave her enemy a widow! We have a gallery of husbands here; some I wot of are a great deal happier than they were outside!" He laughed at his puny jest. "They're all alike, cats−−just cats!" he finished.

"A sentiment one would hardly express to one's wife," said Paul. If there was a way of salvation it lay in cultivating the man's humour.

"Tell your wife she's a goddess and try to believe it; it's the quicker way in the end," the Serb growled. He picked up a lantern from the corner and lit it slowly, and with a hand that trembled.

"Yesterday," he went on, poking the wick with the match till it spluttered into flame, "a young man was put in here who had been married a week."

"Ah!" said Paul. "And his crime?"

"His wife boasted that she omitted to kiss the hands of the Queen at the last assembly. She was summoned to Court, commanded to kiss the Queen's hand, and dismissed. In an hour we turned the key on her husband. Alas! to be a widow on one's honeymoon; a pretty jest!"

He ambled across the room and opened the door. A wind swept in and almost extinguished the lantern, but shielding it with his hand he led the way into the corridor. His thick soft boots made no sound on the stone flags, and Paul followed close at his heels, measuring his man as he did so. A blow and the fellow in his maudlin state would drop without the power to rise.

The path led steadily down hill, as if to the very bowels of the world. And presently the stone−paving ceased, and they were treading the crude earth. The air grew more rank with every step they took; first it reeked of mould and decay, then the stench deepened till the lungs seemed bursting. The light of the lamp as it played on the walls showed them to be dark green−−as if they had been the slimy sides of ships−−and shining with moisture. Here and there patches of mildewed decay had fallen, leaving the stonework bare, and the feet sank lightly into them. They were treading the caverns of the living dead.

The horror of it, the presence of this awful tomb around him filled Cazalet with unspeakable dread. He saw rats scuttle away from under nail−studded doors down which little streams of moisture trickled. He heard sounds that seemed to come from no human throat, moans in which all the agony of the world seemed to be concentrated. Somewhere, behind one of these black patches that denoted the presence of doors, a woman was sobbing and laughing by turns. He stopped and listened, as if compelled by the invisible hand of horror. The sobbing changed to a low crooning sound−−the sound a woman might make to a child against her breast, then words, muttering and piteous, followed, only to break off in a choking cough. And on the other side of him a smothered flopping noise broke from under the door, where a man in the agony of despair was beating the flat of his hands against the walls with a steady thud, thud, in the belief that he was pushing the walls away from him.

Paul shuddered, and the Serb, holding up the lantern to his face, laughed at the pallor of it.

"You would like to see," he said, and made a movement as if to draw back the shutter at one of the spy holes.

"No, spare me that," Paul cried. He pushed the man in front of him. "Go on. I don't want to see more of this hell than I'm obliged. Go on, man; for heaven's sake, go."

They moved forward again, and the sobbing of the woman, which had ceased at the sound of voices, broke out again in a low wail that rose note by note to a shriek. Down they went, down, ever steadily downward. Once they passed under an oil lamp fixed to the wall, and glancing up at it Paul saw a giant slug drawing itself steadily across the square face of the glass, leaving a smudgy trail behind it.

In the midst of this horror Jean was enduring a living death. The thought tortured him, and awoke to passion the brute in his blood. He felt all the emotions become subservient to one insensate desire−−the desire to kill the loathsome thing that stalked beside him, the thing in man's shape that stood for justice as they interpreted it here. There was no torture chamber which a freak imagination had fashioned in his mind that could compare to this. Men and women were buried here living, existing here in the dark till life slipped quietly into death, and so slight

was the transition as to be no more than the changing of one dream into another.

Yet, despite the mingling sounds, he felt himself to be alone, with only this creature beside him, alone in some secret place where he could kill his man and place his secret in the keeping of the tomb. He was stirred by the emotion which hides the horror of murder from the mental eyes of the man who would commit it. The sounds about him became almost forgotten and lost the power to record impression on his mind; the clank of chains, the moaning cry of those stricken with physical and mental torture and fear of the dark, the scratchy rustle of a heavy body turning in a bed of straw to listen, the faint rattle of a tin pannikin as a rat scampered across it in terror of approaching footsteps, the sound of the name of God breathed hoarsely from lips tired with blasphemy−−these things became mere attributes of the situation without direct bearing upon it. He felt himself to be alone with the Serb, and he meant to kill him.

It was Chance that had brought him to this, and Chance that completely turned the trend of things during the moments which followed. For the Serb stopped suddenly and looked up at the number burned into the wood of the door. He muttered something in an undertone, and began fumbling with the key in the lock. It turned slowly with a rasping sound, the door scraping on its hinges as he forced it back. Then, picking up the lantern from the ground, he held it high above his head and let the light flow into the cell. It flooded the whitewashed walls till they seemed charged with the brightness of magnesium. But the cell was empty! From the wall a chain with an open gyve at the end hung loose in the straw strewn about the stone floor.

Paul drew back into the passage and looked inquiringly into the face of his companion.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked. "Where is your prisoner?"

The Serb's face was expressionless. The look upon it might have been one of blank amazement or cunning. He wiped the damp from his forehead with his hand.

"They must have moved the prisoner." He garbled the words, and shuffled to a cell door a few feet away, holding up the light again to distinguish the number upon it. "They must have moved the prisoner. The wrong cell." He kept on repeating the words to himself aimlessly, foolishly, as if he did not mean the other to hear.

With quick distrust Paul clutched his arm.

"By God! If you play any tricks−−−−" he began.

Without replying the Serb rattled the key into the lock of the next cell.

"I don't understand," he said at length. He was laughing a little, as if at the anger of the Englishman. "We shift the prisoners from cell to cell sometimes."

"If such a change had taken place you would have known of it."

Paul felt the knuckles of dread knocking at his heart. Was he too late? What had Slana done since the morning? And the leer on his face as he passed from the Queen's chamber, purposeful, significant! But the Servian had pushed open the door of the second cell, and was focusing the light of the lantern to break the gloom. Paul moved close to him and stared in. He caught sight of something lying in the straw−−a dark object in rags, torn and filthy, and with the flesh showing through the rents in them−−an object which lived and moved and looked up with fluttering eyelids as the light appeared.

It was the first glimpse of the horror; the fear which he had felt up till this moment had been the outcome of sound working upon his imagination. But before him was the visible, more horrible than the imagination had pictured. He stood still, unable to move or utter a sound. Nor was it this sudden coming upon realisation that appalled him. He would have cried out, but horror sealed his lips as with an iron band. The thing in the straw that moved painfully had once been a man, but now the long white hair drooped around his shoulders, partially hiding his face. From his hands that worked convulsively in the straw the flesh seemed to have shrivelled up, leaving the knuckle−bones as points that might have been sharpened with a knife. The face was starchy white and flabby, like the flesh of dead men, with pits in the cheeks and under the eyes.

And this thing, chained inanimate to an iron staple in the wall, was a man he had once known!

He watched recognition grow in the eyes of the prisoner, he saw the slow working of the mouth, the hands come upraised from the straw in appeal, the long fingers twisting and untwisting. And down the wall there were tiny furrows where this creature had torn into the blackened mildew with his broken nails. It was not a man, but an animal. It had the appearance of an animal, the same hunted eyes, the same cringing movements. And blood weals showed across one side of the whitened face as if they had been made with the lash of a whip.

"Paul! . . . Paul!"

The cry; the piteous shriek ran in long echoes down the vast corridors, and brought back on its wings the moans of a dozen others. It lashed Cazalet into sudden consciousness, and snatching the lantern from his companion's hand, he went into the cell and held it towards the prisoner's face, so that the red−lidded eyes closed before the fierce light. Even then he could hardly believe.

The Serb caught at his arm and would have pulled him away, but he shook him off.

"He is a foreign madman," he said in Slav. "Come away. He talks all day about something; at times he raves. We don't understand. He's mad, I tell you. He'll die soon. He's dying now. Can't you see?"

The figure in the straw tried to raise himself to his knees, only to fall back with a little cry of exhaustion.

"Paul," he whimpered. He was gripping Cazalet's legs with his feeble hands. "Paul, you come to set me free! . . . I remember now."

He seemed to be looking past Cazalet to the wall beyond, as if he were studying some mental picture reflected there. And still Paul did not answer. Instead, he stooped down and caught the chain that bound the wretched man, tore at it, stamped with his rough boots upon the staple in the wall till a cloud of rust rose in a powder to his nostrils. He cut the flesh from his fingers and pounded the chain till it burst through the leather of his boot, only to remain impotent, helpless.

He turned upon the Serb. The hideous face of the man was puckered in a smile of derision.

"That chain held a man for forty years," the brute told him. "He died when he had almost rasped through one of the links. He strove for years, and we repaired the link in an hour. The folly of it all!" He shook his head. "No, such a chain will not give up its new captive in a few weeks."

Paul clenched his fist threateningly.

"Set him free!" he exclaimed. "Do you Servian pigs know what you are doing, or are you a race of maniacs? Set him free. He's an Englishman. Lord Penstone−−my uncle!"

The Servian grew grave; surely his friend were jesting.

"Your uncle here, m'sieu!" He chuckled over the jest and found it good. "All Englishmen are related in a foreign land. Yes, m'sieu, that is the spirit of a patriot!"

The imbecile! Had Cazalet beaten him to his knees it would have driven no comprehension into the sodden brain. He turned to the whimpering creature at his feet, and, bending down, took one of the withered hands in his own.

Lord Penstone sank back in the straw wearily, and in a moment Cazalet had turned and caught the Servian by the throat.

"Set him free, or I'll kill you!" he cried.

He swung the hairy brute against the wall of the cell, but the man broke aside and was free. The light was gleaming down the curved blade of a knife he held in his hand, as he crouched in the corner, glowering upon his aggressor.

But the hour of vengeance was not yet. When Paul, turning his back upon him, knelt down and lifted Lord Penstone's head to his knee, the Servian resheathed the knife. Even now he had not the courage to kill an Englishman when to−morrow's inquiry might send him to the mines; and the old peer was babbling again and laughing like a child playing with the toys of memory.

"I remember that night in the rose−garden at Penstone−−she was there−−Irma−−I remember there was a strong moon, and I watched her face change−−I wanted a son, I told her. Yes, I remember that."

"Go on," said Paul. It seemed to him that he was on the threshold of confession. Things became obvious to him as he listened to the senseless chatter; incidents, the whole string of past events, formed in his mind, took definite shape and place. He bent lower. He uttered sympathetic words−−words of courage, of promise.

"The night in the rose−garden . . . what did she say to you?" he asked quietly.

He felt the clammy hands of the other creeping up his wrist like the grasp of some cold−blooded thing, some creature wet from the sea.

"I can't remember−−I can't remember−−−−"

The old man's hold relaxed. He had swooned. The mouth dropped, white waxen lids closed over the filmy eyes. A crisis had arrived; Paul knew it, sensed the coming of death. This man, whom he had believed dead and yet lived, might never speak again. If he did, Paul knew it would be for the last time. He waited, listening, watchful. And in the silence his mind pictured a woman in the royal palace, the woman who had committed her

husband to a bourne from which there was no return−−this man with the lost memory who could utter no charge against her, or name her for the murderess she was.

With a sudden inspiration Paul approached the Serb. He slipped his hand into his pocket and produced a little roll of notes, then unrolled them slowly, and watched the effect upon the brute face of the other.

"That man's dying; you know it, I know it. He will not live till morning," he said.

"No," said the Serb.

"He is your prisoner?"

"Yes, my prisoner. The prisoner of the State."

"And I want to buy a night's freedom for him; comfort, if you prefer to put it like that, till day−break."

"No prisoner passes these gates without the King's signature on the order."

It was the Servian's last effort against temptation. But Paul saw the gleam in the vicious eyes.

"Then we will gamble for his freedom, and you, my friend, shall hold the stakes. Take these notes."

He crushed the paper into the Serb's hand.

"We will move the prisoner to your room," Paul said.

"To my room, m'sieu−−−−"

"Yes, to your room−−unless you would provide a better one." The firm tone quelled the remonstrance of the other. "If he lives till morning you set him free; if he dies you still hold the notes. Are you afraid of the chance?"

"Set him free? I have no power. When the Governor returned−−−−"

"A note on your records that the prisoner had died−−and who knows? But if he lives till morning I will double the sum you hold the moment he leaves the prison. Does that interest you?"

The other nodded his head slowly.

"I think we might risk that," he said. "God looks after the sparrows sometimes," he added, as if to conciliate himself for his treachery.

Paul stepped back into the cell. The prisoner lay in a stupor muttering little broken sentences as if he were trying to speak the dream that was passing across the chaos of his mind:

"It was in the rose−garden; yes, it is Irma's face I see there −−she laughed. And then−−−−"

"Come and free his legs," Paul demanded in a sharp undertone, and producing a key from his pocket the Servian bent over and fumbled with the rusty lock. "You do not understand his tongue, you only see the fringe of a great conspiracy. This man is innocent, and has lost his memory. With the sight of me has come recognition. And with recognition−−death."

"Yes, it is often so. They remember and die. Sometimes it is better like that."

The Serb threw the chains apart with a clatter. Then he drew back into the passage, nervous, like a man afraid of something that would emerge from the darkness. He leant against the wall listening, and his ears, trained to the big silences of this underground pit, detected the slow tread of footsteps in the distance. He darted back into the cell, dragging the lantern along the ground, and made as if to close the door.

"Put the chain round his ankle−−I hear someone." His voice was shaking with fear.

The soft pattering footsteps were coming nearer. But still Paul did not obey. He lifted the prisoner a little higher, forced open the coarse shirt, and placed his hand over the heart. He could just feel its movement, timid and fluttering, like the throbbing of a leaf.

The Serb began fumbling with the light, but his trembling fingers missed the screw, and with a quick movement Paul dragged the lantern from his reach before he could put it out.

"No!" he exclaimed. "He shall have light so long as his eyes have life to see it−−aye, if it costs you a century in the mines!" And with a vicious kick of his foot he sent the door crashing open again.

The Serb, trapped in a frenzy of fear, said nothing. If the Governor had returned! Already he felt the bite of the thong on his back. And the mad Englishman chattering still! He hurled a curse at the soul waiting to take its last journey. Then stealthily he crept towards the door again, one hand on the hilt of the half−sheathed knife, despair aflame in his eyes.

Paul did not heed him. He was listening to the wild muttering of the creature beside him. Lord Penstone had opened his eyes and closed them again. A weak smile rippled over his face.

"It was Irma's voice . . . I do not remember what she said . . . If God would give me understanding."

That he might pass into unconsciousness and never remember! To Paul it was an unspoken prayer.

A few seconds more and the dark figure of the man came into the circle of light. Paul got up, clutched the lantern, and stared into the face of Fenning. He felt no impulse to cry out; the hour of surprise was gone. And the Servian, slinking from the darkness of the cell into the light, grinned as if the weight of anxiety on his soul was at an end.

"So you, too, are in this," Paul said. His voice was loaded with menace, and he kept his eyes fixed on Fenning's.

"In what? If you thought I knew that I should meet you here, my Paul−−−−" Fenning laughed. Had this been a prearranged meeting he could not have been more at ease.

"You probably imagined I was too poor a fool to know anything of the plot," Paul said.

"Indeed, no," Fenning replied. "We always seem to be meeting in odd places, you and I. I thought you would turn up somewhere. The devil brings us very close together, Paul. You talk of a plot. I do not understand."

Cazalet swung round and let the light fall upon the prisoner in the cell.

"You knew Lord Penstone was there!"

"Good God, no!" Fenning came nearer and strained his eyes into the murk. "Lord Penstone−−that!"

"Yes. Do you remember what you said in Paris?"

"I doubted if Lord Penstone was dead. Yes; I remember."

"And yet you say you had no knowledge."

"I do. My remark was a shot in the dark. I thought it might have been so. I knew what that woman was. But here−−like this."

Fenning spoke earnestly. Liar and rogue he might be, but it was the truth now; Cazalet read as much in his face.

"I know why you are here," he said presently.

"Perhaps you do."

"To see her?"

"No."

Fenning bent over Lord Penstone and listened to his breathing. They watched him, saying nothing. He got up at length and shook his head; he had seen Death wrapping itself about the old man's face.

"We can talk afterwards," Paul said. "Help us to get my uncle away from here. We are going to take him to this man's room."

It was a long and painful process, but between them they carried him there. And the old peer seemed to sleep with a smile on his face. Broken sentences left his lips at times; he was ever trying to remember, but his Creator had put up a barrier which his mind was never destined to pass. They laid him on the rough couch, and the Serb trickled a little brandy through his parted lips. The fire of the liquid in his throat caused him to open his eyes; he smiled faintly at Paul in recognition. The old spirit of the man awoke, and for a moment made a brave show of strength.

"Ah, Paul, they cannot kill me even here," he said. "You will take me back to Penstone−−back to Irma. She would be waiting for me there."

He sighed and half turned his head. And they waited, all three of them, afraid to break the big silence of the room. Outside in the city a clock was booming; they could hear the muffled sound of it through the thick window. But the minutes slipped past like hours. At last Fenning told them that the old man slept, and if God were merciful he would never wake again.

Paul went across to the door, and Fenning followed him, while the Serb sat on the corner of a chair and watched the sleeper, not in any attitude of sympathy, but drawn by a curious fascination which affects some people, who, seeing others pass from life to death, wonder what their own passing will be.

Just beyond the door Paul turned to Fenning.

"I didn't know Penstone was here," he said. "I believed he was dead. I did not think this infernal trickery could have been carried so far."

"There are some things you have to learn," Fenning replied. "They will be asking questions in England soon. You had better go back."

"And leave you a clear field?"

It was the first suggestion of the enmity between them, the first demonstration on the part of either that they

were foes.

"Oh, no, I was not thinking of that," Fenning said quietly.

"As a matter of fact I came here to see Jean Lorimer. I have an order from the Queen."

Fenning lifted his eyebrows.

"I am sorry," he said. "I fear you have had your journey for nothing."

It was Paul's turn to look surprised.

"For nothing? You may as well explain," he replied. "We have lost the power to hurt each other. We are both conscious of one omnipotent fact, that we love the same woman. We learnt it that morning in Paris, and we told ourselves it would never make any difference. It was only self−deceit, belief in a specious friendship. And I tell you that I came here to−night to see her, to get her out of this fearful place if I could."

"I was here when you came," Fenning put in. "Odd how we always seem to be bumping against each other."

"You were here?"

"Yes, in this very room. I heard what passed between you two. And I laughed."

"Why laughed?"

"Because I knew that you had come to try and do what I had already done."

Paul stared in amazement, saying nothing.

"You came to try to rescue her." Fenning took Paul's arm and looked closely into his face; his eyes seemed like points of flame in the semi−darkness. "I had already done that an hour before!"

"You got her out?"

"Yes, I got her out−−with the help of that man." He pointed over his shoulder to the room behind them. "I merely came back to make a little settlement with him. Then you were announced. I wanted to hear what you had to say, so I quietly dropped behind the big cupboard in the comer."

"Then where is she?" Paul asked. The sudden flush of anger rushed to his cheek. "Do you think she should be trusted with you?" he burst out.

"Is there any choice in the matter, my friend?" the other resumed. "She is quite safe. Satisfy yourself with that."

"When I know that it was through you that she was brought here?"

"Yes, shame me with that if you will," Fenning retorted. The words were the lash on his back again, the one thing in his life for which he would never find self−forgiveness. "It is true, every word of it. It was all through me; for that I can never atone to her. And I risked my life to get her out, because if I am found in Belgrade now−−−−" He gave a snap of his fingers. "It will be just like that with me. You may throw my code of honour in my face, but it's my code, not yours. I live by it; it's elastic; a puling, helpless sort of thing to you, perhaps, but it brings me what I want. And I want this woman. I want her as I have never wanted anything in my life. It is because I am what I am that I want her so. It is because I know the sort of man I am, the sort of life I lead, that I desire her. I want her to build me up again; and she'll do it, Paul, by the living God, she'll do it!"

The frank confession, shameless and replete with brutality, drove the hot blood pounding through Paul's veins. In a moment the man before him seemed to become a loathsome thing.

"Do you imagine for one moment" (he spoke quietly and in a voice under perfect control) "that I am going to stand by and see you tear a woman's soul to pieces to save your own? Any woman, that is−−leaving her out of the argument entirely. You would drag her down, you−−−−"

"To my level, yes," Fenning broke in. "And I care for her so much, man, that pulling her down will give me pleasure, because her victory shall be the greater on that account. She won't be the only woman engaged in mission work in her own brave life. She won't be the only woman who could, if she dared, get up and say, `See what my husband is: it is I who made him.' And the women like that−−the big missionaries we hear nothing about−− are worth more beside the hearth than the family Testament on the mantelshelf. She's going to learn my world, and she it is who will make the ugliness of it beautiful. That's the way I look at things. To you it's wrecking."

"You think she would trust herself to you, knowing that?"

"I would not marry her until she did know it," Fenning retorted.

"You speak like some uncivilised savage that buys a woman as he might any article for his mud hut," said Paul hotly. "You're talking of something even worse−−theft. You have rescued this girl and you would claim her.

And what do you think would be her opinion of all this−−of you? You are so absurdly pagan, Fenning. You don't know that directly a woman's respect for a man dies she grows to hate the sight of him. There is no passion, no love, conventional or unconventional, that can override the loss of respect. Respect is the rock on which happiness between man and woman−−love of sex to sex−−is built; take it away and you bring together two warring forces, hating with the elemental hatred that is inborn and prevents our little world becoming an Eden. You must understand that. And if you know anything of women you will know that until the end of her days this girl will hate you."

Fenning shrugged his shoulders.

"The old conventional argument," he said. "But desperate remedies are generally unconventional. This remedy is decidedly desperate; we might even call it daring. I'm not a saint, Paul. The old habits will need some rescue work before they are safely battened down."

"You will never compel her to marry you."

"I shall not try. Rather, I shall persuade her."

"By playing on her emotions as the man who rescued her from a living death. It is the act of a coward. I wonder what particular ancestor of yours inspired it in you."

Fenning turned aside with a laugh. His fingers worried the cloth cap he held in his hand; he knew that beneath the taunt self−control was slipping away from him.

"Your ancient theory, worn threadbare," he jeered. "My ancestors went and caught their women, loved them, fought for them, raised children by them. Animal instinct, you will tell me. Perhaps; but they were born so. And yours, my friend−−were they so much better than mine? Are you so much better for all your civilisation, any happier, your marriages any more successful?"

"In the main−−no," Paul responded. "But one must always consider the woman."

"Consider her? Jerusalem! Don't we clothe her with all the worship our ragged souls can give? Don't we fight for her still −−not with stones and sticks maybe, but with every artifice that makes for progress that she may share it? Paul, you are a good fellow, but a poor philosopher. Your laws won't put the world right, but this girl's love will mend mine."

He re−entered the room and threw something on the table. Then he came out trailing a smoking lantern in his hand. Without another word he went down the passage. A door opened and clanged again; a blast of fresh air spent itself in the staleness of the inner atmosphere.

Paul thought for a moment, then went back into the room.

* * * * *

It was at daybreak that Lord Penstone opened his eyes for the last time. Paul, leaning beside the couch, snatched at the broken sentences, but they conveyed nothing. The old man was still wandering in his rose−garden with a sheaf of memories. And he slipped back and died with the telling of them on his lips.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE HOUSE OF SURRENDER

DURING the time Fenning had been present at the little tragedy in the Kalamegdan prison, Jean waited in the cottage−−little more than a cavern of stones it appeared to be−−for him to come to her. The events of the past two hours were confused in her mind. She had recollections of the opening of the door of her cell; of two faces looking in at her−−one of which she recognised as that of Fenning−−of passing emotions of fear and hesitation. Then a wild drive through the night in a cart that rocked springless as it was drawn at a gallop over the pits in the road; the groping for the door of the cottage in the dark with the aid of an oil lamp, the musty smell of the place as they entered it alone, the three whitewashed rooms. And then she remembered the few words he had said as he left her in one of the small chambers, how he would return in an hour to take her away.

She went over these things mentally, and put them in their respective places as she leaned at the open window and listened to the lapping of the river against the very wall of the cottage. He had spoken of taking her away, and she had not paused to consider what the future might be. Whither? And alone or with whom? She had arrived at that point of implicit trust that obeyed unquestioningly. Verily she understood that in seeking vengeance she had found defeat, how full and overwhelming she realised only now. Twice had she come to Belgrade hoping that the man who had brought about her brother's destruction in the Servian capital three years before might be delivered into her hands. And she had failed. Captain Zanolich, the man she sought, remained in the royal service; he might even now be in the palace, the doors of which were barred to her. True, she had met and philandered with him, but the hour of destruction was not yet. He, the destroyer, would go free, while she suffered the torture which the knowledge of failure brought to her. But could a woman put right the iniquity of a nation, or call down the wrath of God upon the man who had robbed her?

She was a woman alone, waiting to be taken out of danger by Fenning whom she had despised; as helpless, she knew herself to be, as the smallest child. And if it had not been for him she might have achieved her mission and humbled Zanolich.

She crouched in the low wooden chair at the window with her head in her hands, afraid to think of the future. A candle was guttering on the rude mantelshelf, and on the table the lamp still smoked where he had put it down. He had opened the window for her, and the dampness came in and seemed to clothe her, she felt it touching her like tired hands passing over her flesh. She knew that Belgrade must be two or three miles away; she could just see the lights of the city through the river mist. And she was alone in the house, waiting for him to come to her.

The moon was dredging through a sea of thin cloud, a faint glint was smeared over the water, and by it she could just detect the pine−belt at the edge of the cottage. She felt a growing unrest at the solitude. That strange blending of night sounds which creates a presence in the imagination, and compels Nature to assume a mastery over the mental compass, provoked in her now a sense of awe. Almost at her feet the river crept past, contorting itself around tree stumps, and showing for the fraction of an instant a glimpse of its black depths below the folds of the light−sprung ripples. And then some sound that came from nowhere and yet was everywhere would slip out on the wind, slight and inconsequent, but, remaining in the memory, would appear to grow louder in circles till another noise disturbed it. A frog croaked and moved with a rustle in wet grasses−−a rustle of something damp forcing itself against an obstruction equally damp; sedges touched each other and swung back in the wind, while the moonlight steered deftly down their blades like tiny swords in play. Behind them last year's leaves, whipped into restlessness by the breeze, hissed like water on red−hot metal.

The river flowed, the pines rocked and creaked, an insecure bird fell with a heavy flop to the branch below. A rat gnawed at a stick so close to the waiting woman that she could see its tiny eyes glimmering like diamonds. And over all was the damp sweet smell of the earth that clings around wet trees, and scents the mist that rises from waters moving against verdure.

She did not know that the door had opened and closed again; but she heard the man's step in the room when his boot struck against a chair. She turned, vaguely fearful of something she could not define, now that she knew Fenning had come back. He was looking at her with a strange fierce light in his eyes. He had thrown aside his hat, revealing the profusion of black ruffled hair.

She came half−way across the room.

"Are we going now?" she asked quietly.

"Going?" he repeated after her. "Going where?"

"Well, of course you won't expect me to stay here for ever," she exclaimed petulantly. "You said something about getting me out of Belgrade−−or have you regretted it?"

"I shall get you out, of course."

"To−night, then. Now?"

"No, not now. You would not get beyond the hills. They would catch you at the hills."

There was fear on her face, and she knew that he saw it.

"When are we going?" He hesitated, and she put the question again.

"We might attempt it to−morrow. I will find out what is happening in the city. Half Belgrade is drunk to−night, but the other half is uncommonly sober. I don't know what is taking place; there is an air of unrest everywhere."

She came a little nearer.

"You don't expect me to remain in this musty damp room all night?" she asked.

"I'm afraid you'll have to. It's the best I can do for you."

She walked to the door, crept down the passage and opened the door beyond; he stood waiting in the room, wondering what she was going to do. She returned in a few minutes and stood like a ghost in the doorway.

"Where does this road go to?" she said. She pointed over her shoulder.

"To the hills. All roads go to the hills."

"And they will be watching there?"

"I told you that you would not go ten miles without capture," he answered sharply.

The helplessness of the situation, which before had been merely an irritation, developed into fear. And waiting and watching there, her mind trailed slowly back over the past few days and formed a summary of everything appertaining to the man before her. Above everything was the knowledge that it was through him, through him entirely, that she was now shut up in this house with him; that he had by some deft handling of events and the situations they created brought about the impasse. It might have been accidental or otherwise. Then, remembering the episode in Colonel Slana's rooms, her mind formed its own resolutions. She drew into the room again and approached him.

"Why did you bring me here?" she asked. There was strength in her voice, courage in her eyes.

"It was the only thing to do−−to hide you till the chance of escape occurred."

"But why should you wish to hide me? Don't you remember how you decoyed me, tricked me?"

"Yes−−I know−−I cannot forget all that." He stood looking away from her.

"But you think you owe me something," she went on remorselessly. She was growing afraid of him, afraid of his sullen replies to her questions; it was fear that shaped her words. "You made a profit, we will say, by a piece of trickery, and I was the means by which you made it. And no man likes to remain in debt to a woman. You thought you must pay things back somehow. You must get me out of the hands into which I had fallen through you−−you must pay off the debt. So you would take me to the frontier, turn my feet towards England, and then go your own path, singing, with an easy conscience."

"Don't put it like that−−it's brutal, unnecessary. It wasn't that," he told her. "I can't explain to you, but it wasn't that. I think my soul dropped into hell that night in Slana's room, and returned to me purged. I came to realise clearly the unutterable horror of the thing I had done. It wasn't as if you were an ordinary woman−−−−"

"An ordinary woman?"

"I mean a woman who was nothing to me. I should probably not have suffered anything then. I should have called you a little fool for being in Belgrade at all, and have told myself that you deserved all you got. It's no good offering you cheap sentiment, or trying to make my soul beautiful beneath a coat of whitewash. I told you about myself that day in Paris−−you remember−−it was an ugly confession, and I was sorry afterwards that I had told you. There were times when I felt I would rather you had a better opinion of me. But I didn't recollect any of these things the day I arranged the episode in Slana's rooms. I wanted to beat the man, and make him pay for his absurd faith in me. I didn't care how I did it, but I meant to do it. The desire became a craving−−to hold him at my mercy, to make him pay−−I had to go forward to it, using every means to the end. It was moral weakness, rank moral rottenness."

"You didn't think what it would mean for me?" she said.

"I may have thought. I don't remember. If I did, it would not have turned me from my purpose then. Of course you can't understand that−−I expect it makes you hate me, but it's true−− true, every word of it. You don't understand the depths to which men of my stamp will sink. And then when one has fallen a notch lower than ever before−−reached the very dregs of life as it were−−there comes the reaction. It is the process of going down two steps and climbing back one, slipping, slipping, all the time. Moral immersion is really as hard as drowning. People say it's easy: it's not; to start with, anyhow, it's the torture of the damned, the fighting back for the one step, the ghastly depression of falling back two. Real sin is moral hopelessness, the abandon that a drowning man assumes if he realises in a vague fashion that he has risen to the surface for the last time. That's what I've felt. You had to know. Now I've told you."

He bent over the table and turned up the lamp a little. She saw that his fingers were shaking. She wanted to say something to make the self−imposed task easier for him; yet was aware that he had no claim upon her clemency.

"You think I didn't care; to you all that happened that night was a piece of moral jugglery." He leant on the edge of the table and swung his leg aimlessly to and fro, trying to appear at his ease. "It wasn't that. And the reaction brought just as strong a desire−−the desire to try and atone, however trifling the atonement might be, for what I had done to you. That is why I bribed that brute in the prison to set you free, that is why I have brought you here, why I mean to take you back to England."

She did not understand the strangeness of the man, his utter sacrifice of dignity. It seemed to her an interpretation of what she had believed−−that he wished to atone for motives of self− interest, to salve a wounded conscience. And the knowledge brought resentment.

"I would not go back to England−−with you," she declared vehemently. "I don't think I want to go with you anywhere. Even out of here now−−I'd rather be alone; to take the chance of what happened by myself. At the worst they cannot do more to me than you have been the means of doing."

She saw him wince beneath the words; a fleeting desire that she could recall them came over her.

"You wouldn't do it−−I wouldn't let you do it!" he said, approaching. She saw the quick set of resolve about his mouth. However much she might hate him, he was master of the situation, and to her surprise she found herself scarcely resenting it. Her heart told her that she had forgiven his crime against her long ago; her dignity answered that she should never forgive him, or at least let him know that forgiveness were possible. The play of moods across her disguised the truth that lay secret in the depths−−the love she felt for him.

"You've got to trust yourself to me, to−night, or for days and days maybe. We may have to lie hidden in the mountains. God knows what is going to happen. You came here without counting the risk, and you cannot say to yourself `I am tired of it all,' and expect some fairy carpet to carry you back to England while you close your eyes. You'll have to do everything I tell you without rebellion and trust to me."

"Trust you? Do you think I would ever do that again?"

"Not now, perhaps. But from now on you've got to obey."

He spoke firmly, almost brutally, then going across to the grate began fumbling with the fuel there, and set light to it with the candle. He knelt down and watched the sticks catch, poured a little of the liquid fat from the candle over them till they crackled and the tongues of flame leapt up.

For a little while he waited staring at the fire he had made, then he went into the outer room, and returned, carrying a covered basket. He opened it and drew out some dried meats and bread and a bottle of wine and two glasses, and set them carefully on the table, taking care to put her plate exactly opposite to his own on the other side.

"Sit down and eat," he said. He sat down himself, knowing she would obey. "You must be famished. It's not quite a supper at Maxim's, is it? But it is the best I could do. . . . You ought to have the appetite of a horse."

She took her place opposite him and said nothing, but kept her eyes fixed on the open window. He cut off a chunk of bread for her, then gingerly helped her to some slices of meat. To him it was a meal of Lucullus; it might have been savoured with the finest wines and all the skilled art of a Paris chef.

She spoke only when he asked her a direct question, and ate scarcely anything. The very smell of the food seemed to choke her. The bread was stale, for the sun's heat had beaten through the basket; there was a rasp in the wine that made the tongue tingle and burn. It was her first taste of the native wine of Servia; to her it was vinegar.

But he revelled in the sight of her red lips in the glass, with the red wine creeping up to meet them. And she never met his eyes, but bent her head low over her plate, till at last she threw down her knife and fork with a clatter.

"I can't eat," she exclaimed. "It chokes me. I'm not hungry; I feel as if I could go on living without ever eating again. I suppose it's fear or something. I'm silly. Don't think I don't appreciate what you brought; it's not that. You understand."

"I think I do," he said. "You're only very tired of me. You hate me, but you're trying not to, trying desperately hard. You think I'm kind to you in a disinterested sort of way, and that you ought to be grateful. I know what you feel. A girl with your eyes can't conceal what is passing in her mind. Your eyes don't lie."

Mechanically he swept the plates to one end of the table without speaking to her again. He lounged beside the fire, wishing he could do or say something, and very conscious of disaster. The flames had expired and only a dull ember remained at one corner, and kneeling down he began to prod at the damp wood. Afterwards he wondered if it were a miracle that made her come softly round the table and bend over his shoulder and ask if she could help him. He made some inconsequent remark about her blacking her fingers, but he knew she had driven disaster from the room. Then she dropped into the rough chair by his side, and sat silently watching his profile flung out in strong relief as the flames burst upward again.

"How wet your boots are!" he exclaimed at last, turning with a suddenness that startled her. "You can't live in wet boots. Take them off."

"They're not wet really," she answered, drawing her feet beneath her skirts. "No, they're not wet. It's only the soles that are damp."

"They're wet. Take them off; you must!" he said again.

He reached out and caught one reluctant foot. Then he began to unfasten the laces, while she bent over him, beating at his hot hand.

"You've got to take them off. You're going to stay here all night. You've got to take them off!"

He held her foot as in a vice. He shook off the unlaced boot and threw it to one side. The second boot followed the first; then, groping for a log in the grate, he pushed it towards her.

"Put your feet on that. So. Let them get the warmth of the flame. Wet boots are the devil. I don't want you to get ill, not while you're with me, anyway." The callousness of the final remark jarred, yet she could find no fitting retort.

She put out her feet slowly, a hot flush rising on her cheeks. That he should see her stockinged feet−−he, of all men! But one small foot crept on to the log, and when he was looking away from her the other followed. She loved the warmth of it; it drew the rioting blood down from her head.

He crouched closely down on to the very edge of the hearth, spreading out his hands to catch the heat. She hated him for his silence; herself for her obedience to him. Once she pictured Indian idols she had seen crouching like that, the hideousness of them half suggested by the brutish profiles. His pose was ugly, and such of his face as she could see appeared vicious in the flame−light. But in this man centred, for the hour at any rate, the whole heart of her world. He was to be−−and she was conscious of the necessity of him, she wanted him there.

He looked up at her quickly. It might have been that he saw something in the flames, or that he had become more conscious of her presence, the magnificence of her. He rose slowly to his knees, taking her wrists in his hands and drawing her towards him till his face was very near to hers. She was afraid, yet not afraid of him. His fingers were pressing into her flesh, the breath of him was upon her cheeks. He was very near to her, and the sense of him rippled slowly, then more rapidly through her being. But the cry that was upon her lips dropped away when he spoke to her, for the sound of his voice came as something she had been waiting for through all the ages.

"Jean," he whispered hoarsely, "I love you." He buried his face in the folds of her dress. "I love you! How I love you!"

She put her hands upon his head and pushed back at him, her long fingers in his hair.

"Don't," she cried. "Don't!"

"Why not? Tell me why not!" He threw his head back and stared up at her, and looking down she searched the deeps of his eyes, and saw there what she had sought, what her heart told her now she had hoped for−−love that burned for her, that struck a responding call in her that cried out with clarion voice: "You are my man, God made you for me, shaped you for me, cleft into your brain a love for me that would spring up and grow."

Things about her became dead; the shrill whistle of a steamer on the river−−she never heard it; she saw the passing of steamer lights, but she did not heed them; the rattle of the wind about the corners of the windows, the voice of it reminding her of the greater life without−−she never heard these things. His lips touched her, something−−she knew not what−−broke in cascades of fire about her, his arms were just the borders of the world. Her head drooped, drawn by a fascination as of steel to lode, her lips met his.

She drew back from him, lying half supine in his arms.

"Jean," he cried. "Jean−−I want you; a sheer hulk of human wreckage though I am. I want you; want you−−want you! My little world meant nothing till you entered into it; you began things for me, and with you everything ends. I would like to load you with rich treasures−−the gold and frankincense of all life has to give, and I have nothing."

"You hare offered me everything."

"Jean!"

"Yes," she answered him. "Everything−−yourself."

To Fenning the words brought re−incarnation. He heard the doors of the old life clang, just as he knew that the gates of the new life had opened. Something had emerged out of himself, creating and unfolding possibilities, hopes, desires−−great impracticable desires. He had, as it were, awakened suddenly to the realisation that love is the borderland of life, and hitherto he had been content with a narrow patch well within the border. It is in such moments that the greatest scoundrels of the world sometimes find their way to heroism.

He put his hands on her shoulders and held her at arm's length, and for a few seconds looked at her in amazement, a smile on his lips, his eyes the mirrors of his heart.

"If I could give you my ideal," he said. "I can't describe it−− it's another man, somehow, the kind of man I used to think I'd loathe. You've unravelled some quaint cord in me that had become buried under; you've made me desire to climb up to some decent pinnacle for you; the desire−−aye, it's more than that−−the craving that you might be able to take paper and pencil and reckon me up as if you were taking an inventory, and place more virtues on the one side than vices on the other."

She made a little moue.

"I'd hate you as a saint," she said. "I'd always be afraid you were going to tumble down from your pedestal and get broken. Women don't like men like that; it's such a weary business trying to live up to them. If I ever married, I'd want a man who would teach me his value by simple rule−of−thumb lessons, by little tiny insignificant things that only children might think of. And if he hadn't a vice, I'd be afraid he would cultivate one!"

He caught one of her hands, and spreading it open, pressed his lips on the palm.

"I know," he said. "I'm beginning to understand. You're teaching me−−you−−you maligned icicle! Nothing matters, save that the world is in two halves−−the man on the one and the woman on the other. . . . Marry me, Jean!"

"I would never marry you."

"You will!" he said, gripping her wrists fiercely.

"No, never. We'd never agree. We're not babies, we can talk plain facts to each other."

The emphasis of her words changed his mood. For a moment he was silent.

"You're afraid of me," he said at last. "Afraid of the strain of rottenness in me−−the rank rottenness. It's there−−I know it; it's there all right. And it wants a dynamite bomb to blow it up. You are the dynamite bomb; you will destroy it and remodel me. I am the crude clay, and you will create an elegant vessel out of me. It will be your pastime, your ambition. It'll take years−−I know all about that−−but you won't be afraid; you'll be ever so proud of each little conquest. And I−−why, I'll just love you for your little tyrannies, hating them at times, and the next moment kissing the rod with vows of obedience. We'd live down things. We'd make it a success, that marriage, by sheer subjection to each other, blind worship."

She saw the strong love for her on his face; and yet his words still lacked conviction. A few moments before she had been on the point of surrender; the blunt, half−brutal way he had spoken to her had aroused a knowledge of the mastery of his sex in a difficult situation. It brought no retort to her lips because she appreciated the fact that only by brute strength would he steer them through the peril. And she liked the sight of the brute in him, it denoted the fighter, not the churl she might have thought him in London. But that night in Slana's rooms−−would

the stretch of ages ever wipe out the memory of that?

"It could not be as you say," she answered him. "Not after all that happened that night. I don't think I could forget it. It would always be like some big shadow between us."

She dropped her head. He felt a hot tear fall on his hand where it clung to hers.

"Won't a lifetime of adoration and service blot it out? Is there no mercy somewhere that will make a woman forget?"

"No woman would forget−−that."

"But she could condone it, and so prove the greatness of her sex. Women are doing that every day, overlooking things which a man would never shut from his mental vision. A man can't bend to forgive frailty like a woman."

He took both her hands, hot and restless they were in his own, and pulled her gently to him. He put his arms around her, and crushed her to him till he could feel the wild throb of her heart. It seemed like the whole world pulsing steadily beneath his fingers. He buried his lips in her hair where the burnish of it shone in the dull glow of the light, kissed her mouth, her hands.

"It had to be−−the meeting like this−−this march of events−− all that has happened was shaped for us." His lips were against her face; he was trembling as he held her. "You and I set out on some mission without seeing or asking to know the end. And this is the end. You and I here. We don't care what happens. I ask nothing of to−day, to−morrow, for ever, so long as it gives me you. And you−−if you care, if you could care, cannot you see a future, trying to make me the big thing in your life?"

He lifted her face a little that he might read her answer.

"The perfect woman does not desire the perfect man to mate," he said in a little crooning undertone. "It is her life work to create elegance from the crude. And you, Jean, you need a man in your life; not a perfect man, but one with many faults, whose weakness you can turn to strength. You've hated men, hated them all the time. You came into the man's field, the mad under−world of secret diplomacy, and failed. You will go on failing. No, don't draw away, you've got to hear the truth. Only vicious women succeed at this game, vicious women who degrade their charms, drag their very womanliness in the mire to attain an end. You have been a woman trying to fight with a man's strength, and without using the lure of your charms. It's all wrapped up in that−−your failure. You might have succeeded and been no longer a woman, but an unsexed creature, with big disappointments at the end of your life. Such women are current coin at this game; you buy things with them, use them as means of barter. Do you think I don't know? And I tell you that I never knew what a woman meant in all the world till I met you."

She unloosed his arms and, drawing away from him, leant against the table.

"But I would never marry you," she declared again without looking at him.

"Good heavens! Am I some queer thing without an ounce of domesticity in its whole ugly soul?" he cried.

"No, it's not that. It's not you; it's I who am at fault."

"You?"

"Yes. You ought to marry a woman who'd settle down, not an adventuress! Fancy marrying a woman you remembered as a spy, the sexlessness of her, the thing dressed in silks and satins who had once lacked scruples!"

"Absurd!" he remonstrated.

"It's true," she argued. "The restlessness is in my blood; I can't help it. You made me what I am−−−−"

"Debased you!"

"It was the effect of the things you said to me a year ago. We were talking about spies and spying. It was at Lady Castleton's. I cannot explain things to you now, but I set out to hurt those who killed the only relative I had. And I knew, too, that the pursuit of vengeance would take me out of myself, away from the humdrum life of the average unmarried girl in her twenties. I was sick of myself, sick of every day as it came to me."

"I had forgotten all about the Castleton incident till now," he said.

"It was what you said that fired my ambition. My blood was crying out for the destruction of the destroyer." She leant towards him. "I came here with the intention of using every artifice and charm of which I was capable to destroy a man."

"You?"

"Yes; I, the woman you want to marry! . . . And I've failed!"

He looked at her, aghast.

"What man?"

"Captain Zanolich, of the Servian army. Hatred of him was choking my life out. He killed my brother!"

He nodded his head slowly.

"I think I understand," he said.

"I went to Paris. It was there I met Jules Poret."

"Poret? Dear old Jules!" he exclaimed, and the tears vanished from her eyes. "He's sold his soul for half−a−dozen governments, and never succeeded in robbing one of them!" He swung himself on to the corner of the table. "Fancy your knowing Jules! He owes me a hundred francs, the old ruffian, and says he won't pay lest it should break our friendship! Dear blundering old Jules! And he made a spy of you!"

"He gave me a little help, a little encouragement. Then I went on−−alone!"

He got down quickly from his perch and faced her.

"Look here, little goddess!" he cried. "Some chance words of mine fired you−−wrecked you."

"Brought me here," she corrected.

"It's wreckage, if you say it makes you afraid to marry a man."

She shook her head.

"Think of other men's wives who know what I'd been! How they'd look down on me! I wouldn't mind, but I'd hate it for you. There have been moments when I would have stopped at nothing to find things out. That's a confession you'd never be able to forget!"

"One I'd always be glad to remember, little brave!" he exclaimed. "A perfect woman would kill me with boredom. I'd have to sit and look at her and wonder if she were becoming world−soiled. But one who'd been through the whole trough of adventure! Oh, you glorious woman! It's your faults I love, your little frailties. Without your faults you'd be horrible; without your wilfulness you'd be unbearable. It's the intractability of a woman that makes her fascinating; she must obey the man in the big moments of life, and make him her slave in others. And life is mostly made up of the others!"

"But how we'd quarrel!" she laughed. "You and I are all moods, all contrasts!"

"It's the contrasts that make the successes." He watched the firm set of her lips, the swift denial in her eyes. "I'd prove it if there were a square inch of looking−glass about," he went on. "I'd make you look in it. You'd see how that band of sapphire ribbon about your hair−−which, by the way, I notice you have deftly placed there since you came here, little lady−−makes the wonderful copper of it more wonderful. A harmonising colour would have been a failure. And how carefully you must have smuggled that little piece of ribbon through the Kalamegdan! It shows how splendidly feminine you are. A man would have smuggled in a razor to cut his throat."

She said nothing. He seemed to sway her, carry her puny arguments before him with every attack. Some knowledge of the preordination of things came to her. She stood a little away from him, weighing the words he had uttered, till the barrier between them became as a little ditch, crossed by a single step. They had started from different points, with different objects, different ideals, yet had been drawn together in one of the most lonely spots in Europe. She knew she was fighting destiny, wasting her strength against some overpowering force. Had it not been so she would have felt that ungovernable revulsion at his presence, a nausea at the touch of his lips against her own, which could never have been lived down. It was useless to burke the truth longer; she could find no hatred for the man who had tricked her, simply because she loved him. Given the same conditions she might have despised a strong man, but the weakness of this one, the coat of frailty he wore, had for her some form of subtle appeal.

"I ought to loathe you−−I ought not to be here," she exclaimed. "I know what I ought to do, but things, circumstances, are stronger than we are. I know I−−−−"

"If we got our deserts how few of us would be rich!" he answered.

"Rich! Yes, that's the word. I am rich, I know that. Being loved is a form of treasure, something they can't take away from you."

His hands ran up to her shoulders, clasped at the back of her neck, and tilted her face towards him.

"And my riches−−are they so much less than yours?" he whispered.

"No," she cried vehemently. "No, you know that, you can't help knowing it. Do you think I would remain here alone with you otherwise, whatever the circumstances? Do you think I'd be here with any man? But I'm not afraid of you; you've tried to make me hate you, and you've failed. You've told me all the worst about you. I don't care. I

don't think I care for anything now except to be with you. It's like that with me; I'm past fighting for things as people say they ought to be. I'm wanting you to be with me for all the rest of my life, the man in my life, the one omnipotent thing!"

"It's surrender," he told her. "Surrender to each other, for each other."

"Yes, surrender, absolute and unconditional." Her head was on his shoulder, and he could feel the movement of her lips against his face as she spoke. "I think it's that−−just that. If you go down, I'm going with you. I'm going with you to the end of the world. To hold you up when you falter. In the awful moments of failure that may come to you with the great horrible loneliness, I'll be there. You'll be glad because I'm there. I want to go out with you−−out into the world, and help you. If you knew what that meant to a woman, the right to help."

She was trembling in his arms, trembling from the knowledge of her new−found sanctuary.

"For the rest of my life to be alone with you−−alone just as we are here," he said. He talked to her as if he were teaching a child a fairy story. "They speak of desert islands in books, but in real life we find those islands. They are pitched in the swirl of the human sea; the big solitude of soul understanding soul, and the millions about us merely passing by and never knowing. That will be our island. I won't have to spend half the day catching your dinner on a lonely rock in the mid−Pacific, but you will get the same devotion and in the same solitude as out there. People will say, `They have married;' they will judge us by their own standards. But they won't know−−it'll be our secret, this rare understanding and worship that creates our island. They won't even know that it exists. Kiss me, Jean!"

She laid her lips, full and open, upon his own.

"You've never kissed a man like that before," he exclaimed. "I know; a man always knows when a woman's heart throbs on her lips. And the first time−−you kissed me−−of your own free will!"

"It's not the first time!" She spoke quietly, a little flush ripening in her cheeks.

"Good heavens, girl! do you think I would have forgotten! Do you think I don't feel, don't know Heaven when it comes to me?"

"It was in Paris."

"In Paris?"

"Yes. That night."

"What night?"

"The night at Belleville. I never meant you to know. You were sleeping, both of you, one each side of the door, when I came out in the early morning. And I felt grateful to you both; not the old conventional gratitude−−it was more than that. You weren't just friends; you looked like guardians shielding me. And I bent down and kissed you. Paul Cazalet stirred. Something aroused him. I thought he might have seen. But you−−you slept on!"

"Slept on? When I might have opened my eyes in Paradise?" he said. "You kissed me! If God would give me back that moment! Kiss me, Jean. Again, ten times again−−like that−−as if you didn't care for anyone else in the world−−Jean, Jean! How cool your lips are!"

* * * * * *

He made up a couch for her with five chairs, and half closed the window so that she should not feel the draught. There was no sound in the room, only the mutter of the river life creeping in with the fan of the wind.

"It will be daylight soon. I shall sit up and think about things, and wait for the morning and you." He went to the door that opened into the adjoining room. For a moment he waited, holding the door half open, then he came back. "You're not frightened?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"No. I don't think I shall ever be afraid again," she said.

"And Nemanya comes with the cart in the morning. We can trust Nemanya. He's the only honest man in Servia. And then we'll make for Paris. Paris, Jean−−that's where our lives begin, yours and mine."

He kissed her, turned down the lamp and drew the table nearer to the rough bed he had made for her so that she might reach the light. Then he passed into the adjoining room.

For some time she sat listening to the night sounds without, and his muffled tramp in the adjoining chamber. At times the silence was so profound that she knew he rested. Her eyes closed, to open again as the scuffle of his feet began again. And then the turmoil in her brain fought with sleep, till the warring forces drew away and unconsciousness came.

Towards dawn she heard the sharp creak of a door and sat up. But nothing stirred. The shadows in the room lengthened with the growing dawn, but still the lure of the night was about her. She closed her eyes again, and slept on to the day.

CHAPTER XIX. CONFESSION

IT was the sunlight, stretched like a white band of ribbon across the opposite wall, that drove the weariness from Jean's eyes when she opened them. She could see the river, a sheet of silver soft and undulating, no craft moving upon it, no sound heralding the coming of the day.

She sat up and listened. There were no signs that Fenning was stirring; The footsteps in the outer room no longer sounded, nor could she hear his breathing when she waited for a moment with her ear against the door−lintel.

She endeavoured to arrange her tousled hair as deftly as she could without a mirror to aid her, and to shuffle, with a brave show of tidiness, into those garments she had discarded.

And so the minutes passed till the better part of an hour had slipped by. She began to walk noisily about the room, jostling chairs purposely in the hope that he might waken. Once she called his name, but he did not answer.

She grew fearful with a vague nameless terror. And yet when she considered things, when her mind ranged the full import of the day just breaking, what was there to fear? Her life was entering some new phase, dependent, shared with another, part of another.

An impulse made her cross the room quickly and knock at the rough wooden door set back in the wall. But no reply came; she knocked again, and then the very silence of the place seemed to swell and grow and become almost a tangible presence. A louder blow sent a stream of echoes flooding through the house till she thumped on the woodwork to drown their mocking. She became rapidly afraid. Conviction told her she was alone. She threw open the door and found the room empty.

She knew he had gone; she knew she would never see him again. Already, while yet she stood wondering, her mind floated forward, year by year it might have been, decade by decade, striving to realise what she would think of him when those years were at an end. Would he be just a man who had passed across her orbit and left her nothing but a memory?

Some papers flapped to and fro in the wind; one was pinned to the table by the two top corners. She tore it free from the pins, and, sitting down on a chair, began to read. It was a curious letter, modelled under great mental stress, and yet to her it was as the vivisection of a man's heart. She read it through once, half comprehending; then studied it again. "DEAR LITTLE LADY,−−I have left you, deserted you at the very moment when perhaps you most needed my help. I have gone back to Paris. You will ask why. The answer is here−−Because I love you. I have spent the night realising things; I have grown to know what you mean to me, what I mean to you. And because of this I have left you for ever. You will grow to hate me because of this, and if you do I ought to thank God for releasing you from bondage that would mean your destruction.

"Yes, it would be destruction for you. You would have to sink down to my level−−I intended at first that you should, since it would mean my salvation. When once you had fallen so far you might carry me up with you.

"I know what it would mean. I know what I am, what I have been, what I always should be. I should be ashamed of my first lapse from the new life, and I know that lapse would come. I should hate the mute forgiveness in your eyes. Cazalet talks a lot about blood−taint; I always laughed at him till to−night, but he is desperately right. I am convinced that the strain in the blood controls. And I'm not going to injure you, nor be the weight on your life. I believe it's the only decent thing I've ever done, this leaving you. If I had married you I should have wrecked you in the end, even though I worship you.

"What moral weakness, what rottenness! And yet with it all I love you. If I did not I should drag you to destruction and glory in the possession of you. For I love that wonderful light that springs into your eyes at times, that curving of your lips, the sunlight on your hair, the very sense of your presence near me. I love your little frailties, I love the big influence of you, all that is you and part of you. I love the knowledge that you are in the world, the streets that you have walked. I love the presence of you in my dreams, the soft touch of your hands that comes to me in slumber. And I love the memory of your voice, the memory of your face, the memory of that dress you wore when I first saw you, the very shape of your little boots stained by the wet streets. This is my creed, it is my life.

"And so I have gone back to Paris. I shall pick up the old threads where I laid them down, a better man for the

memory of just three hours.

"You will marry a strong man, and be happy! I want you to marry a strong man. I should know then that I had achieved something for you in leaving you. Good−bye. J.F."

"P.S.−−You can trust Nemanya. He will lead you to safety. He will take you to Semlin. Go with him and take the train thence towards England. But do not return to Belgrade."

She crushed the letter in her hand. He had gone, but she did not wish him back. She had told him her secret, and he had carried it away as if it were the spoil of combat. She thought the whole course of things over, spoke the truth to herself, and yet would not believe it. Her lips framed the word desertion; her mind distorted it into courage−−the courage that means the yielding up of something that one wants−−something that has become more than a desire, an obsession.

She waited in the room, regretting things she might have done, the words she might have spoken. If she had sat beside him all through the night, just as he had sat outside her door that night in Paris! She was as much his guardian as he had been hers when he slept wounded at her lintel. She ought to have talked things out to him to a finish, influencing him, bending his will towards the path she had mapped out for themselves. If she had not wasted those hours in slumber, had taught him to know that she was giving as well as receiving−− that she wanted him.

Ultimately the craving of the woman for the man chosen out of the toil of circumstance came to her. She would go to him and claim him, bring him back to her, drop her sex because he was hers by right, and strengthen him out of the strength of suffering. He was hers−−hers because he had conquered her. It was not for him to dictate terms now; the hour was passed. The day was hers. A little distance away the railway led to Paris.

A little distance away−−and yet half the world, it seemed, to reach it. The going to Paris to him, the confession that he had become so much a part of her that she could not leave him, that she must follow him for ever and he must give himself to her! Her withering dignity took courage again, and found new strength. It was surrender, impossible, despicable. And yet he had stood by her and she could not go, pride would not let her; sex, self−esteem, the whole gamut of earthly prejudices arose as an overpowering barrier in her path. But the voice of her mind was answering that she must see him; the blood in her veins throbbed his name as it sped from her heart. She must sink herself, go to him, claim him.

She heard the grinding of the cart−wheels at last in the rough road without. A moment more and Nemanya was in the room, his hat in his hand, his heavy footsteps sounding through the silent house. He was surprised to find her alone, and yet there was no accounting for the movements of lovers; sixty years in the world had taught him that.

"You have come for me," she said. "He said you would come."

She had spoken in English, and he shook his head.

"Where are you going to take me?" she asked in French.

"The road to the hills is guarded. We cannot go there." He smiled at her dainty accent. He had never believed an Englishwoman could be so pretty.

"Where, then? Tell me?"

"I do not know. There is danger everywhere."

"And the railway, how far?"

"Two miles." He held up his hands. "Ah, it would be impossible. Every train is watched."

"Take me anywhere, then. I do not care. Go to Belgrade."

Sudden decision quickened in her. She would not go to Paris. Better anything than the absolute surrender of herself to a man who would have tired of her. It might be harsh judgment upon him, but it was the dictate of her mood, and she felt the cruelty inborn in every woman urging her. She would not go to Paris. And it might mean years of regret that she had not gone; she realised that even now.

"You would be putting your head in a trap in Belgrade to− day," the Serb said.

"I do not care."

"There is little safety anywhere−−alone."

"Oh, yes, there must be some refuge in a city like that."

The complacent smile spread over his features again.

"There is one place to which I could take you," he suggested.

"Yes, yes?"

"It's a vessel at the riverside. You would be secure there."

"Why?"

"You could hide−−you would be practically alone till you could reach the railway. You would be safe there−−I think so. But nowhere else. No, I should not have earned my money if I took you anywhere else. The good monsieur would call me to account if I took risks."

"On a ship in the river?" she asked dully. Her eyes wandered aimlessly across the opposite wall.

"Yes. She does not sail for a week. The captain is a friend of mine. He will look after you, and I should always be at hand when you wanted me. It is the one place where you could hide."

"Take me there," she answered indifferently.

He led the way out to the road and she followed him. The weak light of the early sun was gleaming in her eyes when they started along the road towards the white city. At this moment it looked like the city of hope.

CHAPTER XX. A WIND BLOWING EASTWARD

FOR two days Paul Cazalet searched Belgrade, burrowing into all the secret corners in which he believed Fenning might be taking refuge with the girl he loved in his custody. He feared the mercilessness of the man, a dread of what he might impose upon her. His brutal outspokenness that highs in the prison was but an index to the extremes to which a rank nature was prepared to go. He haunted the riverside, the sickening stench−reeked alley−ways that crept thin and tapering down to the water, the Turkish coffee−houses in the old town, with their brazen fronts and dens of iniquity behind−−he searched them all with eyes that never tired or faltered. But of those for whom he searched all trace was lost. The white city of the south had swallowed them up.

He got back to his hotel late on the night of the second day after he had explored the depths of the Kalamegdan prison. Lord Penstone's body lay at the Embassy awaiting the necessary papers from England; a dilatory Skoupshtina was busy meanwhile considering a weak apology for an English peer finding his way to a Servian prison at all. It had been an accident of safety; every government would understand that. And the widow would be compensated.

Paul found a small pile of letters on his table. He opened them slowly one by one. The first was from Lady Chesney in London, and addressed to his old chambers in Piccadilly. She deplored the dullness of the season, and begged him if he were in Paris to hasten home that his presence might lend interest to her drawing−rooms. Another letter came from Scotland−−a note from the agent at Penstone, saying that a dozen local officials wanted him to return and investigate a little problem that was puzzling them. He pitched the letter across the table with a laugh.

"So they've got on the scent at last," he muttered. "And about time they did. Dunderheaded idiots! They smell a fraud somewhere, and are afraid to call in even the local policeman."

Four other letters remained; he took them in rotation. A money−lender's advice as to how to have money by taking up five thousand upon note of hand alone, a piano−tuner's plaintive request that he might be allowed to tune the piano in Cazalet's chambers which he did not possess, and a whisky advertisement. The last letter of all bore no stamp. It was in a grimy envelope, and had evidently been delivered by hand. He ripped it open quickly. "Come at once to the steamer Kruna lying beside the quay. You are in grave peril. Do not attend any further meetings till you have seen me.−−JEAN LORIMER."

He read the letter thrice, and laid it out on the table before him.

"What the devil! Steamer Kruna! Some old barge. What is she doing there, And Fenning, too, I wonder!"

He got up and groped for his hat and stick. To him it was a call from the dark. She was there; that was all he cared. She might be in danger; he could not tell. But she had remembered him, warned him of some unforeseen peril, the existence of which he was unaware. The letter was like her voice speaking to him; he felt the consciousness of her somewhere close at hand; the very loneliness of her leapt from the letters scrawled over the page. He hurried down the stairs and out into the city.

The subdued light that creeps from the river over Belgrade by night came upon him like a soft clinging wave as he went down the street. He struck off the main street into a narrow byway where flaming oil−lamps were being hung in irregular rows on the bars above the cramped shops. Lights were springing up with weak yet steady insistence in the cafés, slinking ragged figures crept by in the murk. He clutched his revolver more closely in his pocket. They would pass him by, these pariahs of the streets, but at any moment he might see the gleam of a knife.

The gloom gathered as he pressed against it. He reached the quayside where the black sluggish waters went rolling into the light and out again, chuckling against the stone steps, gurgling and sucking at some wooden staging. The moon dropped from a bank of cloud like a rich jewel shaken out of a lucky bag, and sent a million tiny shafts of light quivering among the masts of ships. And Cazalet moved slowly, cautiously, with his eyes searching every vessel till at last he found the one he sought.

A narrow gangway connected it with the shore, and he went quickly across, and stood on the deck waiting for a moment to be accosted. Then he started towards the companion−way, and suddenly found himself staring into the face of a man who had been crouching behind a bale of merchandise.

"You have an English girl here. Take me to her."

He spoke in Serb, and the man glanced at him doubtfully. But the scrutiny seemed to convince him of Paul's nationality, for he led the way down the stairs to the cabin. He passed along the dark alleyway, Paul following at his heels. There was no lamp burning, but the moonlight broke in patches over the teak walls. Then he stopped and knocked softly at a door; it was partly open, and Paul saw a girl emerging from the gloom.

"Miss Lorimer," he muttered as the man disappeared down the corridor.

"You're safe!"

He was grateful for the note of anxiety in her voice. He followed her into the cabin and closed the door.

She turned up the lamp and stood looking at him.

"Good heavens!" he cried. "How you've changed! The torture of that prison must have nearly driven you mad."

"Oh, don't talk about that," she said breathlessly. "We've only a few minutes to spare."

"Why?"

"He'll be coming back. And I suspect that man."

"What man?"

"The captain here. They must be searching for me, I think. He eyes me so closely, watching me as a cat does a mouse, yet professing all the time friendship for me. I know he would sell me if he could find a purchaser."

Paul tried to laugh away her fear.

"I will get you out of here," he exclaimed. "You would be safe with me."

She said nothing.

"You won't trust me?" he asked.

"Yes, I would. I think I'd trust any Englishman now. I suppose I'm broken by that prison life or something. I've got to the don't−care stage; I know that I'm not so afraid of that prison as I thought I was. The other ship is beginning to suspect."

She was talking a little incoherently. The wild look in her eyes, the words she uttered without any connecting link made him afraid of what was happening to her.

"Where's Fenning?" he said.

"Gone. Gone to Paris."

"He got you out−−out of the prison, I mean?"

"Yes. He got me out."

"What about this other ship?"

He pushed her gently into a chair, and watched her bend over the table and bury her head in her hands. She sat like that for a moment, breathing heavily, and with little fits of shivering passing over her.

"It was moored close to us, and I could hear all that passed in the cabin," she answered him. "Remember, our ship was supposed to be deserted, with only two men on board at times to look after her."

She got up and pulled back a small curtain, disclosing a port−hole through which he could see the river.

"The other vessel was just there, only a few yards between us. And men would come to her in boats, two or three at a time. It seemed so strange that, inspired with distrust as I am, I used to wait here in the dark and watch from the corner of the curtain. I thought at first they were coming to take me back to that awful place again. I don't think I was frightened. I think I just wanted the suspense to end."

He listened to her amazed.

"You mean that men have been meeting there."

"Yes."

"What men?"

"The conspirators. Those who are going to kill the Queen."

"Kill the Queen! Good God! What are you saying!"

"They've been there two nights−−for about an hour each time."

"You heard what they said?"

"Yes, most of it. I could not hear everything, of course, but the voice carries far over water."

"Who are they?" He began to walk up and down, snapping out the questions at her.

"That I cannot tell you. To begin with it was seldom I saw anyone; I simply heard that muttering going on,

then one voice raised higher than another. Finally they would come off in the boats again. But I know they are going to try to kill you to− night."

"So you brought me here?"

"Yes. . . . That night you met me outside the palace−−you did not know where I had been?"

He stopped and looked at her.

"No," he said. "I didn't think you wanted to tell me."

"I had been to Colonel Slana's rooms."

The expression on his face changed, but she did not flinch.

"To Colonel Slana's rooms?" he asked hoarsely.

"Yes."

"I heard as much, but I would not believe it. If it hadn't been for the presence of the Queen I would have killed the man for the accusation."

"Why?" she said. "Why?"

"Because you would never have gone there−−of your own free will. What did you know of Slana that you should go there? And women of your kind don't go to the rooms of strangers."

"But supposing I was compelled to go?"

"What should compel you?"

"Belief in myself, belief that I was going to achieve something by going. I believed I should hear things which would have helped me."

"Tell me what you have gained by going?"

"I have probably saved your life. Shall they say then that I came to Servia for nothing?" She passed her handkerchief nervously over her dry lips. "Listen," she said. "I heard there what you were. You are the man who is playing the part of Captain Galatz. You were attending these meetings in the Rue d'Or. They believed in you, the conspirators would make you their tool so long as it pleased them. And you were content because you had an Englishman's curiosity to inquire into other people's business, and found it more fascinating than your work at home. Do you think I don't know what manner of man you are −−I who have watched your career unfold itself?"

"You advised me not to come to Servia, I admit that," he said. "It is because you took that much interest in me that I came. Tell a man who loves a woman that he is afraid of danger, and you kill fear at once. And in advising me not to come to Servia you implied that I should find fear at the end of the journey. Is this the end of the journey being here with you like this? If so, I'm glad. For I'm going to take you back to England whether you wish it or not."

"I don't think you are. I've changed my mind. I'm not going to England, I'm going to Paris."

"To Paris?"

"Yes. I feel that everything calls me to Paris, the restlessness in my blood, the cry of it for excitement, life. I should hate England now. I want to feel Paris rushing past me in its mad, reckless fashion, the ever moving−−the going on−−−−"

"You would tire of it," he told her. "You would get unutterably tired of it all too soon. Already I am tired of Belgrade."

"Because your throne is usurped. The real Captain Galatz is already in the city. I heard them say so on that ship last night. Come over here."

She went across to the window again, and deftly drew back the curtain. Then, leaning to one side, she pointed down the river.

"You see that ship there−−about two hundred yards away?"

"Yes."

He could just see the black hull of the vessel standing out in the moonlight.

"That is it−−it was moored quite close here until this morning. I think they suspect us; they've seen someone come aboard, or discovered that I was hidden here."

"And this man Galatz is in Belgrade?" he asked, going back to the table.

"Yes. You duped them, but you've been found out."

"There was no suggestion of such a thing two days ago. What has happened since I do not know. I should have learned all this to−night when I went to the passage in the Rue d'Or."

"And it was then they were going to kill you," she answered.

"But I shall still go−−to find out."

"You won't," she cried. "I'd lock you in here first." He looked into her blazing eyes and knew that for the moment she was dictator. "I heard what they said," she went on. "The meeting is at ten."

"In half an hour," he replied, looking at his watch.

"And you are not going to rob me of my achievement. I have other uses for you."

She came closely up to him and put a hand on his arm.

"Do you know why I have been keeping you here like this? To save you from further folly. You came prepared for adventure, and you shall have your fill of it to−night. They are going to the palace after midnight, these scoundrels, to force the abdication of the King and to kill the Queen. Five hundred Austrian agents poured into Belgrade yesterday; they are scattered throughout the city. Five hundred of them, the first breath of wind that heralds the tornado."

"Five hundred Austrian agents here? In Heaven's name, why?" he gasped.

"Only Austria knows that. And you represent Austria. Tell me the reason?"

He hated the look she threw at him−−a look of conquest, of better knowledge.

"Austrian influence was to save the Obrenovitch dynasty," he replied. "The man who sent me suspected that murder would be done unless it could be prevented. But Austrian agents in the city! Slana is too cautious for that."

She crossed the cabin and turned the key in the lock. And she stood there clutching the handle of the door behind her.

"You know me−−know why I came," she said quickly. "I was on the side of freedom, but not freedom by murder. Moreover, there was another reason. There was one man in Servia I wished to meet. But let that pass. What I have seen and what I have heard is knowledge enough for me. Five hundred Austrians stirring up strife after the chaos brought about by assassination, an army flung across the river to restore order and incidentally to remain in Servia! Cannot you see how you in your turn have been duped? How Servia may sell herself into bondage to−night?"

"If I thought you had facts behind your argument," he began.

"Facts!" she retorted quickly. "I have knowledge−−I heard these things. You probably take me for an imaginative little fool. But I have never had so much common sense in all my life as I have now. We've all been playing a big game, but now we're down to the bedrock of hard solid reasoning and action. We've got to do something, we cannot philander any longer. You would like nothing better than to go into a hotbed of murder, even if you received your deserts for your trickery on these men. You would probably perish thinking yourself a martyr to a cause. But I can see farther than you. Go to the palace, to Slana, to any official you can trust−−better still, to the King or Queen−− and tell them what an English girl who is really only a pawn in the game has heard, and that she knows what is going to happen. Convince them. If I were a man I'd risk anything. You don't mend things by letting fanatics loose. You've got to go. It's your great chance."

"A wild−goose chase," he said.

"And I who came here hoping for the overthrow of the autocrats and the freeing of Servia send you on it. How do you reconcile that to my principles? There is danger, of course−− grave danger for you. I have not overlooked that. You're not afraid; you're not that type."

"I believe I would go anywhere if you wished it," he said. "But I think you're overwrought. You imagine things. Galatz may be in Belgrade, five hundred Austrians−−probably humble trippers bent on an outing−−may be in Belgrade, but I don't think they have come to murder yet. But I'll go, if−−−−"

She unlocked the door and pulled it slightly open.

"If−−−−" she said.

"I was going to make an impossible bargain," he interrupted.

"And I to put you on your honour. You can't bargain with honour."

"No," he answered. "I know that. But I'm going for you. I don't believe in your augury, but I'm going for you. I don't suppose I'd bother my head what happened now if it weren't for you."

"Yes, you would," she replied, and gripped his hand as he passed her in the doorway.

"You'll leave Belgrade?" he asked, turning to her.

"Yes. I told you I was going to Paris."

He said nothing further, but went slowly up the companion− way. He knew she was following him, he heard the rustle of her dress, and was conscious of her presence, of the perfume of her floating up to him on the hot wind, the gladness that she was near. And he believed in some intuition which told him that he would never see her again; indeed to him this was the hour of farewell. But this going out on some service for her was the manner in which he would have passed from her life had he been given the choice. It was the crumb of consolation which the gods had thrown to him.

She was going to Paris, to Fenning. Already, it seemed to him, her love had preceded her. She had been carried away by the belief that Paris held all in the world for her. And he knew that while Fenning called from afar she would answer. The realisation came to him as he reached the deck and stood waiting there, looking at nothing, hearing nothing, almost unconscious that she was near him. He wondered what influence the unstable temperament of Fenning would have upon a girl all wilfulness and moods. Which would bend to the other, which absorb the other? How would the strength of this craving stand the strain of years, or would it grow ugly and tawdry, a something ever crying for satiation and receiving none? And yet they were opposites, exact opposites.

She had made her choice. Who then was he that he should judge them?

He still hesitated. The lapping water continued to chant its vespers against the stone steps; away down the quayside a few scattered lamp−flames wobbled in the wind. The very thraldom of the night seemed to be drawing them together.

"You'll work when you get to England; you'll go back into the old swim," she was saying.

"Yes. There's a finality about work; it's the sort of alternative we have held up to us, a sop when everything else fails. I suppose I'll fall into the old rut just as I might put on an old coat again."

"To find it fit you better than you ever dreamed. You'll run England some day!"

He laughed.

"May the heavens fall first! I couldn't stand the solitude of being the best badgered man in the country−−alone."

"You won't be alone," she said.

"I will. You know I will. I've met you."

She looked up at him, her white face framed in the dark.

"And if God lets things be as we plan them that will have helped you. I'll watch you fighting the old battle, a stern brave fight you always made of it, and I'll be proud of you. You won't know it, but I will be. That's a woman's perquisite, this pride; something she hugs to herself and puts away in a little jewel−case in her heart."

"If I thought it was that," he began, but she clutched his sleeve quickly and drew him back into a corner.

"Look there!" she whispered. She bent close to him till her lips were near his face, and pointed out across the water.

He fixed his eyes on the silent vessel ahead, and saw a group of men coming down the stone−flagged quay towards it. A light appeared at the ship's side; it guided them. They were bending forward and moving slowly as if they carried a heavy weight. They reached the vessel and went scuffling across the gangway, six of them in all, dragging and pushing at something that hung shapeless between them. Cazalet heard the hard footfalls on the deck; a silence followed, and then a heavy splash.

He hurried to the rail, yet crouching there could see nothing. Down the river he watched some circles broadening out across the water till they disappeared, and the glassy surface grew placid again. He expected to see a man swimming, but nothing moved.

He was about to draw away when a black object bobbed up from the shadow at the side of the Kruna. It dropped into the darkness again, only to reappear a few yards from where he stood, floating slowly down with a thin wash of water rippling over it. In the moonlight it was white and ghastly. A cry was on his lips. He bent over and stared at the thing as it went past.

A man's face. And he recognised every feature.

"Good God!" he almost screamed. "Nichodim!"

The dead thing floated away into the dark, leaving him standing there with the cold sweat beading his forehead. They had trapped him, Nichodim, the little wizened spy of the Rue de la Save! Verily the dread work of the night had begun.

CHAPTER XXI. THE NIGHT OF COWARDS

IF you know your Belgrade you know the "Srbski Kruna." Mayhap you have sat at one of the little tables on its veranda and sipped coffee and slivovits while a band in the Kalamegdan gardens opposite plays the dreamy intoxicating melodies of the south. You roll yourself up in your chair and watch the night come down and the lights pop out. And ever the music goes on ceaselessly, now soothed, now crescendo as the warm wind carries it towards you. The coffee grows cold, but you have forgotten it. Someone has filled again the liqueur glass, but it is so dark that you can scarcely distinguish whether it is empty or otherwise. You drink in the air, warm and soft like a good wine that pleases the tongue. The blood beats to the rhythm of the wild waltz they are playing; figures flit through the dark, mere vignettes that create no memory. And somewhere−−far away as it might be on another hemisphere−−life, civilisation, the whole great unsolvable problem is twisting and turning, but its burden is gone; for you it has no meaning.

To−night the café was crowded. In the smoke−haze at the back of the room were the laughing faces of women. But around the tables on the veranda a number of men crouched over their glasses and spoke in undertones, and laughed aimlessly. Someone brought a light, but they sent him away. They wanted the gloom, the shadowy faces of their companions rather than the white glare that revealed the fear written across them.

A woman passed out and turned with a jest at the clustered figures.

"I sent two notes to you, pig of a fellow," she whispered into the ear of a young lieutenant. "You forgot even to raise your glass. Such manners for a lover!"

He reached across his chair and swung his arm round her and pulled her near to him, till the reek of her scented clothing was in his nostrils.

"You're wonderful to−night, Helene," he exclaimed. "And by God! what eyes! Like those stars out there." He clutched her wrist. "Kiss me," he implored.

He fought for her red lips so close to his own, but she struck him lightly across the face.

"So much for you!" She was laughing at his discomfiture. "You couldn't make love to−night if you tried ever so hard. Your head's too heavy. And you'll be like a bear in the morning!"

She sprang away from him as he lurched to his feet, and, catching her arm, dragged her to himself by brute strength.

"Kiss me, you glorious witch!" he cried. She struggled with him in mock anger, and beat her little fists against his tunic, but his hot lips found refuge on her own. "Thousand devils!" he exclaimed. "Those lips were made for a man to play with!"

He flung her arm wide and stood away from her, devouring her with his heavy−ridded eyes. A roar of laughter went up from his companions.

"Such courage, Jovan, you'll want it to−night!" cried one.

"He won't kiss the other woman, not he," said the second.

"Not he, the dog!"

"Fill his glass, you fool. It'll teach him sense till the morning."

A crimson liquid splashed into the glass of the lieutenant, filled it and ran over. The youth dropped heavily into his chair again with a grunt of content and watched the woman as she passed out, now turning to throw a grimace at him. But the incident had stirred his blood; it struck the key of the situation. He lolled back, breathing in heavily the night air; he sucked at the wine, but a sudden spasm of fear gripping him, his teeth rattled against the glass.

"God! I wish it were morning!" he muttered.

Someone looked at his watch.

"Ten o'clock. Two hours more to go. Oh, stop that infernal band. No, the Draga March again. By God, yes; Kasnitch, call for that march, or, I'll spread your brains on the table!"

Kasnitch got up slowly. He turned and scattered a string of oaths, but no one heeded them. Then he went slowly out, only to roll back again as the Draga March restarted.

They shuffled their feet on the floor to the tune of it. A heavy, scarlet−faced rogue, his eyes glittering like

those of a wild beast, produced a revolver and began to beat time with the butt on the table. A glass was raised. They drank, every man of them, some mysterious toast which only half of them understood. An empty bottle was hurled spinning across the floor.

"That toast again!" A man in the far corner had raised his glass above his head, and it shivered in the cold palsy of fear that shook his hand. "That toast again. To−night! We never lived till tonight. To freedom−−to Servia!"

"To freedom−−to women!" came a hoarse scream.

"To the deuce with women! Confound that band; it's stopping!"

Fear fought with the mad fever of intoxication. The hours crawled past, and they waited, holding their breath till their lungs ached, while the echo of the chiming quarters died away. The heat of the night swept their faces with a warm dew. One, swayed by a passing mood of panic, clutched his glass till the stem broke. The church was going to strike again; he knew it by his watch.

They counted the strokes one by one.

"Twelve!"

"Midnight." It was a weak voice, drink−strangled and trembling.

"Rue Milan. Quick, you pigs!"

They struggled up, a table was overturned; there was a smash of glass and an oath. A sword dragged over stone steps; the click of a revolver sounded. And as they swept out of the door they could see the red ring that clung about the moon as if it were a coronal of blood.

Into the pitch black of the street they went, grotesque figures that seemed to leap and roll. A woman drew away from them with a frightened cry, but no one noticed her. They rushed on like hungry sleuth hounds, drink maddened, afraid, yet brave with the courage of cowards. The walls threw back the echo of their scuffling feet.

And from a distant street came the rumble of artillery over cobbles.

* * * * * *

Meanwhile Paul Cazalet had hurried up the steep street from the river towards the guard−house where he knew he would find Colonel Slana, panting as he ran. Personal enmity, his inborn dislike of the man, were effaced. He was charged with a mission, a woman had sent him, and it was not the moment to heed such things.

As he entered the King Milan Street a battery of artillery was coming slowly down. A strange hush lay over the city; the few idlers in the street hung at the kerb asking questions which no one could answer.

"The King is in danger!" A man had said it, and an echo seemed to carry the words to those who waited.

The troops came on to unlimber at the corner of the palace. Men looked at each other and glanced at the set faces of their officers. A hundred questions were unanswered, a hundred more remained unspoken. What did the call mean−−where was the King? The Queen had abdicated−−rumour had told them that. But the King−−where was the King?

Cazalet went onward to the palace gate. The sentry studied his letter of mark carelessly. He was tired to death of the fuss, and the languor of the night made his eyes heavy. Colonel Slana was probably in bed. But the Englishman could go and inquire.

In a quarter of an hour Paul was facing the colonel in his rooms. He was fully dressed, there was no trace of fear on his face. He heard the Englishman's story calmly and without interruption, or even surprise. He told himself it was no more than he had expected. He had warned the King, he had endeavoured to convince the Queen. But they had laughed. And now the hour had come.

"To the palace!" he said. He charged his revolver and slipped it beneath the flap of his tunic. "Quick, you must follow me. The King may believe you. I have failed. I've done my best, but I've failed. Only the intervention of God−−−−" His voice trailed off; Paul caught the note of emotion in it.

"At least we can urge them to escape," he said. "It's the only chance. We've got to do it. Those troops are not lining the streets for nothing."

They passed through a door and down a long corridor, Paul following close at the heels of the other. Then of a sudden they came to a full stop as an explosion shook the very foundations of the building. The blast of it seemed almost to beat them off their feet.

"Dynamite!" Slana cried. "By God! they've blown the door down!" He plunged on through a maze of passages, looking into rooms, the doors of which swung idly open in the dark. The hot breath of the night wind

came to them through open windows, bearing with it the acrid smell of explosive. He plunged up a staircase, Paul stumbling after him, revolvers drawn, blood racing, and teeth gripping into set lips. From afar came a scream; they heard the rush of feet over thick carpeted floors. A shot was fired−−two.

In that wild moment when life became a mere thing that depended on the cast of the dice, Paul felt a friendship stirring in him for the man at his side. His every action, his courage, seemed to clothe him with the cloak of dignity; his reverence for the monarchy had become a creed. He might have drunk deeply of the cup of life; wine, women, the thousand and one pleasures that beset those in high places−−for all these he had no thought now. The blood call had come to him, the sense of duty, bred and interbred through many generations, was exerting itself. He had lived and he could die, hugging life to him and yet kissing the lips of honour. Once Paul caught a glimpse of his eyes as he swung round in the light, and passion blazed there, as if he had found inspiration, the fugitive thing upon which men get their fingers only when they play the losing stake as they have played the winning, with firm faith in themselves and with dignity dealing the cards.

He knew he was going to his death; Paul read it in his face. For the shots were growing louder, explosion followed explosion, bullets splintered through doors far down the long corridors, and cries and oaths mingled in a vehement roar of passion. Swords were rattling against door lintels and crashing through the glass of pictures, but the colonel never faltered. He was one man going to meet a score, and he went on−−his hand a little firmer on his clutched revolver maybe−−a stronger set about his lips, but fear was dead in him. A rush of black figures swept across a corridor in an overwhelming body into a darkened room, and without a word of farewell he went in to meet them.

"A candle! For God's sake bring a light!"

Paul heard the cry from a distant room. And at the same time there rang out an appeal for help in his own tongue. He could just see the huddled figure of a woman lying prone upon the floor of a salon as he peered in through the darkness. The colonel had disappeared; he felt as if a firm friend had passed from him for ever. But in the dim shadow of the room he held up a woman, and tried to staunch the blood where it rolled in giant beads over her white dress.

Muffled shots came from the streets, shot after shot answered them from the Queen's boudoir beyond. Men were stampeding there, maddened with the lust of killing.

"Find the cattle! If they escape−−by the Cross if they escape!"

In the darkness they were groping round the room, kicking against furniture, and sprawling over objects that lay unseen in their path. The cascade of shattered glass never ceased where revolvers were blindly fired at pictures. And then came the zip of leather, a sword was plunged through a richly upholstered divan−−the crash of rare china dashed into the metal grates; laughter, oaths of derision, of balked vengeance, curses upon a thousand saints that forbade their fingers to find candles. A match was struck, a faint flicker spluttered up against a wolfish face, lighting to frenzy the murder in the eyes.

A little circle of figures stood round the candle while the wick caught the flame. They were defeated no longer; with a light they could kind and kill. They moved in one body towards the door that led into the bedroom, and before it they saw the waiting man. Slana stood there, the revolver in his hand, his face white, but the expression upon it was not of fear, but rather of conquest. In the finer moments of his life he had marked out in his imagination a death for himself, a death that would come to him in service to a monarchy which, in his mind, had the sanctity of a superstition. Rights and wrongs−−he had nothing to do with these. Alexander may have ruled wisely or with the hand of a tyrant, for this he had no care. It was not the hour of judgment, but of duty; the yielding up of life that those who came after him and bore his name might yet place a laurel to his memory in sincerity.

"We want to pass. Out of our path, pig!"

A man with a shaking hand was holding the candle up so that the light of it fell across the colonel's face. But he never moved. A sword−point pressed against his tunic, yet his mouth was firm.

"Go back," he said simply. "Go back before I kill you!"

It was the challenge of an ant to a mountain. A roar of laughter greeted it, the sword−point dropped, the jest was too good to be spoiled by a clot of blood. This man should live; he should make merry at the funeral rejoicings!

It was the ribaldry that roused the colonel's blood to action. Of a sudden he moved, his arm lifted, and he fired

once, twice at those before him. Two men dropped, a third struck the weapon from his hand and drove his sword through the colonel's shoulder. Yet he went on. With clenched fist he struck at the white bloodless faces, hammered into the eyes of them as if he would have beaten the life away. And with the start of blood he rushed forward; some fell and clung about his legs, dragging him down, and still he fought. Now he half rose to his feet, hands clutching at him, finger nails digging bloody into his flesh. A revolver was flung at his face but he dodged, and struck a fierce jab at the man who had aimed it so that he dropped with his hands up.

The moments sped, and yet he lived. His face was beaten out of shape with the batter of knuckles and weapons, but, blind and bleeding, he drove his fist like the piston of some great machine that should kill with every blow. A man's wrist snapped in his grip, when the sight had passed from his eyes for ever. So he fought; it was his hour. And he died smiling, just as he had wished to die, with men hurt and bleeding around him, men whom he had crippled by the sheer force of his hands, with the bare bones of his knuckles from which the flesh was stripped.

The human tide surged on over the broken body of a hero. It rushed from room to room, the steady encroach of destruction unsatiated. Rare hangings, gorgeous silks from the East, were torn out, only to clog the feet of those who pressed forward; a hundred art treasures lay in fragments, the sport of the cavalry boots that ground them to powder into the thick carpets. And above the sounds of destruction and the oaths of thwarted vengeance came the howl of men's voices without, just as a mob might clamour for some evidence of their leaders' work. Pity was dead, justice became an elementary superstition. It was the hour of beasts.

One man, his face wizened in frenzy, was firing at the large portrait of the dead King Milosch−−firing into the eyes that looked down at him as if they had been the eyes of a living man. Another sprawled across a writing table in the Queen's boudoir, tearing the fragile drawers into splinters of wood with his clawlike hands, and rending the letters they contained into a thousand fragments. A third, so drink−maddened that all sense of reason had long since left him, picked up the knitting upon which Draga had been engaged during the evening and tore at the stitches, ripped every weft of the work to shreds, and felt the delight of achievement. But there came no sound of the hidden quarry, only the cries from without. "Hurry! For the love of God, hurry!"

The tide turned and ebbed back upon its path−−back through those rooms again, back over the shamble of broken glass and china, back down the stairs into the chill air.

"To the new palace−−they've hidden there!"

"To the new palace!" The very trees seemed to whisper it as they shivered in the wind.

Black capering figures−−a dozen−−two−score−−went scampering across the courtyard, blacker than the shadow, and murder made them blacker still. It needed but the glare of hell and a man might have told his fellow that he had seen the Pit.

A shot sounded−−an officer stood pointing his smoking weapon up at a window.

"Back, you fools! They're there! The Queen called for help!"

A woman's cry for help, and the answer−−a shot that shattered the glass about her face! And the maddened rabble was pouring back once more! They scaled the stairs−−a door that had blown to in the wind and caught on the latch was burst down.

"More candles! They're behind the window." It was a scream of frenzy.

But for a woman's cry of despair the double windows of the palace would have held their secret. And now the mob had reached the room, which, searched before, had yielded nothing. They overturned the furniture−−one, his revolver outstretched, tore down the curtains and drew back at what he saw. The man and the woman hiding there crouched, white−faced, half clothed. The black hair of the Queen hung loose about her shoulders; her eyes were pits of fire. And quickly as the light broke in upon them she drew in front of her husband.

"Spare your King! . . . I will go. . . . I'm not afraid. I−−−−"

Two revolvers snapped. A volley broke out . . . The last of the House of Obrenovitch lay huddled on the floor.

* * * * * *

They hurled the body of the King through the window, and told each other they had freed Servia. They slashed a woman to pieces, and laughed at their courage.

"It's finished, mon vieux!" said a colonel, wiping his sword on the rug. "Finished! And the air breathes the cleaner for it. That we should have been plagued with such swine!"

He glanced at himself in the cracked mirror, and was aghast at the pallor of his face. But the lieutenant spoken

to had edged towards the door. He was shivering with excitement and the fear of some unnameable horror.

"I don't like the flavour of this room." He spat on the thick carpet. "It's rank."

"Nor I." The colonel passed his tongue across his parched lips. He glanced over his shoulder towards the window, and went out and joined the group of figures standing at the head of the stairs, muttering in frightened whispers. "That's what it is−− rank," he said to the man beside him. "Let's go and get a brandy, for God's sake! This taste of river mud makes me sick!"

They passed down the stairs one after the other. No one spoke. But some were conscious of the presence of dead things that followed them from the dark corners, and laid clammy hands upon their shoulders. Across their faces came the sweep of cold winds.

But the day was dead; to−morrow the episode would be but a memory. And what a tale for the cafés in the morning!

Even now a few of them felt the drape of laurels.

* * * * * *

In a room close at hand Paul Cazalet held the yielding form of Irma, Lady Penstone, in his arms, whilst with every shudder she gave the life ebbed from her. Only the light from a lamp in the courtyard showed him her face where it lay couched against his shoulder.

"I didn't know it would be like this," she said brokenly.

He lifted her up a little to ease the words upon her lips. She opened her eyes and fixed them on his own.

He said nothing, but looked at her, wondering at the strange jugglery of circumstance that had brought them together here. About them the building was very still. He knew the King was dead, for death seemed to be stalking through the dark corridors, and he could hear the voice of tragedy in the silence. Outside was clamour and confusion, shouts, the rumble of wheels, cheers, the cries of frightened people where the guns, in the mad ecstasy of delight displayed by their drivers, would have run them down. A child crying somewhere out there in all this vast wilderness of disturbance, a clattering horse on the stones beneath the window−−a strange conflict of sounds. And within, the great silence that he listened to, and only a woman's sobbing breath breaking through it.

He saw the pallid light reveal the beauty of her face. "You are a beautiful woman. I never knew it till now," he could have told her, but his lips forbade the message. She had not recognised him, and for that he was glad. In this surfeit of tragedy, he needed no more lest the cup brim over.

He reached out his hand and grasping the carafe of water put it to her lips, and held it there while she sipped. Then she turned her head away.

"They shot me!" she muttered at last.

"An accident," he breathed in her ear. "Men don't shoot women on purpose."

Her lips moved; she gathered her strength.

"But they kill them−−kill them nevertheless−−strangle their souls. And what do we ask for? We love; we are loved."

"Of such is the kingdom of earth. It's what we need above everything," he said, as much to ease his own aching heart on the mood of the moment as to humour her. "You feel easier now?"

"Yes−−a little."

"I'm glad," he said. "You'll be better soon," but he knew she would not live till the day.

"It was all for his ambition," she said a little joyously, disregarding the promise he had made to her.

"His ambition? Whose?"

"Captain Zanolich."

"Why for his?"

"He could not marry me. But he wanted money−−money for the cause. I married that I might fill his hands with gold."

"Your husband's money?"

"Yes, my husband−−poor fool. Yet not so great a fool as I. To−day Lazar told me that he hated me−−he had never loved me. He wanted power and position for another woman−−this English girl he had made love to, and whom they threw into the Kalamegdan. I had helped him to it; unconsciously for this I had worked. How foolish we women are!"

"You loved him," he said, controlling his voice with difficulty. He swept her hair back from her forehead.

"God would not question that. I loved him. Why do we women love like this?"

"It's the one almighty law of nature that the woman shall give everything for the man she loves. She doesn't choose."

The violet eyes opened and closed again, a smile wavered about her lips.

"For him success was everything," she said. "And I helped him to it. I gave him what his own hands could not reach. I stopped at nothing. I killed a man for him."

"Killed a man?"

Paul bent a little lower. She did not feel the trembling of his hand on her own.

"Yes, Count Stolpin. Lazar said the Count would wreck his schemes, would bring about his imprisonment. The Count was the stumbling−block−−the one man in his way."

He felt the wild flutter of her heart as the moments of her life counted themselves away. He crouched there silent, afraid to move, yet he could not have named the cause of his fear. But a new trend of thought had started in his mind.

"Who shot you?" he asked suddenly.

"I do not know. I did not see−−the lights went out, and I rushed to the door, and−−I think it was then I felt the blow."

"Who shot you?" he asked again. "You must have seen. Think. Who was it?"

"I saw a mass of faces. I couldn't remember. Don't move−− it's dark−−it's getting darker."

"It will be dawn soon," he told her. "Could you lie back against the corner? So! I would fetch a doctor."

"There is no need. . . . He'd come to me if he knew."

"Who?"

"Lazar. Tell me, does a man ever love twice?"

"God knows!" he said.

"But the real love, the big understanding−−−−"

"I think it only comes once to a man," he answered.

He sat staring into the dark and wondered if she heard him. She said nothing; he no longer felt the labouring of her heart. The minutes passed, and the words he expected from her never came. He waited. He could hear a clock clanging once, twice. Then of a sudden he felt her head slowly sliding down his arm. He clasped her wrist, but no movement responded to his touch.

And still he waited. He knew that death had come into the room, the presence of it was about him; he could almost feel its contact as he had done that night on the yacht. He lowered her to the ground and stood up; by some odd chance her face was still lying in the stream of light across the chamber. Then quietly he went out and closed the door.

* * * * * *

And in his own quarters Captain Zanolich sipped at a glass of brandy. He bent over the table and examined the lock of his revolver, then shut the weapon with a snap. He felt glad that he had fired the shot.

"Women can be so damned inconvenient," he muttered to the silent room.

CHAPTER XXII. LADY CHESNEY MAKES A BET

"YOU dislike the woman," said Sir Toby.

"I loathe the little cat!" Lady Chesney sniffed the air and smelt battle in it.

"Yet you put her on your visiting list. And−−yes−−it was only a week before we left London that you called on her."

"To get rid of her, of course," Lady Chesney replied in quick rebuke. "You can't make an enemy without doing something for it."

Sir Toby breathed a sigh of tired resignation.

"I'm afraid I don't follow your reasoning, my dear. You're beyond me; you're so clever."

The little man−−almost lost in the big padded arm−chair of the Paris hotel−−felt hot and flushed. An argument with his wife always affected him like that. He knew it was equivalent to fighting a battle with victory couched on the other side at the outset.

"How dense you are, Toby. I think your brain wanders at times."

"I agree, my dear. It's wandering now. Going round and round trying to discover why you should call on Rosa Mendl in order to make an enemy of her. I can't see−−shall I call it your line of attack?"

"I hardly expected you would." Lady Chesney sat up stiffly, and withered her husband with a look. "If only you had a woman's brains you would not be the thing you are."

Sir Toby sighed again and put his finger−tips together.

"You were always clever," he said meekly by way of indicating complete surrender. He reached for the newspaper on the next chair.

"Toby."

"My dear."

"Drawing−rooms, Toby. What did you think of your drawing− room when you were married?"

The question amazed him, and the tense expression of inquiry on her face amazed him the more. He sat looking at her with protruding eyes like a frightened owl disturbed in a chimney− stack.

"Good Lord! I had forgotten we ever had one," he said. "I suppose we did, though. Must have done. A scramble of odd chairs and things. What did I think about it? I probably thought it was the most unhealthy collection of unnecessary household appendages ever got together by diligence and perseverance."

"You may talk like that now. Gratitude to the woman who got together this−−this collection, as you are pleased to describe it, could not enter your brain. But you were proud of that drawing−room then. I remember you once mentioned it in the same breath with heaven."

"Probably−−quite likely," he answered dryly.

"We hadn't much money in those days, Toby."

The little man dropped the paper again.

"Money? No. Deuced hard up. I married in debt, and I've been in debt ever since, with you as the principal creditor. Seems like that to me. I don't know where we would have been if you had not happened along and managed things. You're so clever."

He made a fresh start at the paper.

"That's why I called on Rosa."

"What is?" he asked, peering over the edge of the sheet.

"The drawing−room. Every young bride raves over her drawing− room, and would like to discuss it with you. Remember, they've only been married two months. Of course I discussed it with her, shared her enthusiasm."

"Of course. It was the only nice thing to do."

"I know what I felt about mine. Everyone had to agree with me. If they didn't I hated them. I agreed with her to a point. Only to a point, Toby."

"What of it?" he said with mild spirit. "I don't suppose she expected you to covet the place. Really, I can't see the drift of all this. What did it matter if you liked her drawing−room or not? You hadn't got to live in it. It wasn't your house!"

He snapped the sentences at her with a courage that pleased him.

"Oh, lie down, Toby," she exclaimed. "Don't you see that when I delicately suggested−−only delicately, mind you−−that the tones of the drawing−room were really bilious in their relation to each other, and that bad pictures were such antique taste, it finished things? Finished them−−pouf!−−like that!" She snapped her thumb and finger in the air to indicate finality. "She couldn't return my call after that; she'd be afraid to. She was afraid to see my house, lest she discovered how incorrect her own furnishing was. And a young wife is as sensitive as a jelly− fish about furniture. Still, I did my duty. I had to call. It is a duty I have never flinched from, this meeting people I don't want to meet."

"But I don't see why you should destroy her faith in her taste," retorted the little man, quivering slightly. It was the nearest approach to anger he dared venture−−this quivering like a nervous animal.

"Because I wanted to disagree thoroughly with her palate. That's why. I can't do with her, Toby."

"She has married a very rich man."

"A furniture−maker. Good heavens!"

"Well, one must make something. It's paid him evidently. He wouldn't go on making furniture for his health."

"His manners are like most of his cabinets I've seen−− lacking in polish," she beat in.

Sir Toby flung the newspaper to the adjacent chair age again.

"You don't like to find them here at the same hotel as yourself, that's it. That's what it means. You wouldn't like to have to say you know her. You hated the thought of her at the next table at lunch, eating the same menu. It was gall and wormwood to you, the sight of her, having to breathe the same air with her. You would like to hurt her, humiliate her, because she has married a man of whom you disapprove, though before her marriage you could not do enough for her. It's like all you women−−pride. I'm getting tired of pride. We're all pride−−you and I; you know we are. You like to see crests and things about everywhere, and know good people, and be talked about because you entertain. If there were no newspapers to record the things you do you wouldn't do them. It's like racing or lying or thieving, and things like that−−when you begin you have to go on with them. And I'm getting tired of it, I tell you. Tired of it all!"

Lady Chesney leant forward in her chair and stared at him open−mouthed. She had never heard him talk like this before. It was her first glimpse of rebellion during the forty years of their marriage. And conscious that he had overstepped the mark, stolen suddenly into a strange country as it were, the little man endeavoured to screw himself smaller into the big arm− chair.

"It's the heat, Toby," she said excusingly at first. "You never could stand it."

"If Rosa had married Paul Cazalet instead of this other person you would have forgiven her anything," Sir Toby replied lamely. "You wanted her to marry Cazalet. It would have given you infinite happiness to think you had arranged such a match. But Paul Cazalet will never marry anyone."

"Mr. Cazalet is not a fool. He knows that marriage is expected of every man, especially when there are not enough men to go round. And Rosa certainly was mad on him at one time. You won't even admit that, I suppose."

"Cazalet has his work to do," he replied evasively. "He will prefer to paddle his own canoe, unless he has been killed in this horrible business in Servia. If you would permit me I would like to read the latest account of it in this Telegraph."

"Very well. Read on." Lady Chesney got up and walked towards the window. "A man's love for a murder story is worse than his gluttony for his breakfast."

"But regicide−−−−" he began.

"Just as sordid. It hasn't even got the romance of a divorce case."

She walked away, but before Sir Toby had read a column she was back again with a man by her side.

"I found him in the hall, and rescued him from a horde of clamouring porters," she explained.

Sir Toby got up and smilingly gripped the hand held out to him.

"Mr. Cazalet!" he exclaimed. "I thought you were in Servia."

"I was. But I am back in Paris, bound for England."

"For England?"

"Yes. Same old London. We all drift back there in the end. We've got a big corner in our hearts for London when we know her."

"Work?"

"No end of it."

"This awful business in Servia," Lady Chesney chimed in.

"The tragedy of a century," Paul responded.

"Yet to us it is frightfully fascinating." Lady Chesney grew enthusiastic. "For the past few days my eyes have been glued to the newspapers. Perfectly hideous business altogether. It reminds one of Charles the First and Robespierre by turns."

Paul laughed and nodded.

"I am not sorry to turn my back on Servia," he said.

"I should think not. But I knew you would be coming home after my letter. And Parliament has been so stale without you. You'll stand again?"

"I expect so."

"Same constituency−−South Lanchester?"

"If they'll have me. I sometimes wonder if they will tolerate a deserter. Have you been in Paris long?"

"Only a week, and Toby is bored to death already."

"The heat−−it gets me in the back of the legs; gout or rheumatics or some old weakness, 'fernally silly thing," Sir Toby confessed.

Paul chuckled.

"Age!" he said chaffingly. "Call it age, Sir Toby. We men wear so badly."

"Age be hanged! I never felt so young in my life!" replied Sir Toby, who had a secret fear of death.

"By the way, Mr. Cazalet," broke in Lady Chesney, catching his sleeve, "I saw a friend of yours in Paris this morning. She didn't see me. She was hurrying up the Rue de Rivoli."

"Indeed!" said Paul.

"Jean Lorimer. I introduced you. You remember her that night? You took her home."

He grew grave in a moment.

"Ah, yes," he said. "Was she alone?"

"Yes."

"You are quite sure?"

"Positive. She was walking very quickly or I should have stopped to speak to her. Quite an interesting girl. I heard she had gone to Servia."

"Yes, I heard that. You don't know where she is staying in Paris?"

"I have not the faintest idea," Lady Chesney said.

Paul waited a moment, tapping his foot against the leg of a chair. Then he held out his hand.

"You must excuse me if I run off," he said. "I've enough luggage piled up in the hall to build a barricade. Suits and things−−the usual masculine trumperies."

"But we shall see you again?" A note of anxiety crept into Lady Chesney's voice. "You're not going home yet? Won't you share our table at dinner? How long are you staying?"

"A few hours," he answered.

"No more?"

"It depends. I don't think so. You know how restless an Englishman is on his way home."

"And how cruel to his friends," she beamed. "But there is that Penstone business−−it was all in the newspapers. I was forgetting that."

He looked at her sharply.

"I have been away a long time. Possibly I haven't heard. Tell me," he said, wondering what she would answer.

"The disappearance of Lady Penstone, a very strange affair altogether. Surely you must have heard?"

"Oh, yes. I had letters, of course. That's why I'm going home," he said. "Good−bye, Sir Toby. You'll be back for the shooting?"

"Very much so. We've turned down a lot of birds at Tavisham this year. You'll have to come along. Put in a couple of days with us now, and let's all go back together."

"Can't, thanks."

"And I would have liked to talk to you about this Belgrade affair. The papers seem to give such piffling accounts. What amazes me−−−−"

"If you are kind you will help me to forget it," Paul rejoined.

Lady Chesney's eyes fixed upon her husband and seemed to smite him with reproof.

"Oh, lie down, Toby," she exclaimed. "When a man escapes from a lot of savages he doesn't want to be continually talking about it. Killing kings and things−−cannibalism isn't in it."

"True, my dear. Quite true." He turned to Paul. "Au revoir, Mr. Cazalet. Excuse the French. I know six words and my wife a dozen, and with the eighteen we waddle through Paris."

Paul laughed and departed. They watched his big figure stride across the hall. Then Lady Chesney approached her husband, who was groping for the Telegraph beneath a table.

"Toby," she said.

"My dear."

"I don't bet as a rule?"

"Bet? Good Lord, no!" His voice was conciliatory.

"But I want to make a bet with you."

"Certainly. If it's not cheaper to pay beforehand."

Lady Chesney glanced at the door, then she bent down and whispered in her husband's ear.

"I bet you a pair of gloves that Paul Cazalet marries Jean Lorimer within six months."

Sir Toby looked up with a start.

"What wild−goose chase are you on now?" he asked. He put his hands in his pockets and stared at her. "Of course if you have private information−−−−"

"Absurd; I only think," she answered him.

"Then I'll back your thoughts to lose."

"Within six months, I said. Will you bet?"

"Course. Damn silly thing, really. But, barring accidents, such as the girl being a non−starter, married already, or any little thing like that, I'll give you a dozen pairs of gloves if she does."

"Thanks," replied Lady Chesney. "I'll write to Hobbes and Pennant, and cancel my standing glove order. Fashions in shades change while one is wearing out a dozen pairs."

And she went to the writing−table in the corner.

CHAPTER XXIII. MASTS AGAINST THE SKY

"Joy singing through pain . . . and your smile
That cleanses my soul . . . The kiss of the breeze,
The night sounds a−flutter among the trees. . .
A sigh mid'st your tears . . . an echo . . . Farewell.
And two ships, adrift from the whimpering bell,
Steer out o'er the deep . . . to have spoken awhile." JEAN LORIMER walked quickly through the streets of Paris. All she had dreamed of the city, the insistence of its call for her, was as something that is dead. The pavements were hot and stifling in the June sun, and yet here, in the restless heart of things, she had come to seek for freedom, for all that life could promise her.

The events, the little incidents of the past weeks, came ceaselessly across her mind like the tumbling waves of a sea. The terrors of Belgrade on the night of the assassination, and, preceding them, the dread hours in a dungeon beneath the earth, the cottage by the Save, the refuge on the ship, the flight from Belgrade two days after the tragedy, with the help of Nemanya, the coming to Paris with one intention−−the desire to go to him−−he who had chained her life to his by invisible fetters−− all these things appeared to her now as the meeting of byways that led up to the present.

To Paul Cazalet she gave no thought. The courage of the man, the cool calculating way of him which had always struck her as a strong trait, his readiness slavishly to obey her bidding became mere attributes which she admired in the abstract. That after the night of tragedy in Belgrade he had searched the city for her and followed her to France she had no idea. He was the last person she would have looked for in Paris at this moment.

She had longed for Paris, yet to−day it frightened her. There was a strangeness in the atmosphere, as if she had come back to the city an old friend who had been forgotten and whose place had been usurped. The intimacy, the friendliness of the streets no longer existed; the rushing clamour struck a note that jarred. The living, pulsing thing Paris had always been to her shed its romance like a woman who has dropped her youth. In the sounds which at other times would have sung to her of life and pressing on, there was an undertone, as easily detected as a single bad note in a well−tuned orchestra. Yet her heart might have told her that Paris was the same, that it was of herself she was afraid.

She found the house at last, after what had been practically two days' searching. She recognised it by the bent iron lamp that hung over the doorway, and she went in and climbed the steps slowly, as if the weight of millstones were about her feet. She wondered what Fenning would say to her when they met; what she would say to him. She must explain things, though there seemed nothing that had not been spoken between them. She had read his heart, his life right back to the earliest times, she knew him with an intimacy that seemed to have come to her through the space of years of friendship. And yet they had met but a few weeks ago.

She paused at times as she climbed the stairs and framed little sentences, the words she would speak to him, but they ill−expressed her meaning, and were quickly discarded in favour of others. She wanted the simplest thing to say, so simple that it was charged to the uttermost with meaning.

"I have come back to you, followed you because I cannot do without you. You have made−−−−"

Mentally she threw the words aside with a shrug of disgust. Her dignity was flogging her with whips; she could never cringe like that. And how cumbersome the words sounded; she would not remember half of them.

She reached the top of the stairs and stood holding the banisters, her mind following a new trend of thought like flame along a trail of powder. What would she do when she was inside the room, how would she stand, what would be her whole attitude, of surrender or conflict still? She prayed for the power to hurl six words at him−−six words that would completely change his outlook, his opinions, that would recall him to herself and bind him with bonds he could never break. She remembered the long staircase, she could see it reversed in her mind, as it had appeared when she came down the day they had started for Belgrade together.

"I was unconscious when I came up this staircase before," she muttered to herself, remembering the night at Belleville. "I wonder how close he was to me!" It was a woman's reasoning, illogical, trusting. For God made a woman's mind a thing of beauty, but forgot to balance it with the power to mistrust where she has placed her

worship.

She was waiting outside the door. Fear had gone, unless it be that the surprise of her coming would urge him to anger. She was a woman grown out of herself, obsessed by the desire for action, no longer a slave to the puny horrors of her brain. She opened the door boldly and walked in without knocking.

The room was empty. It carried the heavy odour of tobacco smoke that had secreted itself in the curtains and the fabrics with which it was adorned. And from a half−empty glass came the pungent odour of spirits. There were cigarette ends littering the desk, a scatter of them in the grate, and a curtain badly burned where a lighted cigarette had been placed too close against it. It was the room of a man whose mind moved beyond its precincts.

She crossed the chamber and pulled back the curtains at the far end. The little ante−room there was empty and disclosed the same disorder. Beyond it again she could define the outlines of a bedroom−−the room in which he had nursed her after that struggle at Belleville. It seemed familiar to her, the window at which she had stared for hours together whilst lying on her back, the door half ajar through which she had expected him to appear at every sound of a footfall.

She sauntered into the outer room again, breathing the atmosphere as it seemed to ooze from the walls. And there were little familiar touches here and there that she loved, trifles that seemed to be part of him, the household gods of a man who lived alone. In a silver ash−tray on the mantelpiece she noticed a dead carnation, reminding her of an incident of those past weeks, when she had torn the flower from a bunch of pink blossoms he had given her, and handed it back to him as a souvenir. She picked it up and it was still in her fingers when the door opened quickly and he came in.

He came to a full stop when he saw her, and for a few seconds that seemed like eternities they stood looking at each other. She could almost see the blood draining from his cheeks, and by some process of mental telepathy knew what he was going to say. It was as if she could read the half−formed words on his lips.

"Jean! Why are you here? You shouldn't have come. You know that!"

He closed the door, and approaching stood with one hand on the desk.

"Shouldn't have come? You wanted me to come−−wanted me ever since you left me in that cottage!"

Without premeditation she had spoken the truth, and now the effect of her words was revealed like an answering signal in his eyes.

"I didn't intend that we should ever meet again," he said.

She went up to him, and gripping the lapels of his coat, remained looking up into his face.

"You didn't intend it, but God did, Fate did," she said. "And you haven't altered a bit!"

She was laughing. A song was ringing in her heart. Here was the beginning of life−−alone in the great city, just the two of them, to struggle together, to make good together. She felt that here, amidst all the turmoil of the streets, the crowd and press of things, there was that splendid isolation of which he had spoken, and which he had compared to a lonely island. Here was solitude with the clamouring sea without, the ceaseless tide of humanity that could never reach them. And what did it mean? To live as the heart of each told the other they should live, content in the joy of to−day, careless for the fears of to− morrow. It was the sight of him there that awoke the thing in her that was still. In her heart something was living and beating−−beating with the wings of freedom. They were on the threshold−−she knew it−−and with her hand in his they would step across.

"Altered? Good Lord! You didn't expect me to alter in eight days, did you?" he said, catching the infection of her laugh.

"No, no, of course not. Altered towards me, I mean. You might have forgotten. I don't know. Those eight days have seemed an eternity." She looked away from him, her eyes going slowly round the room.

"Eight eternities," he answered her, and hated himself for the words, since they gave the voice to his love for her.

"I don't care," she exclaimed suddenly. "I'm here. I'm going to stay here. I'm yours. You conquered me with the strength of your love when I should have hated you. You crushed me by making me hate you, and then turning my hatred to love. You brought me here. You can't jeer at me now. I'm yours. D'you understand that−−yours!"

The cords in his throat swelled, and pain drove rough−hoofed across his face, but she saw nothing. He put out his hand and touched hers, and the magic of her seared like a fire through his flesh. But for the power that wrestled with him he would have crushed her in his arms, and so linked their lives together for all time.

"It can't be. You know that," he answered sharply. And he was surprised at the strength of his voice, the sheer

command. "It can't be−−I told you. We can't marry. It's all a farce. We've been thrown together too much; we ought to have seen where we were drifting. I ought to have held back; I'm the brute, the cur!"

She stared at him appalled.

"You don't−−want me?" She choked out the question. "You mean you don't want−−−−"

"Want you? What's the good of wanting? Want you! Shall I ever cease to want you? I've gone down into hell for you, but you're not coming there with me."

"I am!" she cried. "I am! You don't understand yourself."

"A man understands himself when a woman sees in him nothing but good smeared over evil," he answered. "You don't know how I live; you don't know half the things you would have to know about me. Good heavens! You would never be able to hold up your head and call yourself a decent man's wife if I married you."

Strength was ebbing from her beneath the pitiless flail of his words.

"Have you forgotten what you told me−−what I should do for you?" she asked quietly.

"No. I have not forgotten. I was a weak fool then. I did not understand."

"Understand what?"

"The thing that is greater than you." He hung his head.

"You mean temptation."

"It isn't temptation. It's not that; it's greater than that. I've really only understood things since I came back to Paris. It's born in a man this thing, a form of moral parasite, that clings to him and does not leave go. Hard training might have beaten it out of me, but the day for that is gone. You can't cure blood−taint in a generation. Cazalet will tell you that, it's his great big theory. It's stronger than laws or doctrines, stronger than prison bars, stronger than suffering. You obey; you've got to obey. You fight and give in; you give in and fight again. And all the time something is going out of you, and another thing is setting in−−strength on the one hand, weakness on the other."

She gave a little cry.

"You're afraid of yourself; afraid to trust yourself to me," she said. "Try me. Let me be your confessor. Tell me about all that is worst in you−−hide nothing. I shall not be ashamed or despair. I wouldn't be afraid. Let me be the physician, diagnose the ill, and prescribe the treatment that will bring about the big cure."

She drooped her head and for a moment some words hung unspoken on her lips.

"I don't ask you to tell me now," she said quietly. "I don't want to know now. I wouldn't want you to tell me till after we were married. You see I am sure of myself, so sure of you."

Amazement spread slowly over his face.

"You wonderful woman!" he cried. "If I let you, I should hurl myself into the Seine for very cowardice!"

He took her hand and raised it slowly to his hot lips, then let it fall listlessly to her side again. Her last words seemed to open up a new vista, so that he saw things he had never seen hitherto. He saw a woman's love as he had only dreamed it, and knew by some sudden access of knowledge, beyond thought or question, how impossible it was to sacrifice it on the altar of himself. His brain throbbed, and his mind went out on a lonely journeying towards a goal to which he had never turned before.

"Little girl," he said. His voice was very quiet, and had a strange melody in it. "One does not sacrifice the big women of the world to the weaklings. We try to stem evolution, which in its natural progress would stamp out the weakest, by framing social laws that they may survive. We tell ourselves that we are progressing thereby, but we are not. Progress is found in the mating of strength to strength, the building up, the going forward. Not by waiting for the laggards shall we march in the advance−guard. We'd never be the pioneers that way."

"But if we were together−−−−" she sobbed.

"We'd find destruction. I know it. You'll learn it some day." He fidgeted with a book on the desk. "Will you come back here at seven o'clock?" he asked.

She looked up in surprise, her grey eyes swimming with tears.

"At seven o'clock?"

He led her slowly to the door.

"Yes, at seven o'clock. You'll learn then why we could never marry."

She was silent; but at the door she turned.

"I won't come back!" she exclaimed! "I'll never come back!"

"I think you will," he answered. "You've got to learn your lesson. You've got to know things."

He watched her, standing at the head of the staircase. Then he slowly closed the door and shut her out.

* * * * * *

He sat down in the room alone and stared at the wall opposite. What was the good of going on, what was there left for him to do? A dozen resolves−−the ghosts of things he might have done−−stalked in gaunt procession across his mind. And life as he had dreamed it was slowly slipping away from him, because his hands refused to grasp it.

He had striven often to analyse himself, to lay naked for examination his temperament, and the whole process was a thing of disgust. The meanness of himself, what an old friend it was, how it clung to him! The poverty of his every attribute of manhood−−hard barren soil which in other men was fertile and fruit−yielding−−the gradual going down, mentally, morally, dropping into that serene oblivion where things never matter because self−respect is dead. He was not the straightforward criminal, the honest criminal. He knew that. That taint might have yielded to drastic treatment, such as a great sacrifice, or the knowledge of the great possession that waited for him to take. But he saw in himself only the mean slinking thing−−a man afraid of the law because the law had the power to hurt him, and he shrank from pain both mental and physical; a man who worked with the hand of treachery, who lived for himself, and would hurt others that he might live. And he knew that, whereas crime might be a thing a man can take to himself by some freakish instinct of his brain in development, his was a taint that affected his entire being.

His first intention in getting rid of Jean for a few hours was that he might go away and seek refuge somewhere beyond her finding. When she came back he would be gone, and he would never return. But the better fragments of his brain taught him that his departure in this fashion might be reckoned by her as, what it was, a form of fear; no yielding up of love, but in its way a puny heroism. "He loved me so much that he was afraid of himself and had to go," she might say. And if her love endured, as he believed it to be an endurable thing, she would still shield him in the sanctuary of her heart, or the image of him crowned with the laurels of her regard. Such a notion of heroism might uplift him in her mind; there would be no ending of things. And some day they might meet again. He was frightened of that. He knew what would happen, his mind was on the threshold of it even now. The old fires would rekindle, and burn with a flame more consuming than before. He would be powerless to fight this battle twice. He would marry her. And their marriage would be her destruction. Sheer, absolute destruction.

He rose to his feet with a strong desire for the definite line of action which was shaping in his brain. He knew there was one thing that must be done, and that to destroy her love, shatter it without sympathy, with brutality if need be, as one weeds out a flower by the root that it may not blossom again. So picking up his hat he went out.

* * * * * *

When he returned an hour later he was not alone. The woman who accompanied him was frail, slightly built, and with a small pathetic face that might have been recently stained with tears. She watched him questioningly as he closed the door, studied every expression of his face with some nervous inner dread.

He began to tidy up the room without speaking. And it struck her then that he was doing unnecessary things, such as moving various objects on the desk and table aimlessly, shifting them from one position to another and back again, as if his sole motive was to keep himself occupied. Always he had his back turned to her, and when occasionally he glanced in her direction it was with a strange furtive look in his eyes that made her fear him.

It was her quiet sobbing that caused him to turn round at last and stare, as if he could not believe the evidence of the sound he heard. And he saw that she had buried her head in her handkerchief, and was leaning forward in the chair crying in a restrained yet piteous manner.

"What are you crying for?" he asked quickly. "Don't carry on like this. I hate to see a woman crying; it's so babyish."

She did not answer him; the quivering handkerchief still covered her face. He felt that in some way he was becoming enmeshed in a side issue, a byway that bothered him rather than caused anxiety. At any other time he would have let her cry to her heart's content, and carefully tidied his bookshelf while she did so, but he felt it incumbent upon him now to do something to put an end to a source of irritation. So he went across and touched her shoulder, and stood looking down at the narrow nape of her neck where it emerged from the low−cut collar of her black dress.

"You're not afraid?" he asked. "What's there to make all this commotion about?"

She dropped the handkerchief and twisted it shapelessly in her twining fingers, binding it round the forefinger, then wrenching it away again with strong nervous tension. And all the while her eyes were fixed on her little shoes.

"Yes−−it's that−−I'm afraid, I think. I don't know why. Why have you brought me here?"

He gave a hard, mirthless sort of laugh.

"You silly little fool," he answered her. "You've got nothing on earth to be frightened about."

"Then why am I here with you−−like this?" she asked in so quiet a tone that he scarcely heard the words.

"Because you came," he responded with vicious annoyance. But the sound of the choking sob she gave made him choose a gentler tone. "Don't worry your little head, petite. It's all right, Everything's quite all right. You're afraid of your own shadow." He patted her head and dropped into the chair facing her.

"I only wanted you to come here to play a part." He laughed. "Easiest money you've ever earned. Nothing to do but look pretty and alluring, and answer a few plain questions if you're asked them."

She shivered a little, and looked up at him with mistrust.

"It's not like me−−this going to any man's rooms. You know that," she explained.

"Of course. That's beside the point anyway. This is a mere business arrangement. If you thought I was such an ogre it's a wonder you came."

"I don't think it. It's cruel of you to talk like that," she whimpered. "I felt I owed you something−−there was an outstanding debt. That's why I came."

"You mean over that rotten business at the Bal Tabarin?"

"Yes−−that."

To humour her he began to chatter about their first meeting, till the colour came back to her cheeks and a smile to her eyes.

"Heaven knows where you would have been if I hadn't been there," he said laughing. "I came along at the right moment as a sort of guardian angel, I suppose. If you are superstitious you would say I was brought there for the purpose of saving you from an extremely objectionable fellow, when you were just holding your breath before you jumped to destruction. As a matter of fact I happened there owing to an unquenchable desire for a drink."

"You saved me. You know that; you saved me. I always wanted to thank you−−really thank you."

"Save you? S'pose I did. More by accident than design, though. I liked the look of your pretty face then; it was four months ago, wasn't it?"

"A bit more than that. Five, I think."

"I know I loved that man's scowl when I took you away and marched with you down the passage in front of him. What a brave couple we were. And how we laughed afterwards! I felt in a mood for a fight. I don't know what had happened, but I longed to feel my knuckles against a man's flesh. Then I took you home in a cab, and gave you twenty francs because you were pretty. And, hang it! I believe I even kissed you in the doorway with the driver looking on! Queer thing to do when you think of it. You were nothing to me. I wasn't sorry for you really, but you just fitted my mood. It was one of the few times in my life when I felt I wanted to protect something. Must have had a motive, of course."

"Courage," she said with awakening interest in him. "That's what made you do it."

"I don't think so; at least I might have done at the time. I remember one night walking over a lot of barges that were strung together down there by the Pont Neuf. I stopped in the middle−−it was as black as your hat−−and I asked myself why I was climbing about with a certain drop to death on every side of me unless some miracle guided my footsteps aright. What was I doing it for, what was the motive? One of the fellows had thrown Remy's hat on to the end barge, and I was going after it. Of course I had a motive. I fancy the bet was a franc."

"But with me," she said, "I think it was that you didn't want to see a woman destroy herself."

"I only think what the motive was in those moments when I call myself up for judgment before my ideals. And the judgment sends me to the cells of disgust."

"But you have not brought me here this evening and offered me forty francs in order to tell me that," she said.

"I don't think forty francs could be got out of me so easily," he answered. Then he leant forward and spoke for some time in an undertone. "That's all you have to do," he said.

"Just sit in that room and smoke cigarettes and say that?" she exclaimed with a little cry of pleasure.

"Yes, that's about all there is to it."

She ran across and pulled aside the curtains and smiled back at him.

"I'll sit in that big cosy chair, and put my feet up. So!" She suited the action to the words, and lay back with her small shoes balanced on the chair opposite.

"The cigarettes, my friend. And an ash−tray. So! Dear obedient husband! And shall I be discovered darning your socks, or would you like me to hide the needle−marks on my fingers? I've got a maid−−no? And I think I'll read an English novel just to show I'm studying the language. And what will my hated rival have to drink? Some coffee−−no? A champagne fin, then?"

He loathed her for her prattle, but said nothing. He must live for the hour and adapt himself to the circumstance, crushing down feeling, strangling the very nerves that would have urged desertion of his task.

He left her alone there and waited in the outer room; walking round and round, then backwards and forwards like some fear−driven beast. She called to him and he answered her when it pleased him, but more often preserved a rigid silence. He hated the presence of the woman in the room, the knowledge that she was there.

He paused at length and leaned against the mantelpiece, studying, as a means of thought, the cigarette between his fingers which had grown as cold as the ash that had fallen from it. And even though he was waiting for the soft tap at the door it set his heart pounding when it came, so that a rigor seemed to hold him without the strength to move. Then he went across and turned the handle.

Jean came in slowly, she looked round the room and hung a little away from him, afraid, uncertain. Her eyes were red− rimmed, her lips quivered weakly.

"You asked me to come−−to tell me something."

He stood transfixed. Something made him put out his hand, a second power, following quickly in the wake of the first, compelled him to withdraw it again. It was the last stage of the conflict, and, though he was spent and the very soul of him a faltering thing, the remnants of a mongrel courage held him to his resolve. She came nearer to him, and lifted her face, shameless of the trace of tears in her eyes.

He pushed back the door till it caught on the hasp.

"I hated going down those stairs alone−−it was as though you had turned me away," she said wistfully.

"It was that." He spoke in a voice he scarcely recognised as his own. "Yes, it was that. I did turn you away."

"You meant it?"

"Yes. I meant that I didn't want you any more. I can't explain. I−−−−"

He paused, appalled by the hideous horror that had flamed up in her eyes. For some movement beyond the curtains, or the instinct that those curtains concealed someone, made her go across and pull them sharply aside. She gave a cry, vehement, but as quickly restrained−−a cry that bore to him the knowledge that the thing he wished to kill was dead, that her world, as he had helped her to build it. had broken into little pieces as she looked.

"That woman−−−−"

"Yes. My wife!"

The curtain tore from the hook beneath the weight of her hand. He turned his head away as if the shame made cowards of his eyes. And the other woman threw aside her book with a careless attitude and rose to her feet.

"What's this, Jimmy!" she cried. "A visitor? English? Ciel. We haven't any tea!"

A silence, like a thick overlying curtain, seemed to enfold the room.

"Your wife? You−−you're married?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Four days ago."

A shuddering sob made her tighten her lips. She came a little nearer, looked for a moment into his face, and backed towards the door, slowly, step by step, as if afraid of an enemy that might strike her should she avert her eyes. But she did not speak.

"I owed this woman a debt." He pointed to the girl who, standing between the curtains, watched the tragedy in amazement, uncomprehending. "She's been everything to me. D'you hear that−−everything. She had to come first."

Still she said nothing. But at the door she waited as if powerless to turn the handle, till it was opened quickly from without, and Paul burst in.

He stood looking from one to the other. And passion blazed in his face; he stepped forward, his fists clenched.

In a frenzy Jean clutched his sleeve.

"Take me away!" she exclaimed. She broke into a storm of sobs. "I'm coming with you. I can't stay. This place is poisonous to me. I hate him. He's loathsome−−horrible. Take me back!"

Paul put his arm about her and drew her aside. He stood looking at Fenning.

"Yes, you're coming with me," he answered her. "You're coming home."

Two minutes passed. Fenning thought that the hour hand of the little clock had crept round twice. The door closed, and he heard shuffling footsteps going down the stone staircase. Another eternity and a door banged.

The other woman was fussing with the broken curtain and straightening a crumpled cushion.

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"You said forty francs," she exclaimed, looking at the gold coin on the table.

"Twenty."

"Forty, you said."

"Twenty," he flung back. "Get out; d'you hear!"

She snatched at the coin and moved towards the door.

"If you always cheat women like that−−−−"

"Get out, damn you!"

The door swung to with a crash.

He waited a moment looking round the room. Then he went slowly to the mantelpiece and tore to shreds the dead

CHAPTER XXIV. HAVENAGE

"IT was a year ago−−just a year ago to−night," said Pentelow.

Marchant cracked his walnut carefully, and bent over the peeling of it.

"What was?" he inquired.

"Don't you remember? All of us together at the Toledo−−in this very room, and−−by gad, yes−−at this very table!"

Marchant looked up sharply.

"Was that the night you showed Cazalet the report of that Penstone business in the paper, and he went off to Servia to chew the cud of it?"

"Yes. That night. Fenning was here, too." Pentelow lay back and looked round the half empty room. It was late, and most of the diners had slipped away to the theatres or their clubs. He lit a cigarette and let the smoke drift across his face. "I thought Cazalet was finished with that evening," he added.

Marchant nodded assent.

"Yet when I came back from the East two months ago I heard his name everywhere. He'd jumped up like a mushroom in a single night. The political world had found a new genius in a man it had always mistrusted. South Lanchester washed its hands of him, but they had got him in for Camford just before I started. I saw him the day he took his seat. He was radiant, sure of himself."

"Yes," rejoined Pentelow, "he settled that tangle over the Penstone estates, and he roped in a pot of money when things were straightened out." He produced his cigar−case as Marchant pushed aside his plate. "Try these," he said.

"But it wasn't that−−the money, I mean." Marchant took the cigar and snicked off the end of it with his thumbnail, then he leant across the table. "It was this way, Pent. Exactly eight months ago Cazalet woke up. Previously he'd never cared very much about anything; he was a more or less idle, clever man, if you understand me. He could have climbed the political ladder as easily as he has done now at least four years ago if he had tried. But he didn't try; he didn't want to try. He just drifted along in an aimless sort of way, but all the while the other benches were afraid of him as one might be of a volcano which is ever dangerous. He let off steam when he liked, and people said he was one of the cleverest men in the House till he went to sleep again."

"I remember I told him that night he was mad," said Pentelow. "And when he married a girl from nowhere I thought him madder still."

Marchant smiled.

"You were pretty wide of the mark, my friend," he returned. "Don't you remember the girl Fenning was talking about that night? She sat at that little table in the corner over there, the one covered with pink carnations."

"I'm afraid I could never remember which of Fenning's girls was which," said Pentelow gruffly. "What's become of him, anyway?"

"That's precisely what I was going to tell you." For a moment Marchant paused and drew at his cigar. "Fenning's dead," he said.

"Dead!"

He nodded.

"Dead! Not Jimmy? Good heavens!" The big filmy eyes widened in a stare of horror.

"Yes, there's not much to tell," said Marchant. "I went East in September, and I caught sight of Jimmy at the moment of going aboard at Marseilles. We had a drink together in the saloon as the vessel started. But he was very quiet. Changed, I thought; a different man. He would say nothing; he seemed interested in nothing. Then I lost track of him, in fact I kept out of his way because I thought he didn't want to talk to me. Jimmy had moods like that sometimes. Women, I used to say it was."

"Go on," said Pentelow, as the other waited.

"It was some days later. I was sent for to go to cabin 41. Fenning was lying there. I knew he was dying, read the truth in his face, and he saw that I knew. He was too far gone to write and he asked me to take down a letter at his dictation, and then deliver it when I got back to England. I did so, and he just had strength enough to sign it. It

was a letter to a woman, Pent. You and I never understood Fenning."

"What woman?" asked Pentelow under his breath.

"The woman we saw here that night−−the girl he pointed out to us. I just remember her in the white frock she wore. And Jimmy's letter was to her."

Again Marchant hesitated.

"That all?" asked the other.

"No, not quite. They had met and loved, it seemed, but he knew he'd only have dragged her down. Of course he would; why, you and I could have told him that a year ago. He deserted her; she followed him to Paris, and there he led her to believe that he had married another woman. The lie killed her love for him; he meant to kill it."

"Jimmy did that?" asked Pentelow incredulously.

Marchant nodded.

"Yes," he said. "That wasn't Fenning as we knew him, eh? But, as I said, you and I never understood him. Odd how some men mess up their lives and clear up the muddle at the end, a sort of moral house−cleaning before going out. And this letter to her was confession. He told her how he had picked up this woman in the street to play the part. He told her more than that, what she meant to him, she to whom he had lied. Mind you, Pentelow, I'm not a sentimental sort of brute, but I didn't recognise my handwriting when I had finished taking down that letter."

"And the end?"

"A bright moonlight night and the ship stopped dead. So light it was that every bit of rigging had its shadow on the water. Then they hurled something overboard wrapped in a sailcloth, and someone was muttering words from a book. I couldn't stand any more. I went back to my cabin and thought over the letter in my pocket."

Pentelow sat turning his empty liqueur glass round and round by the stem.

"That's the woman Cazalet married−−there's no need for you to tell me that," he said.

"Say, rather, the woman who made Paul Cazalet," replied Marchant. "I used to wonder what manner of woman she was, till I went to her house one evening to deliver Fenning's letter. It was after her marriage, of course. And I remember that all the way there I was telling myself that a woman who had loved could not hurl that love away at a word and marry another, and Fenning had made his sacrifice in vain, he had wasted it on a woman who never cared. That was my reasoning, and it made me feel a brute. I was glad that I had it in my power to hurt her. But when I met her she was surrounded by her friends, and they had been talking that day of giving her husband an under− secretaryship. It was when I saw her that I knew−−I knew."

"What?"

"She loved him, by heaven, yes. She was proud of him. There was triumph in her eyes, pride in every word she spoke. Pent, there are some things I don't understand about women. . . . I left soon after that."

"A queer yarn," said Pentelow. "I suppose she just read the letter and laughed, eh?"

"She never read it."

"Never even bothered to read it!" exclaimed Pentelow.

"Never read it, I said." Marchant nodded across the room as he spoke. A man and a woman had entered and taken their places at the little table in the corner. Pentelow looked on in silence. The woman was fingering one of the pink carnations, and tapped the scented petals of it against her lips as she watched her husband. And when Paul spoke to her the fires of happiness and a great content kindled in her eyes, and in her laugh was all the melody of life.

Marchant got up quickly.

"Come," he said. "It is the night of celebration. And we don't come in here. Fenning would have told us that we are the dead leaves of last year."

Unobserved they crept from the room and down into the street.

"Club, eh?" said Marchant.

"Might as well." They walked along in silence. "Say, Marchant, about that letter."

"What about it?"

"Why wouldn't she read it?"

"Because I refused to let her."

"Refused? When it was a dead man's trust?"

"Don't be a fool, Pent. Should a man deliver a letter from the dead if it will destroy a woman's love when it

has found its havenage? Should he tear down what the other's sacrifice built up? The weakness of Fenning made him dictate that message; a stronger man would have closed his lips for ever. And if I had given it to her, it would have opened up again the whole problem, to remain unsolved so long as she lived, it would have stolen her from the side of the man who loves her and to whom she has given herself, that she might revere the dead. What good would it have done? Tell me that."

"It was a dead man's trust," repeated Pentelow.

"Haven't you seen things with your own eyes to−night?" counter−questioned the other.

"Yes."

"And yet you still judge; you would still destroy?"

Pentelow was silent.

"What did you do with the letter anyway?" he asked.

"Do with it? Do with it? Man alive! What should anybody do with a letter like that when it would destroy a woman's life happiness? Why, my dear respected friend, I lit my pipe with it!"

THE END