A SENTIMENTAL SWINDLE.

William Le Queux

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COUNT BINDO'S retreat near Winchester proved to be a small, rather isolated house near Kingsworthy. It stood in its own grounds, surrounded by a high wall, and at the rear was a very fair garage, that had been specially constructed, with inspection−pit and the various appliances.

The house was rather well furnished, but the only servant was a man, who turned out to be none other than the yellow−haired young fellow who had been introduced to me at the Cecil as "Mr. Henderson."

He no longer wore the light fancy vest and smartly−cut clothes, but was in a somewhat shabby suit of black. He smiled grimly as I recognised him, while his master said:

"Got back all right, Henderson — eh?"

"I arrived only ten minutes ago, sir. All was quiet, wasn't it?"

"Absolutely," replied the Count, who then went upstairs, and I saw him no more that evening.

For nearly a fortnight the car remained in the garage. It now bore a different identification−plate, and to kill time I idled about, wondering when we should start again. It was a strange ménage. Count Bindo was a very easy−going cosmopolitan, who treated both Henderson and myself as intimates, inasmuch as we ate at table with him, and smoked together each evening.

We were simply waiting. The papers were, of course, full of the clever theft from Gilling's, and the police, it appeared, were doing their utmost to track the tricksters — but in vain. The Count, under the name of Mr. Claude Fielding, seemed to be very popular in the neighbourhood, though he discouraged visitors. Indeed, no one came there. He dined, however, at several houses during the second week of his concealment and seemed to be quite confident of his safety.

At last we left, but not, however, before Sir Charles Blythe had stayed one night with us and made some confidential report to his friend. It being apparent that all was clear, some further alteration was made both in the appearance of the car and in the personal aspect of Count Bindo and myself, after which we started for the Continent by way of Southampton.

We crossed and ran up to Paris, where we stayed at the Ritz. The Count proved a devil−may− care fellow with plenty of friends in the French capital. When with the latter he treated me as a servant; when alone as a friend.

Whatever the result of the clever piece of trickery in Bond Street, it was quite clear that my employer was in funds, for he spent freely, dined and supped at the expensive restaurants, and thoroughly enjoyed himself with his chums.

We left Paris and went on the broad good road to Lyons and to Monte Carlo. It was just before Christmas, and the season had, of course, not yet commenced. We stayed at the Hotel de Paris — the hotel where most men en garçon put up — and the car I put into the Garage Meunier.

It was the first time I had seen "Monty," and it attracted me as it does every man and woman. Here, too, Bindo di Ferraris seemed to have hosts of friends. He dined at the Grand, the Metropole, or the Riviera Palace and supped each night at Ciro's, indulging in a little mild play in the Rooms in the interval between the two meals.

He did not often go out in the car, but frequently went to Nice and Cannes by train. About a fortnight after our arrival, however, we ran, one bright morning, along the lower road by Beaulieu to Nice — bad, by the way, on account of the sharp corners and electric trams — and called at a small hotel in the Boulevard Gambetta.

The Count apparently had an appointment with a tall, dark−haired, extremely good−looking young French girl, with whom he lunched at a small restaurant and afterwards he walked for an hour on the Promenade, talking with her very earnestly.

She was not more than nineteen — a smart, very chic little Parisienne, quietly dressed in black, but in clothes that bore unmistakably the cachet of a first−class dressmaker. They took a turn on the Jetée Promenade, and

presently returned to the hotel, when the Count told her to go and get a close hat and thick coat, and he would wait for her.

Then, when she had gone, he told me that we were about to take her over to the Bristol at Beaulieu, that great white hotel that lies so sheltered in the most delightful bay of the whole Riviera.

It was a clear, bright December afternoon. The roads were perfect, though dusty as the Corniche always is, and very soon, with the Count and his lady friend, I swung into the curved drive before the hotel.

"You can go to the garage for an hour or so, Ewart," my employer said, after they had descended. Therefore I turned the car and went to the huge garage at the rear of the hotel — the garage which every motorist on the Riviera knows so well.

After an hour I re−entered the hotel to look for the Count and receive orders, when I saw, in the great red−carpeted lounge, my employer and the little Parisienne seated with the man whom I knew as Sir Charles Blythe, but who really was one of Count Bindo's confederates.

We exchanged glances, and his was a meaning one. That some deep and ingenious game was in progress I felt certain, but what it was I had no idea.

Blythe was smartly dressed in a grey flannel suit and white shoes — the costume de rigueur on the Riviera — and as he smoked his cigar, easily reclining in the wicker lounge−chair, he presented the complete picture of the English aristocrat "putting in" a month or two for sunshine.

Both men were talking earnestly in French with the dark−eyed little lady, who now and then laughed, or, raising her shoulders, looked from one to the other and protruded her chin in a gesture of uncertainty.

I retired and watched closely. It was quite plain in a few moments that the young lady was entirely devoted to the handsome Bindo. Both manner and glances betrayed it. I saw him look at Blythe, and knew that they were working in accord towards some pre−arranged end.

Presently a noisy party of American girls who had just returned from "Monty" entered and sat close to them, calling for tea. Therefore the trio rose and went out into the evening dusk. They wished, it seemed, to talk in private, and they did so until, half an hour later, I received orders to bring round the car, and drove them all three back to Nice, which we reached in plenty of time for dinner.

"Now, you will not forget, Gabrielle, you're sure?" said Bindo in French as he handed her out of the car and shook her hand as he bared his head.

"I have promised, m'sieur," was her reply in a low, rather musical voice. "I shall not forget."

And then she bowed to Blythe, ascended the steps, and disappeared into the hotel.

Her quietness and neatness of dress were, to me, attractive. She was a dainty little thing, and yet her plain black dress so well cut, was really very severe. She had the manner of a lady, sweet and demure. The air of the woman−of−the−world was, somehow, entirely absent.

Well, to confess it, I found myself admiring her very much. She was, I thought delightful — one of the prettiest, sweetest girls I had ever seen.

Evidently our run to Beaulieu and back was her first experience of motoring, for she laughed with girlish delight when, on an open piece of road here and there, I put on a "move." And as she disappeared into the hotel she turned and waved her tiny black−gloved hand back at the handsome Bindo.

"Done, my dear chap!" chuckled Blythe in a low voice to his companion as the neat figure disappeared behind the glass swing−doors. "The rest is easy — if we keep up pluck."

"It's a big thing, of course; but I'm sanguine enough," declared my employer. "That little girl is a perfect brick. She's entirely unsuspicious. Flatter and court a woman, and if she falls in love with you she'll go any length to serve you!"

"You're a splendid lover!" declared Sir Charles as he mounted into the car beside the Count, while the latter, laughing lightly, bent to me saying:

"Back to Monte Carlo, as quick as we can get."

I slipped along out of Nice, through Villefranche, round Beaulieu, slowing up for the corners, but travelling sharply on the open road, and we were soon back at the Paris.

Having put the car into the garage, I walked round to the hotel, transformed myself from a leather−coated chauffeur into a Monte Carlo lounger, and just before ten o'clock met the Count going across the flower−scented Place to the Rooms.

He was alone, and, recognising me crossed and said:

"Ewart, let's walk up through the gardens. I want to have a word with you."

I turned on my heel, and strolled with him.

"You know what we've done to−day — eh? You stand in, so you can just shut your eyes to anything that isn't exactly in order — understand? There's a big thing before us — a very big thing — a thing that's simply dropped from the clouds. You want money, so do I. We all want money. Just keep a still tongue, and obey my orders, and you'll see that we'll bring off the biggest coup that the Riviera has yet known."

"I know how to be silent," I said, though I did not at all like the aspect of affairs.

"Yes, you do. I give you credit for that. One word of this and I go to durance vile. Silence, and the whole of us profit and get the wherewithal to live. I often think, Ewart, that the public, as they call it — the British public — are an extraordinary people. They are so confoundedly honest. But, nowadays, there surely isn't any honesty in life — at least, I've never found any. Why, your honest business man who goes to church or chapel each Sunday, and is a model of all the virtues, is, in the City, the very man who'll drive a hard bargain, pay a starvation wage, and button his pockets against the widow! Who are your successful men in business? Why, for the most part, the men who, by dint of sharp practice or unscrupulousness, have been able to get in front of their competitors. Therefore, after all, am I very much worse than the successful City man? I live on my brains — and I'm happy to say I've lived very well — up to the present. But enough of this philosophy," laughed the easy−going young scoundrel. "I want to give you instructions. You stand in with us, Ewart. Your share of the Gilling affair is to your credit, and you'll have it before long. At present, we have another little matter in hand — one which requires extremely delicate handling, but will be successful providing Mademoiselle Gabrielle doesn't change her mind. But women are so often fickle, and the morning brings prudence far too frequently. You'll see some strange happenings to−morrow or the next day. Keep your eyes and ears closed; that's all you have to do. You understand — eh?"

"Perfectly," was my reply, for my curiosity was now thoroughly whetted.

There was a desperate project in the air, and the spirit of adventure had now entered thoroughly into me.

Early next morning I drove the Count back to Nice where, at a quiet spot beyond the Magnan, he met the pretty Gabrielle clandestinely.

When we drew up to where she was apparently awaiting us, I saw that she was annoyed at my presence.

"Ewart, my chauffeur," he explained, introducing me, "will say nothing about this meeting. He knows how to be discreet."

I raised my peaked motor−cap, as our eyes met. I thought I detected a curiously timid glance in them, for in an instant she dropped her gaze.

That she was an intimate friend of the Count was shown by the instructions he gave her.

"You two walk along the Promenade des Anglais, and I'll meet you at the other end by the Hotel Suisse. I'll take the car myself on to the garage."

This meant that I was to walk with her a full three−quarters of an hour along the whole of the beautiful sea−front of Nice. Why, I wondered?

"But, Bindo, can't you come?"

"I'll meet you outside the Suisse. It's better to do that," was his answer. "Go along; you'll find Ewart a clever fellow. He'll tell you how to drive a motor−car."

She laughed lightly, and then, as Bindo mounted into the car again and turned away, we strolled together on the broad asphalte back towards the town.

The morning was delightful, with bright sunshine and blue sea. The sweet−smelling wallflowers were already out, and the big palms waved lazily in the soft breeze.

I quickly found my companion most charming, and envied the Count his acquaintanceship. Was she marked down as a victim? Or was she an accomplice? I could not grasp the motive for being sent to walk the whole length of the promenade with her. But the Count and his companions were, they admitted, working a "big thing," and this was part of it, I supposed.

"This is the first time you have been in Nice, eh?" she asked in her pretty broken English as she stopped a moment to open her sunshade.

"Yes," I answered; "but the Count is an old habitué, I believe?"

"Oh, yes," she laughed; "he knows everybody. Last year he was on the Fetes Committee and one of the judges at the Battle of Flowers."

And so we gossiped on, walking leisurely, and passing many who, like ourselves, were idling in the winter sunshine.

There was an air of refined ingenuousness about her that was particularly attractive. She walked well, holding her skirt tightly about her as only a true Parisienne can, and displaying a pair of extremely neat ankles. She inquired about me — how long had I been in the Count's service, how I liked him, and such like; while I, by careful questioning, discovered that her name was Gabrielle Deleuse, and that she came to the Cote d'Azur each season.

Just as we were opposite the white facade of the Hotel Westminster we encountered a short, rather stout, middle−aged lady, accompanied by a tall, thin, white−haired gentleman. They were well−dressed, the lady wearing splendid sables.

She started when she recognised them, instantly lowering her sunshade in order to hide her face. Whether the pair noticed her I cannot say. I only know that, as soon as ever they passed, she exclaimed, in annoyance:

"I can't think why Bindo sent you along here with me."

"I regret, mademoiselle, that my companionship should be distasteful to you," I replied, mystified.

"No, no, not that, m'sieur," she cried anxiously. "I do not mean that. You do not know — how can you know what I mean?"

"You probably mean that you ought not to be seen walking here, on the Promenade des Anglais, with a common chauffeur."

"If you are a chauffeur, m'sieur, you are also a gentleman," she said, looking straight into my face.

"I thank mademoiselle for her high compliment," I said, bowing, for really I was in no way averse to a little mild flirtation with such a delightful companion. And yet what, I wondered, was my rôle in this latest piece of complicated trickery?

She quickened her pace, glancing anxiously at everyone we met, as though wishing to arrive at the end of our walk.

I was sorry our little chat was drawing to a close. I would like to have had her at my side for a day's run on the car, and I told her so.

"Perhaps you will take me for a long trip one day — who knows?" she laughed. "Yesterday it was perfect."

A few moments later we arrived before the Suisse, and from a seat on the Promenade Count Bindo rose to greet us. He had left his motor−coat and cap in the car, and stood before us in his grey flannels and white soft felt hat — a smart, handsome figure, such as women mostly admire. Indeed, Bindo was essentially a lady's man, for he seemed to have a bowing acquaintance with hundreds of the fair sex.

"Well, Gabrielle, and has Ewart been saying lots of pretty things to you — eh?"

"How unkind of you!" she protested, blushing slightly. "You really ought not to say such things."

"Well, well, forgive me, won't you?" said the Count quickly, and together we strolled into the town, where we had an aperatif at the gay Café de l'Opera, opposite the public gardens.

Here, however, a curious contretemps occurred.

She accidentally upset her glass of "Dubonnet" over her left hand, saturating her white glove so that she was compelled to take it off.

"Why!" ejaculated the Count in sudden amazement, pointing to her uncovered hand. "What does that mean?"

She wore upon her finger a wedding ring!

Her face went crimson. For a moment the pretty girl was too confused to speak.

"Ah!" she cried in a low, earnest tone, as she bent towards him. "Forgive me, Bindo. I — I did not tell you. How could I?"

"You should have told me. It was your duty to tell me. Remember, we are old friends. How long have you been married?"

"Only three weeks. This is my honeymoon."

"And your husband?"

"Four days ago business took him to Genoa. He is still absent."

"And, in the meanwhile, you meet me, and are the merry little Gabrielle of the olden days — eh?" remarked

Bindo, placing both elbows upon the marble−topped table and looking straight into her face.

"Do you blame me, then?" she asked. "I admit that I deceived you, but it was imperative. Our encounter has brought back all the past — those summer days of two years ago when we met at Fontainebleau. Do you still remember them?" Her eyelids trembled.

I saw that, though married, she still regarded the handsome Bindo with a good deal of affection.

"I don't blame you," was his soft reply. "I suppose it is what anybody else would have done in the circumstances. Do I remember those days, you ask? Why, of course I do. Those picnics in the forest with you, your mother, and your sister Julie were delightful days — days never to return, alas! And so you are really married! Well, you must tell me all about it later. Let's lunch together at the London House." Then he added, reflectively, "Well, this really is a discovery — my little Gabrielle actually married! I had no idea of it."

She laughed, blushing again.

"No; I don't suppose you had. I was very, very foolish to take off my glove, yet if I had kept up the deception any longer I might perhaps have compromised myself."

"Was it not — well, a little risky of you to go to Beaulieu with me yesterday?"

"Yes. I was foolish — very foolish Bindo. I ought not to have met you to−day. I ought to have told you the truth from the very first."

"Not at all. Even if your husband is away, there is surely no reason why you should not speak to an old friend like myself, is there?"

"Yes; I'm known in Nice, as you are well aware."

"Known as the prettiest woman who comes on the Riviera," he declared, taking her hand and examining the wedding−ring and the fine circle of diamonds above it. Bindo de Ferraris was an expert in gems.

"Don't be a flatterer," she protested, with a light laugh. "You've said that, you know, hundreds of times before."

"I've said only what's the truth and I'm sure Ewart will bear me out."

"I do, most certainly. Madame is most charming," I asserted; and it was undoubtedly my honest opinion was, however, disappointed equally with the Count, to discover that my dainty divinity in black was married. She was certainly not more than nineteen, and had none of the self−possessed air of the matron about her.

Twice during that conversation I had risen to go, but the Count bade me stay, saying with a laugh:

"There is nothing in this that you may not hear. Madame has deceived us both."

He treated the situation as a huge joke, yet I detected that the deception had annoyed him. Had the plans he had laid been upset by this unexpected discovery of the marriage? From his demeanour of suppressed chagrin I felt sure they had been.

Suddenly he glanced at his watch, and then taking from his pocket an envelope containing some small square hard object, about two inches long by one inch broad, he said:

"Go to the station and meet the 12.15 from Beaulieu to Cannes. You'll find Sir Charles Blythe in the train. Give him this from me, and say that I'll meet him at the Beau Site at Cannes at four o'clock. Have the car ready at two. I'll come to the garage. You haven't much time to spare, so take a cab."

I rose, raised my hat to the dark−eyed little woman, who bowed gracefully, and then, mounting into a fiacre, drove rapidly up the Avenue de la Gare.

The situation was decidedly interesting. My ideal of that sunny morning had been shattered. Gabrielle of the luminous eyes was already a wife.

I met the train, and discovered Sir Charles looking out for me. I handed him the packet, and gave him the Count's message. I noticed that he had some light luggage with him, and presumed that he was moving from Beaulieu to Cannes — to the tea−and−tennis Beau Site.

Then, when the train had moved off, I wandered across to a small restaurant opposite the station, and lunched alone, thinking and wondering about the dainty little girl−wife who had so completely fascinated me.

That she was still in love with Bindo was quite clear, yet he, on his part, was distinctly annoyed at being deceived.

At two o'clock, almost punctually, he entered the garage, flung his hat into the car, put on his cap, goggles, and motor−coat, and without a word I drew the "Napier" out into the road.

"To Cannes — quick!" he snapped. "Round to the right into the Rue Magnan then straight along. You saw

Blythe?"

"Yes, I gave him the packet and the message."

"Good! then we haven't any time to lose. Get a move on her whenever you can."

On we flew, as fast as the sharp corners would allow, until presently we slipped down the long hill into Cannes, and passing through the town, pulled up at the Beau Site, where we found Sir Charles awaiting us.

The latter had changed his clothes, and was now in a smart blue serge suit, and was idly smoking a cigar as we swept round to the entrance.

The two men met enthusiastically, some words were exchanged in an undertone and both burst out laughing — a laugh of triumph. Was it at the expense of poor little Gabrielle?

I was left outside to mind the car, and waited for fully an hour and a half. The wind blew bitterly cold at sundown, as it always does on the Riviera in December, and I was glad of my big fur coat.

Whatever was the subject of discussion it was evidently a weighty one. Both men had gone to Blythe's room and were closeted there.

A little after five Blythe came out hailed a cab, and drove away into the town; while the Count, whose appearance was so entirely changed that I scarcely knew him, sauntered slowly down the hall after his friend. Blythe had evidently brought him some fresh clothes from Monte Carlo, and he had used his room as a dressing−room. He looked very much older, and the dark brown suit he now wore was out of shape and ill−fitting. His hair showed grey over the ears, and he wore gold spectacles.

Instantly I saw that the adventurous scheme was still in progress, so I descended and lit the big head−lights. About a dozen idlers were in the vicinity of the car, and in sight of them all, he struggled into his big motor−coat, and entering, gave me orders to drive into the centre of the town. Then, after we had got clear of the hotel, he said:

"Stop at the station; we have to pick up Blythe."

Directed by him, we were soon at the spot where Sir Charles awaited us.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed in a low voice as he took out a big coat, motor−cap, and goggles. "Quick work, wasn't it?"

"Excellent!" declared the Count, and then, bending to me, he added, "Round there to the left. The high road is a little further on — to Marseilles!"

"To Marseilles!" I echoed, surprised that we were going so far as a hundred odd miles, but at that moment I saw the wide highway and turned into it, and with our big search−lights throwing a white radiance on the road, I set the car westward through St. Raphael and Les Arcs. It commenced to rain, with a biting wind, and turned out a very disagreeable night; but, urged on by both men, I went forward at as quick a pace as I dared go on that road, over which I had never before travelled.

At Toulon we pulled up for a drink — for by that time we were all three chilled to the bone, notwithstanding our heavy leather−lined coats, and then we set out again for Marseilles, which we reached just after one o'clock in the morning, drawing up at the Louvre et Paix, which every visitor to the capital of southern France knows so well. Here we had a good hearty meal of cold meat and bock. Prior, however, to entering Marseilles, we had halted, changed our identification−plate, and made certain alterations, in order more thoroughly to disguise the car.

After supper we all got in again, and Bindo directed me up and down several long streets until we were once more in the suburbs. In a quiet, unfrequented road we pulled up, where from beneath the dark shadow of a wall a man silently approached us.

I could not distinguish his face in the darkness, but from his voice I knew it was none other than Henderson, the servant from Kingsworthy.

"Wait here for half an hour. Then run the car back to that church I pointed out to you as we came along. The one at the top of the Cannebière. Wait for us there. We shall be perhaps an hour, perhaps a little more," said the Count, taking a stick from the car, and then the trio disappeared into the darkness.

Fully an hour elapsed, until at length, along in the shadow the three crept cautiously, each bearing a heavy bundle, wrapped in black cloth, which they deposited in the car. The contents of the bundles chinked as they were placed upon the floor. What their booty was I knew not.

Next instant, however, all three were in, the door was closed, and I drew off into the dark open road straight before me — out into the driving rain.

The Count, who was at my side, seemed panting and agitated.

"We've brought it off all right, Ewart," he whispered, bending to me a few minutes later. "In behind there's over twenty thousand pounds' worth of jewellery for us to divide later on. We must get into Valence for breakfast, and thence Henderson will take the stuff away by train into Holland!"

"But how — what have you done?" I asked, puzzled.

"I'll explain in the morning, when we've got rid of it all."

He did explain. Blythe and Henderson both left us at Valence with the booty, while Bindo and myself, in the morning sunshine, went forward at an easy pace along the Lyons road.

"The affair wanted just a little bit of delicate manoeuvring," he explained. "It was an affair of the heart, you see. We knew that the pretty little Gabrielle had married old Lemaire, the well−known jeweller in the Cannebière, in Marseilles, and that she had gone to spend her honeymoon at Nice. Unknown to either, I took a room next theirs at the hotel, and, thanks to the communicating doors they have in foreign hotels, overheard her husband explain that he must go to Genoa on pressing business. He also left her his safe−keys — the duplicates of those held by his manager in Marseilles — with injunctions to keep them locked in her trunk. I allowed him to be absent a couple of days, then, quite unexpectedly, I met her on the Promenade, pretending, of course, that I was entirely unaware of her marriage with old Lemaire. In case of accident, however, it was necessary that the little woman should be compromised with somebody, and as you were so discreet, I sent you both yesterday morning to idle along the whole length of the promenade. In the meantime, I nipped back to the hotel, entered Gabrielle's room, obtained the two safe−keys, and took impressions of them in wax. These I put into a tin matchbox and sent them by you to Blythe at the station. Blythe, with his usual foresight, had already engaged a locksmith in Cannes, telling him a little fairy−story of how he had lost his safe−keys, and how his manager in London, who had duplicates, had sent him out impressions. The keys were made to time; Blythe took a cab from the hotel, and got them, rejoined us at Cannes station, and then we went on to Marseilles. There the affair became easier, but more risky. Henderson had already been reconnoitring the shop for a week, and had conceived a clever plan by which we got in from the rear quickly opened the two big safes with the copied keys, and cleared out all old Lemaire's best stock. I'm rather sorry to have treated little Gabrielle so — but, after all, it really doesn't hurt her, for old Lemaire is very rich, and he won't miss twenty thousand pounds as much as we're in need of it. The loving husband is still in Genoa, and poor little Gabrielle is no doubt thinking herself a fool to have so prematurely shown her wedding−ring."