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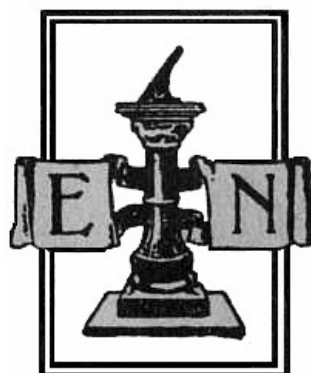
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THE COUNT'S CHAUFFEUR

[Pg 1]

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CHAPTER I

A MOVE ON THE "FORTY"

In Paris, in Rome, in Florence, in Berlin, in Vienna—in fact, over half the face of Europe, from the Pyrenees to the Russian frontier—I am now known as "The Count's Chauffeur."

An Englishman, as my name George Ewart denotes, I am of cosmopolitan birth and education, my early youth having been spent on the Continent, where my father was agent for a London firm.

When I was fourteen, my father, having prospered, came to London, and established himself as an agent in Wood Street, City, representing a great firm of silk manufacturers in Lyons.

At twenty I tried City life, but an office with a high stool, a dusty ledger, and sandwich lunches, had no attraction for me. I had always had a turn for mechanics, but was never allowed to adopt engineering as a profession, my father's one idea being that I should follow in his footsteps—a delusive hope entertained by many a fond parent.

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Six months of office life sufficed me. One day I went home to Teddington and refused to return again to Wood Street. This resulted in an open quarrel between my father and myself, with the result that a week later I was on my way to Canada. In a year I was back again, and, after some months of semi-starvation in London, I managed to obtain a job in a motor factory. I was then entirely in my element. During two years I learned the mechanism of the various petrol-driven cars, until I became classed as an expert driver and engineer.

At the place I was employed there was manufactured one of the best and most expensive makes of English car, and, being at length placed on the testing staff, it was my duty to take out each new chassis for its trial-run before being delivered to a customer.

Upon my certificate each chassis was declared in perfect running order, and was then handed over to the body-makers indicated by the purchaser.

Being an expert driver, my firm sent me to drive in the Tourist Trophy races in the Isle of Man, and I likewise did the Ardennes Circuit and came in fourth in the Brescia race for the Florio Cup, my successes, of course, adding glory and advertisement to the car I drove.

Racing, however, aroused within me, as it does in every motorist, an ardent desire to travel long distances. The testing of those chassis in Regent's Park, and an occasional run with some wealthy customer out on the Great North Road or on the Bath or Brighton roads, became too quiet a life for me. I was now seized by a desire to tour and see Europe. True, in my capacity of tester, I met all classes of men. In the seat beside me have sat Cabinet Ministers, Dukes, Indian Rajahs, Members of Parliament, and merchant princes, customers or prospective purchasers, all of whom chatted with me, mostly displaying their ignorance of the first principles of mechanics. It was all pleasant enough—a merry life and good pay. Yet I hated London, and the height of my ambition was a good car to drive abroad.

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After some months of waiting, the opportunity came, and I seized it.

By appointment, at the Royal Automobile Club one grey December morning, I met Count Bindo di Ferraris, a young Italian aristocrat, whose aspect, however, was the reverse of that of a Southerner. About thirty, he was tall, lithe, and well dressed in a dark-brown lounge suit. His complexion, his chestnut hair, his erect, rather soldierly bearing, his clean-shaven face, and his open countenance gave him every appearance of an English gentleman. Indeed, I at first took him for an Englishman, for he spoke English so perfectly.

When he had examined my testimonials and made a number of inquiries, he asked—

"You speak French?"

"Yes," was my reply; "a little Italian, and a little German."

"Italian!" he exclaimed in surprise. "Excellent!"

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Then, while we sat alone, with no one within hearing, he told me the terms upon which he was willing to engage me to drive on the Continent, and added—

"Your salary will be doubled—providing I find you entirely loyal to me. That is to say, you must know how to keep your mouth closed—understand?"

And he regarded me rather curiously, I thought.

"No," I answered; "I don't quite understand."

"Well, well, there are matters—private family matters—of which you will probably become cognisant. Truth to tell, I want help—the help of a good, careful driver who isn't afraid, and who is always discreet. I may as well tell you that before I wrote to you I made certain secret inquiries regarding you, and I feel confident that you can serve me very much to our mutual advantage."

This puzzled me, and my curiosity was further aroused when he added—

"To be plain, there is a certain young lady in very high society in the case. I need not tell you more, need I? You will be discreet, eh?"

I smiled and promised. What did it all mean? I wondered. My employer was mysterious; but in due course I should, as he prophesied, obtain knowledge of this secret—a secret love affair, no doubt.

The Count's private affairs did not, after all, concern me. My duty was to drive on the Continent, and for what he was to pay me I was to serve him loyally, and see that his tyre and petrol bills were not too exorbitant.

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He went to the writing-table and wrote out a short agreement which he copied, and we both signed it—a rather curiously worded agreement by which I was to serve him for three years, and during that time our interests were "to be mutual." That last phrase caused me to wonder, but I scribbled my name and refrained from comment, for the payment was already double that which I was receiving from the firm.

"My car is outside," he remarked, as he folded his copy of the agreement and placed it in his pocket. "Did you notice it?"

I had not, so we went out into Piccadilly together, and there, standing at the kerb, I saw a car that caused my heart to bound with delight—a magnificent six-cylinder forty horse-power "Napier," of the very latest model. The car was open, with side entrance, a dark green body with coronet and cipher on the panels, upholstered in red, with glass removable screen to the splashboard—a splendid, workmanlike car just suitable for long tours and fast runs. Of all the cars and of all the makes, that was the only one which it was my ambition to drive.

I walked around it in admiration, and saw that every accessory was the best and very latest that money could buy—even to the newly invented gas-generator which had only a few weeks ago been placed upon the market. I lifted the long bonnet, looked around the engine, and saw those six cylinders in a row—the latest invention of a celebrated inventor.

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"Splendid!" I ejaculated. "There's nothing yet to beat this car. By Jove! we can get a move on a good road!"

"Yes," smiled the Count. "My man Mario could make her travel, but he's a fool, and has left me in a fit of temper. He was an Italian, and we Italians are, alas! hot-headed," and he laughed again. "Would you like to try her?"

I assented with delight, and, while he returned inside the Club to get his fur coat, I started the engine and got in at the steering-wheel. A few moments later he seated himself beside me, and we glided down Piccadilly on our way to Regent's Park—the ground where, day after day, it had been my habit to go testing. The car ran perfectly, the engines sounding a splendid rhythm through the Regent Street traffic into broad Portland Place, and on into the Park, where I was afforded some scope to see what she could do. The Count declared that he was in no hurry, therefore we went up through Hampstead to Highgate Station, and then on the Great North Road, through East End, Whetstone, Barnet, and Hatfield, to Hitchin—thirty-five miles of road which was as well known to me as the Strand.

The morning was dry and cold, the roads in excellent condition bar a few patches of new metal between Codicote and Chapelfoot, and the sharp east wind compelled us to goggle. Fortunately, I had on my leather-lined frieze coat, and was therefore fully equipped. The North Road between London and Hitchin is really of little use for trying the speed of a car, for there are so many corners, it is mostly narrow, and it abounds in police-traps. That twenty miles of flat, straight road, with perfect surface, from Lincoln to New Holland, opposite Hull, is one of the best places in England to see what a car is worth.

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Nevertheless, the run to Hitchin satisfied me perfectly that the car was not a "roundabout," as so many are, but a car well "within the meaning of the Act."

"And what is your opinion of her, Ewart?" asked the Count, as we sat down to cold beef and pickles in the long, old-fashioned upstairs room of the Sun Inn at Hitchin.

"Couldn't be better," I declared. "The brakes would do with re-lining, but that's about all. When do we start for the Continent?"

"The day after to-morrow. I'm staying just now at the Cecil. We'll run the car down to Folkestone, ship her across, and then go by Paris and Aix to Monte Carlo first; afterwards we'll decide upon our itinerary. Ever been to Monty?"

I replied in the negative. The prospect of going on the Riviera sounded delightful.

After our late luncheon we ran back from Hitchin to London, but, not arriving before lighting-up

time, we had to turn on the head-lights beyond Barnet. We drove straight to the fine garage on the Embankment beneath the Cecil, and after I had put things square and received orders for ten o'clock next day, I was preparing to go to my lodgings in Bloomsbury to look through my kit in preparation for the journey when my employer suddenly exclaimed—

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"Come up to the smoking-room a moment. I want to write a letter for you to take to Boodle's in St. James's Street, for me, if you will."

I followed him upstairs to the great blue-tiled smoking-room overlooking the Embankment, and as we entered, two well-dressed men—Englishmen, of aristocratic bearing—rose from a table and shook him warmly by the hand.

I noticed their quick, apprehensive look as they glanced at me as though in inquiry, but my employer exclaimed—

"This is my new chauffeur, Ewart, an expert. Ewart, these are my friends—Sir Charles Blythe," indicating the elder man, "and Mr. Henderson. These gentlemen will perhaps be with us sometimes, so you had better know them."

The pair looked me up and down and smiled pleasantly. Sir Charles was narrow-faced, about fifty, with a dark beard turning grey; his companion was under thirty, a fair-haired, rather foppishly dressed young fellow, in a fashionable suit and a light fancy vest.

Then, as the Count went to the table to write, Sir Charles inquired where we had been, and whether I had driven much on the Continent.

When the Count handed me the letter, I saw that he exchanged a meaning glance with Sir Charles, but what it was intended to convey I could not guess. I only know that, for a few seconds, I felt some vague distrust of my new friends, and yet they treated me more as an equal than as a mere chauffeur.

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The Count's friends were certainly a merry, easy-going pair, yet somehow I instinctively held them in suspicion. Whether it was on account of the covert glance which Sir Charles shot across at my employer, or whether there was something unusual about their manner, I cannot tell. I am only aware that when I left the hotel I went on my way in wonder.

Next day, at ten punctually, I ran the car from the Strand into the courtyard of the hotel and pulled up at the restaurant entrance, so as to be out of the way of the continuous cab traffic. The Count, however, did not make his appearance until nearly half an hour later, and when he did arrive he superintended the despatch by cab of a quantity of luggage which he told me he was sending forward by *grande vitesse* to Monte Carlo.

After the four-wheeler had moved off, the hall-porter helped him on with his big fur coat, and he, getting up beside me, told me to drive to Piccadilly.

As we were crossing Trafalgar Square into Pall Mall, he turned to me, saying—

"Remember, Ewart, your promise yesterday. If my actions—I mean, if you think I am a little peculiar sometimes, don't trouble your head about it. You are paid to drive—and paid well, I think. My affairs don't concern you, do they?"

"Not in the least," I answered, nevertheless puzzled.

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He descended at a tobacconist's in Bond Street, and bought a couple of boxes of cigars, and then made several calls at shops, also visiting two jewellers to obtain, he remarked, a silver photograph frame of a certain size.

At Gilling's—the third shop he tried—he remained inside some little time—quite twenty minutes, I should think. As you know, it is in the narrowest part of Bond Street, and the traffic was congested owing to the road at the Piccadilly end being partially up.

As I sat in my place, staring idly before me, and reflecting that I should be so soon travelling due South over the broad, well-kept French roads, and out of the gloom and dreariness of the English winter, I suddenly became conscious of a familiar face in the crowd of hurrying foot-passengers.

I glanced up quickly as a man bustled past. Was I mistaken? I probably had been; but the thin, keen, bearded countenance was very much like that of Sir Charles Blythe. But no. When I looked back after him I saw that his figure was much more bent and his appearance was not half so smart and well groomed as the Count's friend.

At one moment I felt absolutely positive that the man had really been watching me, and was now endeavouring to escape recognition, yet at the next I saw the absurdity of such a thought. Sir Charles's face had, I suppose, been impressed upon my memory on the previous evening, and the passer-by merely bore some slight resemblance.

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And so I dismissed it from my mind.

A few moments later a man in a frock-coat, probably the jeweller's manager, opened the door, looked up and down the street for a few moments, shot an inquisitive glance at me, and then disappeared within.

I found that the clock on the splashboard required winding, and was in the act of doing this when

my eyes fell upon a second person who was equally a mystery. This time I felt convinced that I was not mistaken. The fair-moustached young man Henderson went by, but without recognising me.

Did either of the pair recognise the car? If so, what object had they in not acknowledging me?

My suspicions were again aroused. I did not like either of the two men. Were they following my master with some evil intent? In London, and especially in certain cosmopolitan circles, one cannot be too cautious regarding one's acquaintances. They had been slightly too over-dressed and too familiar with the Count to suit me, and I had resolved that if I had ever to drive either of them I would land them in some out-of-the-world hole with a pretended breakdown. The non-motorist is always at the mercy of the chauffeur, and the so-called "breakdowns" are frequently due to the vengeance of the driver, who gets his throttle stuck, or some trouble which sounds equally serious, but which is remedied in one, two, three, or four hours, according to how long the chauffeur decides to detain his victim by the roadside.

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I wondered, as I sat ruminating, whether these two men were really "crooks"; and so deep-rooted were my suspicions that I decided, when the Count returned, to drop him a hint that we were being watched.

I am not nervous by any means, and, moreover, I always carry for my own protection a handy little revolver. Yet I admit that at that moment I felt a decidedly uncomfortable feeling creeping over me.

Those men meant mischief. I had detected it in their eyes on the previous night. By some kind of mysterious intuition I became aware that we were in peril.

Almost at that moment the shop door was opened by the manager, and the Count, emerging, crossed to me and said—

"Go into the shop, Ewart, and wait there till I return. I'm just going round to get some money," and seeing a boy passing, he called him, saying, "Just mind this car for ten minutes, my boy, and I'll give you half a crown. Never mind the police; if they say anything, tell them I'll be back in ten minutes."

The lad, eager to earn a trifle, at once consented, and descending, I entered the shop, the door of which was being still held open for me, while the Count hailed a hansom and drove away.

The shop is one of the finest in Bond Street, as you know. At that moment there were, however, no other customers. The manager politely invited me to be seated, saying—

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"His lordship will only be a short time," and then, standing with his hands behind his back, he commenced to chat with me.

"That's a very fine car of yours," he said. "You ought to be able to travel pretty fast, eh?"

"Well, we do, as a matter of fact," I replied.

Then he went to the door, and looking over the panes of frosted glass, asked what horse-power it was, and a number of other questions with which non-motorists always plague the chauffeur.

Then, returning to me, he remarked what a very nice gentleman his lordship was, adding that he had been a customer on several occasions.

"Have you been long in his service?" he inquired.

"Oh yes," I replied, determined not to be thought a new hand. "Quite a long time. As you say, he is a very charming man."

"He's very wealthy, according to report. I read something about him in the papers the other day—a gift of some thousands to the Hospital Fund."

This rather surprised me. I never remembered having seen the name of Count Bindo di Ferraris in the papers.

Presently I got up, and wandering about the shop, inspected some of the beautiful jewels in the fine show-cases, many of them ornaments of enormous value. The manager, a pleasant, elderly man, took me round and showed me some of the most beautiful jewellery I had ever seen. Then, excusing himself, he retired to the office beyond the shop, and left me to chat with one of the assistants.

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I looked at the clock, and saw that nearly half an hour had elapsed since the Count had left. A constable had looked in and inquired about the car, but I had assured him that in a few minutes we should be off, and begged, as a favour, that it might be allowed to remain until my master's return.

Another quarter of an hour elapsed, when the door opened, and there entered two respectably dressed men in dark overcoats, one wearing a soft brown felt hat and the other a "bowler."

They asked to see the manager, and the assistant who had been chatting to me conducted them through the shop to the office beyond. Both men were of middle age and well set up, and as they entered, I saw that a third man, much younger, was with them. He, however, did not come in, but stood in the doorway, idly glancing up and down Bond Street.

Within the office I distinctly heard the manager utter an exclamation of surprise, and then one of the men, in a deep, low voice, seemed to enter into a long explanation.

The elder of the two strangers walked along the shop to the door, and going outside, spoke some words to the man who had accompanied them. On re-entering, he passed me, giving me a sharp glance, and then disappeared again into the office, where, for five minutes or so, he remained closeted with the manager.

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Presently the last-named came out, and as he approached me I noticed an entire change in his manner. He was pale, almost to the lips.

"Will you step into my office for one moment?" he asked. "There's—well, a little matter upon which I want to speak to you."

This surprised me. What could he mean?

Nevertheless, I consented, and in a few moments found myself in a large, well-lit office with the manager and the two strangers.

The man in the brown felt hat was the first to speak.

"We want to ask you a question or two," he said. "Do you recognise this?" and he produced a small square photograph of a man upon whose coat was a white ticket bearing a bold number. I started when my eyes fell upon it.

"My master!" I ejaculated.

The portrait was a police photograph! The men were detectives!

The inspector, for such he was, turned to the jeweller's manager, and regarded him with a significant look.

"It's a good job we've arrested him with the stuff on him," he remarked, "otherwise you'd never have seen the colour of it again. He's worked the same dodge in Rome and Berlin, and both times got clear away. I suppose he became a small customer, in order to inspire confidence—eh?"

"Well, he came in this morning, saying that he wished to give his wife a tiara for the anniversary of her wedding, and asked that he might have two on approval, as he was undecided which to choose, and wished her to pick for herself. He left his car and chauffeur here till his return, and took away two worth five thousand pounds each. I, of course, had not the slightest suspicion. Lord Ixwell—the name by which we know him—is reputed everywhere to be one of the richest peers in the kingdom."

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"Yes. But, you see, Detective-Sergeant Rodwell here, chanced to see him come out of the shop, and, recognising him as the jewel-thief we've wanted for months past, followed his cab down to Charing Cross Station, and there arrested him and took him to Bow Street."

I stood utterly dumbfounded at this sudden ending of what I had believed would be an ideal engagement.

"What's your name?" inquired the inspector.

"George Ewart," was my answer. "I only entered the Count's service yesterday."

"And yet you told me you had been his chauffeur for a long time!" exclaimed the jeweller's manager.

"Well," said the elder of the detectives, "we shall arrest you, at any rate. You must come round to Bow Street, and I warn you that any statement you may make will be taken down and used as evidence against you."

"Arrest me!" I cried. "Why, I haven't done anything! I'm perfectly innocent. I had no idea that —"

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"Well, you have more than an idea now, haven't you?" laughed the detective. "But come along; we have no time to lose," and he asked the manager to order a four-wheeled cab.

I remonstrated in indignation, but to no avail.

"What about the car?" I asked anxiously, as we went outside together and stepped into the cab, the third police-officer, who had been on guard outside, holding open the door, while the constable who had been worrying me about the car stood looking on.

"Diplock, you can drive a motor-car," exclaimed the inspector, turning to the detective at the cab door. "Just bring that round to Bow Street as quick as you can."

The constable took in the situation at a glance. He saw that I had been arrested, and asked the detectives if they needed any assistance. But the reply was negative, and with the inspector at my side and the sergeant opposite, we moved off towards Piccadilly, the jeweller's manager having been requested to attend at Bow Street Police Station in an hour, in order to identify the stolen property. By that time the charge would be made out, and we should, the inspector said, be up before the magistrate for a remand before the Court rose.

As we drove along Piccadilly, my heart fell within me. All my dreams of those splendid, well-kept

roads in the sunny South, of touring to all the gayest places on the Continent, and seeing all that was to be seen, had been shattered at a single blow. And what a blow! [Pg 18]

I had awakened to find myself under arrest as the accomplice of one of the most expert jewel-thieves in Europe!

My companions were not communicative. Why should they have been?

Suddenly I became aware of the fact that we had driven a considerable distance. In my agitated state of mind I had taken no notice of our route, and my captors had, it seemed, endeavoured to take my attention off the direction we had taken.

Collecting my scattered senses, however, I recollected that we had crossed one of the bridges over the Thames, and looking out of the window, I found that we were in a long, open road of private houses, each with a short strip of railed-off garden in front—a South London thoroughfare evidently.

“This isn’t the way to Bow Street!” I exclaimed in wonder.

“Well, not exactly the straight way,” grinned the inspector. “A roundabout route, let’s call it.”

I was puzzled. The more so when I recognised a few minutes later that we had come down the Camberwell New Road, and were passing Camberwell Green.

We continued up Denmark Hill until, at the corner where Champion Hill branches off, the inspector called to the cabman to stop, and we all descended, the detective-sergeant paying the fare.

Where were they taking me? I wondered. I asked, but they only laughed, and would vouchsafe no reply. [Pg 19]

Together we walked up the quiet, semi-rural Champion Hill, until we reached Green Lane, when at the sharp right angle of the road, as we turned, I saw before me an object which caused me to hold my breath in utter amazement.

The car was standing there, right before me in the lonely suburban road, and in it, seated at the wheel, a man whom I next second recognised as the Count himself! He was evidently awaiting me.

He was wearing a different motor-coat, the car bore a different number, and as I approached I noticed that the coronet and cipher had been obliterated by a dab of paint!

“Come on, Ewart!” cried the Count, jumping down to allow me to take his place at the steering.

I turned to my captors in wonder.

“Yes, away you go, Ewart,” the inspector said, “and good luck to you!”

Without another second’s delay, I sprang upon the car, and while the Count, as he jumped up at my side, shouted good-bye to my captors, I started away towards Lordship Lane and the open country of Surrey.

“Where shall we go?” I inquired breathlessly, utterly amazed at our extraordinary escape.

“Straight on through Sydenham, and then I’ll tell you. The sooner we’re out of this, the better. We’ll run along to Winchester, where I have a little house at Kingsworthy, just outside the city, and where we can lie low comfortably for a bit.” [Pg 20]

“But shan’t we be followed by those men?” I asked apprehensively.

“Followed—by them? Oh dear no!” he laughed. “Of course, you don’t understand, Ewart. They all three belong to us. We’ve played a smartish game upon the jeweller, haven’t we? They had to frighten you, of course, because it added a real good touch of truth to the scheme. We ought to be able to slip away across the Channel in a week’s time, at latest. They’ll leave to-night—in search of me!” and he laughed lightly to himself.

“Then they were not detectives?” I exclaimed, utterly staggered by the marvellous ingenuity of the robbery.

“No more than you are, Ewart,” was his reply. “But don’t bother your head about them now. All you’ve got to look after is your driving. Let’s get across to Winchester as quickly as possible. Just here!—sharp to the right and the first to the left takes us into the Guildford road. Then we can move.”

CHAPTER II

A SENTIMENTAL SWINDLE

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.

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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.

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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 Hôtel 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 Métropole, 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.

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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.

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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 prearranged 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.

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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 unsuspecting. 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.

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Having put the car into the garage, I walked round to the hotel, transformed myself from a leather-coated chauffeur into a Monte Carlo lounge, 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.

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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. [Pg 29]

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 Hôtel 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 asphalt 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. [Pg 30]

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 Fêtes 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 Côte d'Azur each season.

Just as we were opposite the white façade of the Hôtel 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. [Pg 31]

My companion 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 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. [Pg 32]

"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 *aperitif* at the gay Café de l'Opéra, 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. [Pg 33]

"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 old 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." [Pg 34]

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 di 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. I 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.

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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 twelve-fifteen 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.

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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 forty "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.

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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

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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 farther 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. 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.

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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.

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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 manœuvring,” 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.

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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."

CHAPTER III

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THE STORY OF A SECRET

This story of a secret is not without its humorous side.

Before entering Paris, on our quick run up from Marseilles after the affair of the jeweller's shop, we had stopped at Melun, beyond Fontainebleau. There, a well-known carriage-builder had been ordered to repaint the car pale blue, with a dead white band. Upon the panels, my employer, the impudent Bindo, had ordered a count's coronet, with the cipher "G. B." beneath, all to be done in the best style and regardless of expense. Then, that same evening, we took the express to the Gare de Lyon, and put up, as before, at the Ritz.

For three weeks, without the car, we had a pleasant time. Usually Count Bindo di Ferraris spent his time with his gay friends, lounging in the evening at Maxim's, or giving costly suppers at the Americain. One lady with whom I often saw him walking in the streets, or sitting in cafés, was, I discovered, known as "Valentine of the Beautiful Eyes," for I recognised her one night on the stage of a music-hall in the Boulevard de Clichy, where she was evidently a great favourite. She was young—not more than twenty, I think—with wonderful big coal-black eyes, a wealth of dark hair worn with a *bandeau*, and a face that was perfectly charming.

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She seemed known to Blythe, too, for one evening I saw her sitting with him in the Brasserie Universelle, in the Avenue de l'Opéra—that place where one dines so well and cheaply. She was laughing, and had a *demi-blonde* raised to her lips. So essentially a Parisienne, she was also something of a mystery, for though she often frequented cafés, and went to the Folies Bergères and Olympia, sang at the Marigny, and mixed with a Bohemian crowd of champagne-drinkers, she seemed nevertheless a most decorous little lady. In fact, though I had not spoken to her, she had won my admiration. She was very beautiful, and I—well, I was only a man, and human.

One bright morning, when the car came to Paris, I called for her, at Bindo's orders, at her flat in the Avenue Kléber, where she lived, it appeared, with a prim, sharp-nosed old aunt, of angular appearance, peculiarly French. She soon appeared, dressed in the very latest motor-clothes, with her veil properly fixed, in a manner which showed me instantly that she was a motorist. Besides, she would not enter the car, but got up beside me, wrapped a rug about her skirts in a business-like manner, and gave me the order to move.

"Where to, mademoiselle?" I asked.

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"Did not the Count give you instructions?" she asked in her pretty broken English, turning her great dark eyes upon me in surprise. "Why, to Brussels, of course."

"To Brussels!" I ejaculated, for I thought the run was to be only about Paris—to meet Bindo, perhaps.

"Yes. Are you surprised?" she laughed. "It is not far—two hundred kilometres, or so. Surely that is nothing for you?"

"Not at all. Only the Count is at the Ritz. Shall we not call there first?"

"The Count left for Belgium by the seven-fifty train this morning," was her reply. "He has taken our baggage with his, and you will take me by road alone."

I was, of course, nothing loth to spend a few hours with such a charming companion as La Valentine; therefore in the Avenue des Champs Elysées I pulled up, and consulting my road-book, decided to go by way of Arras, Douai, St. Amand, and Ath. Quickly we ran out beyond the fortifications; while, driving in silence, I wondered what this latest manœuvre was to be. This sudden flight from Paris was more than mysterious. It caused me considerable apprehension, for when I had seen the Count in his room at midnight he had made no mention of his intention to leave so early.

At last, out upon the straight highway that ran between lines of high bare poplars, I put on speed, and quickly the cloud of white dust rose behind us. The northerly wind that grey day was biting, and threatened snow; therefore my pretty companion very soon began to feel the cold. I saw her turning up the collar of her cloth motor-coat, and guessed that she had no leather beneath. To do a day's journey in comfort in such weather one must be wind-proof.

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"You are cold, mademoiselle," I remarked. "Will you not put on my leather jacket? You'll feel the benefit of it, even though it may not appear very smart." And I pulled up.

With a light merry laugh she consented, and I got out the garment in question, helped her into it over her coat, and though a trifle tight across the chest, she at once declared that it was a most excellent idea. She was, indeed, a merry child of Paris, and allowed me to button the coat, smiling the while at my masculine clumsiness.

Then we continued on our way, and a few moments later were going for all we were worth over the dry, well-kept, level road eastward, towards the Belgian frontier. She laughed and chatted as the hours went by. She had been in London last spring, she told me, and had stayed at the Savoy. The English were so droll, and lacked *cachet*, though the hotel was smart—especially at supper.

"We pass Douai," she remarked presently, after we had run rapidly through many villages and small towns. "I must call for a telegram." And then, somehow, she settled down into a thoughtful silence.

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At Arras I pulled up, and got her a glass of hot milk. Then on again, for she declared that she was not hungry, and preferred getting to Brussels than to linger on the road. On the broad highway to Douai we went at the greatest speed that I could get out of the fine six-cylinder, the engines beating beautiful time, and the car running as smoothly as a watch. The clouds of whirling dust became very bad, however, and I was compelled to goggle, while the talc-fronted veil adequately protected my sweet-faced travelling-companion.

At Douai she descended and entered the post-office herself, returning with a telegram and a letter. The latter she handed to me, and I found it was addressed in my name, and had been sent to the Poste-restante.

Tearing it open in surprise, I read the hastily pencilled lines it contained—instructions in the Count's handwriting which were extremely puzzling, not to say disconcerting. The words I read were:—

"After crossing the frontier you will assume the name of Count de Bourbriac, and Valentine will pass as the Countess. A suitable suite of rooms has been taken for you at the Grand Hotel, Brussels, where you will find your luggage on your arrival. Mademoiselle will supply you with funds. I shall be in Brussels, but shall not approach you.—B. DI F."

The pretty Valentine who was to pose as my wife crushed the blue telegram into her coat-pocket, mounted into her seat, wrapped her rug around her, and ordered me to proceed.

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I glanced at her, but she was to all appearances quite unconscious of the extraordinary contents of the Count's letter.

We had run fully twenty miles in silence when at last, on ascending a steep hill, I turned to her and said—

"The Count has sent me some very extraordinary instructions, mademoiselle. I am, after passing the frontier, to become Count de Bourbriac, and you are to pass as the Countess!"

"Well?" she asked, arching her well-marked eyebrows. "Is that so very difficult, m'sieur? Are you disinclined to allow me to pass as your wife?"

"Not at all," I replied, smiling. "Only—well—it is somewhat—er—unconventional, is it not?"

"Rather an amusing adventure than otherwise," she laughed. "I shall call you *mon cher* Gaston, and you—well, you will call me your *petite* Liane—Liane de Bourbriac will sound well, will it not?"

"Yes. But why this masquerade?" I inquired. "I confess, mademoiselle, I don't understand it at all."

"Dear Bindo does. Ask him." Then, after a brief pause, she added, "This is really a rather novel experience," and she laughed gleefully, as though thoroughly enjoying the adventure.

Without slackening speed I drove on through the short winter afternoon. The faint yellow sunset slowly disappeared behind us, and darkness crept on. With the fading day the cold became intense, and when I stopped to light the head-lamps I got out my cashmere muffler and wrapped it around her throat.

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At last we reached the small frontier village, where we pulled up before the Belgian Custom House, paid the deposit upon the car, and obtained the leaden seal. Then, after a liqueur-glass of cognac each at a little café in the vicinity, we set out again upon that long wide road that leads through Ath to Brussels.

A puncture at a place called Leuze caused us a little delay, but the *pseudo* Countess descended and assisted me, even helping me to blow up the new tube, declaring that the exercise would warm her.

For what reason the pretty Valentine was to pass as my wife was, to me, entirely mysterious. That Bindo was engaged in some fresh scheme of fraud was certain, but what it was I racked my brains in vain to discover.

Near Enghien we had several other tyre troubles, for the road had been newly metalled for miles. As every motorist knows, misfortunes never come singly, and in consequence it was already seven o'clock next morning before we entered Brussels by the Porte de Hal, and ran along the fine Boulevard d'Anspach, to the Grand Hotel.

The gilt-laced hall-porter, who was evidently awaiting us, rushed out cap in hand, and I, quickly assuming my *rôle* as Count, helped out the "Countess," and gave the car over to one of the employés of the hotel garage.

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By the manager we were ushered into a fine suite of six rooms on the first floor, overlooking the Boulevard, and treated with all the deference due to persons of highest standing.

At that moment Valentine showed her cleverness by remarking that she had not brought Elise, her maid, as she was to follow by train, and that I would employ the services of one of the hotel valets for the time being. Indeed, so cleverly did she assume the part that she might really have been one of the ancient nobility of France.

I spoke in English. On the Continent just now it is considered rather smart to talk English. One often hears two German or Italian women speaking atrocious English together, in order to air their superior knowledge before strangers. Therefore that I spoke English was not remarked by the manager, who explained that our courier had given him all instructions, and had brought the baggage in advance. The courier was, I could only suppose, the audacious Bindo himself.

That day passed quite merrily. We lunched together, took a drive in the pretty Bois de la Cambre, and after dining, went to the Monnaie to see *Madame Butterfly*. On our return to the hotel I found a note from Bindo, and saying good-night to Valentine I went forth again to keep the appointment he had made in a café in the quiet Chaussée de Charleroi, on the opposite side of the city. [Pg 51]

When I entered the little place I found the Count seated at a table with Blythe and Henderson. The two latter were dressed shabbily, while the Count himself was in dark-grey, with a soft felt hat—the perfect counterfeit of the foreign courier.

With enthusiasm I was welcomed into the corner.

“Well?” asked Bindo, with a laugh, “and how do you like your new wife, Ewart?” and the others smiled.

“Charming,” I replied. “But I don’t see exactly where the joke comes in.”

“I don’t suppose you do, just yet.”

“It’s a risky proceeding, isn’t it?” I queried.

“Risky! What risk is there in gulling hotel people?” he asked. “If you don’t intend to pay the bill it would be quite another matter.”

“But why is the lady to pass as my wife? Why am I the Count de Bourbriac? Why, indeed, are we here at all?”

“That’s our business, my dear Ewart. Leave matters to us. All you’ve got to do is just to play your part well. Appear to be very devoted to La Comtesse, and it’ll be several hundreds into your pocket—perhaps a level thou’—who knows?”

“A thou’ each—quite,” declared Blythe, a cool, audacious international swindler of the most refined and cunning type.

“But what risk is there?” I inquired, for my companions seemed to be angling after big fish this time, whoever they were. [Pg 52]

“None, as far as you are concerned. Be advised by Valentine. She’s as clever a girl as there is in all Europe. She has her eyes and ears open all the time. A lover will come on the scene before long, and you must be jealous—devilish jealous—you understand?”

“A lover? Who? I don’t understand.”

“You’ll see, soon enough. Go back to the hotel—or stay with us to-night, if you prefer it. Only don’t worry yourself over risks. We never take any. Only fools do that. Whatever we do is always a dead certainty before we embark upon the job.”

“Then I’m to understand that some fellow is making love to Valentine—eh?”

“Exactly. To-morrow night you are both invited to a ball at the Belle Vue, in aid of the Hospital St. Jean. You will go, and there the lover will appear. You will withdraw, and allow the little flirtation to proceed. Valentine herself will give you further instructions as the occasion warrants.”

“I confess I don’t half like it. I’m working too much in the dark,” I protested.

“That’s just what we intend. If you knew too much you might betray yourself, for the people we’ve got to deal with have eyes in the backs of their heads,” declared Bindo.

It was five o’clock next morning before I returned to the Grand, but during the hours we smoked together, at various obscure cafés, the trio told me nothing further, though they chaffed me regarding the beauty of the girl who had consented to act the part of my wife, and who, I could only suppose, “stood in” with us. [Pg 53]

At noon, surely enough, came a special invitation to the “Comte et Comtesse de Bourbriac” for the great ball that evening at the Hôtel Belle Vue, and at ten o’clock that night Valentine entered our private salon splendidly dressed in a low-cut gown of smoke-grey chiffon covered with sequins. Her hair had been dressed by a maid of the first order, and as she stood pulling on her long gloves she looked superb.

"How do you find me, my dear M'sieur Ewart? Do I look like a comtesse?" she asked, laughing.

"You look perfectly charming, mademoiselle."

"Liane, if you please," she said reprovingly, holding up her slim forefinger. "Liane, Comtesse de Bourbriac, Château de Bourbriac, Côtes du Nord!" and her pretty lips parted, showing her even, pearly teeth.

When, half an hour later, we entered the ballroom we found all smart Brussels assembled around a royal prince and his wife who had given their patronage in the cause of charity. The affair was, I saw at a glance, a distinctly society function, for many men from the Ministries were present, and several of the Ambassadors in uniform, together with their staffs, who, wearing their crosses and ribbons, made a brave show, as they do in every ballroom.

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We had not been there ten minutes before a tall, good-looking young man in a German cavalry uniform strode up in recognition, and bowing low over Valentine's outstretched hand, said in French—

"My dear Countess! How very delighted we are to have you here with us to-night! You will spare me a dance, will you not? May I be introduced to the Count?"

"My husband—Captain von Stolberg, of the German Embassy."

And we shook hands. Was this fellow the lover? I wondered.

"I met the Countess at Vichy last autumn," explained the Captain in very good English. "She spoke very often of you. You were away in Scotland, shooting the grouse," he said.

"Yes—yes," I replied for want of something better to say.

We both chatted with the young attaché for a few minutes, and then, as a waltz struck up, he begged a dance of my "wife," and they both whirled down the room. Valentine was a splendid dancer, and as I watched them I wondered what could be the nature of the plot in progress.

I did not come across my pretty fellow-traveller for half an hour, and then I found that the Captain had half filled her programme. Therefore I "lay low," danced once or twice with uninteresting Belgian matrons, and spent the remainder of the night in the *fumoir*, until I found my "wife" ready to return to the Grand.

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When we were back in the salon at the hotel she asked—

"How do you like the Captain, M'sieur Ewart? Is he not—what you call in English—a duck?"

"An over-dressed, swaggering young idiot, I call him," was my prompt reply.

"And there you are right—quite right, my dear M'sieur Ewart. But you see we all have an eye to business in this affair. He will call to-morrow, because he is extremely fond of me. Oh! if you had heard all his pretty love phrases! I suppose he has learnt them out of a book. They couldn't be his own. Germans are not romantic—how can they be? But he—ah! he is Adonis in the flesh—with corsets!" And we laughed merrily together.

"He thinks you are fond of him—eh?"

"Why, of course. He made violent love to me at Vichy. But he was not attaché then."

"And how am I to treat him when he calls to-morrow?"

"As your bosom friend. Give him confidence—the most perfect confidence. Don't play the jealous husband yet. That will come afterwards. *Bon soir, m'sieur*," and when I had bowed over her soft little hand, she turned and swept out of the room with a loud *frou-frou* of her silken train.

That night I sat before the fire smoking for a long time. My companions were evidently playing some deep game upon this young German, a game in which neither trouble nor expense was being spared—a game in which the prize was a level thousand pounds apiece all round. I quite appreciated that I had now become an adventurer, but I had done so out of pure love of adventure.

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About four o'clock next afternoon the Captain came to take "fif-o'clock," as he called it. He clicked his heels together as he bowed over Valentine's hand, and she smiled upon him even more sweetly than she had smiled at me when I had helped her into my leather motor-coat. She wore a beautiful toilette, one of the latest of Doeillet's she had explained to me, and really presented a delightfully dainty figure as she sat there pouring out tea, and chatting with the infatuated Captain of Cuirassiers.

I saw quickly that I was not wanted; therefore I excused myself, and went for a stroll along to the Café Métropole, afterwards taking a turn up the Montagne de la Cour. All day I had been on the look-out to see either Bindo or his companions, but they were evidently in hiding.

When I returned, just in time to dress for dinner, I asked Valentine what progress her lover was making, but she merely replied—

"Slow—very slow. But in things of this magnitude one must have patience. We are invited to the Embassy ball in honour of the Crown Prince of Saxony to-morrow night. It will be amusing."

Next night she dressed in a gown of pale rose chiffon, and we went to the Embassy, where one of the most brilliant balls of the season was in progress, King Leopold himself being present to honour the Crown Prince. Captain Stolberg soon discovered the woman who held him beneath her spell, and I found myself dancing attendance upon the snub-nosed little daughter of a Burgomaster, with whom I waltzed the greater part of the evening.

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On our return my "wife" told me with a laugh that matters were progressing well. "Otto," she added, "is such a fool. Men in love will believe any fiction a woman tells them. Isn't it really extraordinary?"

"Perhaps I'm one of those men, mademoiselle," I said, looking straight into her beautiful eyes; for I own she had in a measure fascinated me, even though I knew her to be an adventuress.

She burst out laughing in my face.

"Don't be absurd, M'sieur Ewart," she cried. "Fancy you! But you certainly wouldn't fall in love with me. We are only friends—in the same swim, as I believe you term it in English."

I was a fool. I admit it. But when one is thrown into the society of a pretty woman even a chauffeur may make speeches he regrets.

So the subject dropped, and with a mock curtsy and a saucy wave of the hand, she went to her room.

On the following day she went out alone at eleven, not returning until six. She offered no explanation of where she had been, and of course it was not for me to question her. As we sat at dinner in our private *salle-à-manger* an hour later she laughed at me across the table, and declared that I was sitting as soberly as though I really were her dutiful husband. And next day she was absent again the whole day, while I amused myself in visiting the Law Courts, the picture galleries, and the general sights of the little capital of which Messieurs the brave Belgians are so proud. On her return she seemed thoughtful, even *triste*. She had been on an excursion somewhere with Otto, but she did not enlighten me regarding its details. I wondered that I had had no word from Bindo. Yet he had told me to obey Valentine's instructions, and I was now doing so. At dinner she once clenched her little hand involuntarily, and drew a deep breath, showing me that she was indignant at something.

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The following morning, as she mentioned that she should be absent all day, I took a run on the car as far as the quaint little town of Dinant, up the Meuse, getting back to dinner.

In the salon she met me, already in her dinner-gown, and told me that she had invited Otto to dine.

"To-night you must show your jealousy. You must leave us together here, in the salon, after dinner, and then a quarter of an hour later return suddenly. I will compromise him. Then you will quarrel violently, order him to leave the hotel, and thus part bad friends."

I hardly liked to be a party to such a trick, yet the whole plot interested me. I could not see to what material end all this tended.

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Well, the gay Captain duly arrived, and we dined together merrily. His eyes were fixed admiringly upon Valentine the whole time, and his conversation was mainly reminiscent of the days at Vichy. The meal over, we passed into the salon, and there I left them. But on re-entering shortly afterwards I found him standing behind the couch, bending over and kissing her. She had her arms clasped around his neck so tightly that he could not disengage himself.

In pretended fury I dashed across to the pair with my fists clenched in jealous anger. What I said I scarce remember. All I know is that I let forth a torrent of reproaches and condemnations, and ended by practically kicking the fellow out of the room, while my "wife" sank upon her knees and implored my forgiveness, which I flatly refused.

The Captain took his kicking in silence, but in his glance was murder, as he turned once and faced me ere he left the room.

"Well, Valentine," I asked, when he was safely out of hearing, and when she had raised herself from her knees laughing. "And what now?"

"The whole affair is now plain sailing. To-morrow you will take the car to Liège, and there await me outside the Cathedral at midnight on the following night. You will easily find the place. Wait until two o'clock, and if I am not there go on to Cologne, and put up at the Hôtel du Nord."

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"Without baggage?"

"Without baggage. Don't trouble about anything. Simply go there and wait."

At midday on the following day the pretty Valentine dressed herself carefully, and went out. Then, an hour later, pretending that I was only going for a short run, I mounted into the car and set out for Liège, wondering what was now to happen.

Next day I idled away, and at a quarter to twelve that night, after a run around the town, I pulled up in the shadow before the Cathedral and stopped the engines. The old square was quite quiet, for the good Liègeois retire early, and the only sound was the musical carillon of the bells.

In impatience I waited. The silent night was clear, bright, and frosty, with a myriad shining stars above. Time after time the great clock above me chimed the quarters, until just before two o'clock there came a dark female figure round the corner, walking quickly. In an instant I recognised Valentine, who was dressed in a long travelling coat with fur collar, and a sealskin toque. She was carrying something beneath her coat.

"Quick!" she said breathlessly. "Let us get away. Get ready. Count Bindo is following me!" And ere I could start the engines, my employer, in a long dark overcoat and felt hat, hurriedly approached us, saying—

"Come, let's be off, Ewart. We've a long journey to-night to Cassel. We must go through Aix, and pick up Blythe, and then on by way of Cologne, Arnsburg, and the Hoppeke-Tal." [Pg 61]

Quickly they both put on the extra wraps from the car, entered, and wrapped the rugs about them, while two minutes later, with our big head-lamps shedding a broad white light before us, we turned out upon the wide high road to Verviers.

"It's all right," cried Bindo, leaning over to me when we had covered about five miles or so. "Everything went off perfectly."

"And M'sieur made a most model 'husband,' I assure you," declared the pretty Valentine, with a musical laugh.

"But what have you done?" I inquired, half turning, but afraid to take my eyes from the road.

"Be patient. We'll explain everything when we get to Cassel," responded Valentine. And with that I had to be content.

At the station at Aix we found Blythe awaiting us, and when he had taken the seat beside me we set out by way of Duren to Cologne, and on to Cassel, a long and bitterly cold journey.

It was not until we were dining together late the following night in the comfortable old König von Preussen, at Cassel, that Valentine revealed the truth to me.

"When I met the German at Vichy I was passing as Countess de Bourbriac, and pretending that my husband was in Scotland. At first I avoided him," she said. "But later on I was told, in confidence, that he was a spy in the service of the War Office in Berlin. Then I wrote to Count Bindo, and he advised me to pretend to reciprocate the fellow's affections, and to keep a watchful eye for the main chance. I have done so—that's all." [Pg 62]

"But what was this 'main chance'?" I asked.

"Why, don't you see, Ewart," exclaimed the Count, who was standing by, smoking a cigarette. "The fact that he was in the Intelligence Department in Berlin, and that he had been suddenly appointed military attaché at Brussels, made it plain that he was carrying out some important secret-service work in Belgium. On making inquiries I heard that he was constantly travelling in the country, and, speaking French so well, he was passing himself off as a Belgian. Blythe, in the guise of an English tourist, met him in Boxel two months ago, and satisfied himself as to the character of the task he had undertaken, a risky but most important one. Then we all agreed that, when completed, the secrets he had possessed himself of should become ours, for the Intelligence Department of either France or England would be certain to purchase them for almost any sum we liked to name, so important were they. About two months we waited for the unsuspecting Otto to complete his work, and then suddenly the Countess reappears, accompanied by her husband. And—well, Valentine, you can best tell Ewart the remainder of the story," added the audacious scoundrel, replacing his cigarette in his mouth. [Pg 63]

"As M'sieur Ewart knows, Captain Stolberg was in love with me, and I pretended to be infatuated with him. The other night he kissed me, and my dear 'Gaston' saw it, and in just indignation and jealousy promptly kicked him out. Next day I met him, told him that my husband was a perfect hog, and urged him to take me from him. At first he would not sacrifice his official position as attaché, for he was a poor man. Then we talked money matters, and I suggested that he surely possessed something which he could turn into money sufficient to keep us for a year or two, as I had a small income though not absolutely sufficient for our wants. In fact, I offered, now that he had compromised me in the eyes of my husband, to elope with him. We walked in the Bois de la Cambre for two solid hours that afternoon, until I was footsore, and yet he did not catch on. Then I played another game, declaring that he did not love me sufficiently to make such a sacrifice, and at last taking a dramatic farewell of him. He allowed me to get almost to the gates of the Bois, when he suddenly ran after me, and told me that he had a packet of documents for which he could obtain a large sum abroad. He would take them, and myself, to Berlin by that night's mail, and then we would go on to St. Petersburg, where he could easily dispose of the mysterious papers. So we met at the station at midnight, and by the same train travelled Bindo and M'sieurs Blythe and Henderson. In the carriage he told me where the precious papers were—in a small leathern hand-bag—and this fact I whispered to Blythe when he brushed past me in the corridor. At Pepinster, the junction for Spa, we both descended to obtain some refreshment, and when we returned to our carriage the Captain glanced reassuringly at his bag. Bindo passed along the corridor, and I knew the truth. Then on arrival at Liège I left the Captain smoking, and strolled to the back end of the carriage, waiting for the train to move off. Just as it did so I sprang out upon the platform, and had the satisfaction of seeing, a moment later, the red tail-lights of the Berlin express disappear. I fancy I saw the Captain's head out of the window and heard him shout, but [Pg 64]

next instant he was lost in the darkness.”

“As soon as you had both got out at Pepinster Blythe slipped into the compartment, broke the lock of the bag with a special tool we call ‘the snipper,’ and had the papers in a moment. These he passed on to me, and travelled past Liège on to Aix.

“Here are the precious plans,” remarked the Count, producing a voluminous packet in a big blue envelope, the seal of which had been broken.

And on opening this he displayed to me a quantity of carefully drawn plans of the whole canal system, and secret defences between the Rhine and the Meuse, the waterway, he explained, which one day Germany, in time of war with England, will require to use in order to get her troops through to the port of Antwerp, and the Belgian coast—the first complete and reliable plans ever obtained of the chain of formidable defences that Belgium keeps a profound secret.

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What sum was paid to the pretty Valentine by the French Intelligence Department for them I am not aware. I only know that she one day sent me a beautiful gold cigarette-case inscribed with the words “From Liane de Bourbriac,” and inside it was a draft on the London branch of the Crédit Lyonnais for eight hundred and fifty pounds.

Captain Otto Stolberg has, I hear, been transferred as attaché to another European capital. No doubt his first thoughts were of revenge, but on mature consideration he deemed it best to keep his mouth closed, or he would have betrayed himself as a spy. Bindo had, no doubt, foreseen that. As for Valentine, she actually declares that, after all, she merely rendered a service to her country!

CHAPTER IV

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A RUN WITH ROSALIE

Several months had elapsed since my adventure with “Valentine of the Beautiful Eyes.”

From Germany Count Bindo di Ferraris had sent me with the car right across Europe to Florence, where, at Nenci’s, the builders of motor-bodies, I, in obedience to orders, had it repainted a bright yellow—almost the colour of mustard.

When, a fortnight later, it came out of the Nenci works, I hardly recognised it. At Bindo’s orders I had had a second body built, one made of wicker, and lined inside with glazed white leather, which, when fixed upon the chassis, completely transformed it. This second body I sent by rail down to Leghorn, and then drove the car along the Arno valley, down to the sea-shore.

My orders were to go to the Palace Hotel at Leghorn, and there await my master. The hotel in question was, I found, one of the best in Italy, filled by the smartest crowd of men and women, mostly of the Italian aristocracy, who went there for the magnificent sea-bathing. It was a huge white building, with many balconies, and striped awnings, facing the blue Mediterranean.

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Valentine had travelled with me as far as Milan, while Bindo had taken train, I believe, to Berlin. At Milan my pretty companion had wished me adieu, and a month later I had taken up my residence in Leghorn, and there led an idle life, wondering when I was to hear next from Bindo. Before we parted he gave me a fairly large sum of money, and told me to remain at Leghorn until he joined me.

Weeks passed. Leghorn in summer is the Brighton of Italy, and everything there was delightfully gay. In the garage of the hotel were many cars, but not one so good as our 40-h.p. “Napier.” The Italians all admired it, and on several occasions I took motoring enthusiasts of both sexes out for short runs along the old Maremma sea-road.

The life I led was one of idleness, punctuated by little flirtations, for by Bindo’s order I was staying at the Palace as owner of the car, and not as a mere chauffeur. The daughters of Italian countesses and marchionesses, though brought up so strictly, are always eager for flirtation, and therefore as I sat alone at my table in the big *salle-à-manger* I caught many a glance from black eyes that danced with merry mischievousness.

Valentine, when she left me in Milan, had said, laughingly—

“I may rejoin you again ere long, M’sieur Ewart, but not as your pretended wife, as at Brussels.”

“I hope not, mademoiselle,” I had answered quite frankly. “That game is a little too dangerous. I might really fall in love with you.”

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“With me?” she cried, holding up her small hands in a quick gesture. “What an idea! Oh! la la! *Jamais.*”

I smiled. Mademoiselle was extremely beautiful. No woman I had ever met possessed such wonderful eyes as hers.

“*Au revoir, mon cher,*” she said. “And a pleasant time to you till we meet again.” Then as I mounted on the car and traversed the big Piazza del Duomo, before the Cathedral, she waved her

hand to me in farewell.

It was, therefore, without surprise that, sitting in the hall of the hotel about five o'clock one afternoon, I watched her in an elegant white gown descending the stairs, followed by a neat French maid in black.

Quickly I sprang up, bowed, and greeted her in French before a dozen or so of the idling guests.

As we walked across to Pancaldi's baths she told her new maid to go on in front, and in a few quick words explained.

"I arrived direct from Paris this morning. Here, I am the Princess Helen of Dornbach-Laxenburg of the Ringstrasse, in Vienna, the Schloss Kirchbühel, on the Drave, and Avenue des Champs Elysées, Paris, a Frenchwoman married to an Austrian. My husband, a man much older than myself, will arrive here in a few days."

"And the maid?"

"She knows nothing to the contrary. She has been with me only a fortnight. Now you must speak of me in the hotel. Say that you knew me well at Monte Carlo, Rome, Carlsbad, and Aix; that you have stayed at Kirchbühel, and have dined at our house in Paris. Talk of our enormous wealth, and all that, and to-morrow invite me for a run on the car."

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"Very well—Princess," I laughed. "But what's the new scheme—eh?"

"At present nothing has been definitely settled. I expect Bindo in a few days, but he will appear to us as a stranger—a complete stranger. At present all I wish to do is to create a sensation—you understand? A foreign princess is always popular at once, and I believe my arrival is already known all over the hotel. But it is you who will help me, M'sieur Ewart. You are the wealthy Englishman who is here with his motor-car, and who is one of my intimate friends—you understand?"

"Well," I said, with some hesitation. "Don't you think all this kind of thing very risky? Candidly, I expect before very long we shall all find ourselves under arrest."

She laughed heartily at my fears.

"But, in any case, you would not suffer. You are simply Ewart, the Count's chauffeur."

"I know. But at this moment I'm posing here as the owner of the car, and living upon part of the proceeds of that little transaction in the train between Brussels and the German frontier."

"Ah, *mon cher!* never recall the past. It is such a very bad habit. Live for the future, and let the past take care of itself. Just remain perfectly confident that you run no risk in this present affair."

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"What's your maid's name?"

"Rosalie Barlet."

"And she knows nothing?"

"Absolutely nothing."

I watched the neat-waisted figure in black walking a little distance ahead of us. She was typically Parisienne, with Louis XV. shoes, and a glimpse of smart *lingerie* as she lifted her skirt daintily. Rather good-looking she was, too, but with a face as bony as most of the women of Paris, and a complexion slightly sallow.

By this time we had arrived at the entrance to the baths, where, on the asphalt promenade, built out into the clear crystal Mediterranean, all smart Leghorn was sitting in chairs, and gossiping beneath the awnings, as Italians love to do.

Pancaldi's is essentially Italian. English, French, or German visitors are rarely if ever seen, therefore the advent of the Princess, news of whose arrival had spread from mouth to mouth but an hour ago, caused a perceptible flutter among the lounging idlers of both sexes.

My companion was, I saw, admired on every hand, while surprise was being expressed that I should turn out to be a friend of so very distinguished a person.

In the brilliant sundown, with just a refreshing breath of air coming across the glassy sea, we sat watching the antics of the swimmers and the general merriment in the water. I lit a cigarette and gossiped with her in French, ostentatiously emphasising the words "your Highness" when I addressed her, for the benefit of those passing and re-passing behind us.

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For an hour she remained, and then returning to the hotel, dressed, and dined.

As she sat with me at table that night in the handsome restaurant, she looked superb, in pale turquoise chiffon, with a single row of diamonds around her throat. Paste they were, of course, but none of the women who sat with their eyes upon her even dreamed that they were anything but the family jewels of the princely house of Dornbach-Laxenburg. Her manner and bearing were distinctly that of a patrician, and I saw that all in the hotel were dying to know her.

Yes, Her Highness was already a great success.

About ten o'clock she put on a wrap, and, as is usual with the guests at the Palace, at Leghorn, we went for a brief stroll along the promenade.

As soon as we were entirely alone she said—

"To-morrow you will take me for a run on the car, and the next day you will introduce me to one or two of the best people. I will discover who are the proper persons for me to know. I shall say that you are George Ewart, eldest son of a Member of the English Parliament, and well known in London—eh?"

As we were walking in the shadow, through the small leafy public garden lying between the roadway and the sea, we suddenly encountered the figure of a young woman who, in passing, saluted my companion with deep respect. It was Rosalie. [Pg 72]

"She's wandering here alone, and watching for me to re-enter the hotel," remarked Valentine. "But she need not follow me like this, I think."

"No," I said. "Somehow, I don't like that girl."

"Why not? She's all right. What more natural than that she should be on the spot to receive me when I come in?"

"But you don't want to be spied upon like this, surely!" I said resentfully. "Have you done anything to arouse her suspicions that you are not—well, not exactly what you pretend yourself to be?"

"Nothing whatever; I have been a model of discretion. She never went to the Avenue Kléber. I was staying for two nights at the Grand—under my present title—and after engaging her I told her that the house in the Avenue des Champs Elysées was in the hands of decorators."

"Well, I don't half like her following us. She may have overheard something of what we've just been saying—who knows?"

"Rubbish! Ah! *mon cher ami*, you are always scenting danger where there is none."

I merely shrugged my shoulders, but my opinion remained. There was something mysterious about Rosalie—what it was I could not make out.

At ten o'clock next morning Her Highness met me in the big marble hall of the hotel dressed in the smartest motor-clothes, with a silk dust-coat and the latest invention in veils—pale blue with long ends twisted several times around her throat. Even in that costume she looked dainty and extremely charming. [Pg 73]

I, too, was altered in a manner that certainly disguised my true calling; and when I brought the car round to the front steps, quite a crowd of visitors gathered to see her climb to the seat beside me, wrap the rug around her skirts, and start away.

With a deep blast on the electric horn I swept out of the hotel grounds to the left, and a few moments later we were heading away along the broad sea-road through the pretty villages of Ardenza and Antignano, out into that wild open country that lies between Leghorn and the wide deadly marshes of the fever-stricken Maremma. The road we were travelling was the old road to Rome, for two hundred miles along it—a desolate, dreary, and uninhabited way—lay the Eternal City. Over that self-same road on the top of the brown rocks the conquering Roman legions marched to Gaul, and war-chariots once ran where now sped motor-cars. Out there in those great solitudes through which we were passing nothing has changed since the days of Nero and of the Cæsars.

Twenty-five miles into the country we ran, and then pulled up to smoke and chat. She was fond of a cigarette, and joined me, laughing merrily at the manner in which we were so completely deceiving the gay world of Leghorn. The local papers that morning had announced that Her Highness the Princess Helen of Dornbach-Laxenburg, one of the most beautiful women in Europe, had "descended" at the Palace Hotel, and had been seen at Pancaldi's later in the afternoon. [Pg 74]

"As soon as I came down this morning I was pounced upon for information," I explained. "A young Italian marquis, who has hitherto snubbed me, begged that I would tell him something concerning Her Highness. He is deeply smitten with your beauty, that's very evident," I laughed.

"My beauty! You are really incorrigible, M'sieur Ewart," she answered reprovingly, as she blew the tobacco-smoke from her lips. "And what, pray, is the name of this admirer?"

"The Marquis of Rapallo—the usual hard-up but well-dressed elegant, you know. He wears two fresh suits of white linen a day, with socks to match his ties. Last night he sat at the table next to us, and couldn't keep his eyes off you—a rather short fellow, with a little black moustache turned upwards."

"Ah yes, I recollect," she replied, and then I thought that her countenance changed. "And so he's been inquiring about me? Well, let's run back to *déjeuner*—or *collazione*, as they call it here in Italy, I believe."

An hour later we drew up again at the hotel, and Her Highness disappeared within. Then, after I had taken the car to the garage in the rear, and entered the hotel myself, I quickly became [Pg 75]

surrounded by people who wanted introductions to my charming acquaintance, and to whom I romanced about her wealth, her position, and her home surroundings.

On the following day, Valentine allowed me to introduce her to four persons—an Italian marchioness who moved in the most exclusive Roman set, the wife of a Sicilian duke, the wife of Jacobi, the wealthy Jew banker of Turin, and a Captain of Bersaglieri.

One night a lonely but well-dressed stranger entered the restaurant and seated himself in a corner almost unnoticed, save by Valentine and myself. The new-comer was the audacious Bindo, passing as Mr. Bellingham, an Englishman, but he gave us no sign of recognition. Indeed, the days went on, but he never approached either of us. He simply idled about the hotel, or across at Pancaldi's, having picked up one or two acquaintances, kindred spirits in the art of graceful idling. He never even wrote me a note.

Some deep game was in progress, but its nature I was entirely unable to gather.

Now, truth to tell, I experienced a growing uneasiness concerning Rosalie. To me she was always the modest maid devoted to Her Highness, and yet I thought I once detected a glance of mischief in her dark eyes. Determined to discover all I could, I at once commenced a violent flirtation with her, unknown, of course, to Valentine.

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Mademoiselle seemed flattered by the attentions of one whom she believed to be an English gentleman. Therefore I met her out one evening and took her for a long walk, pretending to be deeply smitten by her charms. From the first moment I began to talk with her I saw that she was not the shallow giddy girl I had believed her to be. She, no doubt, appreciated my attentions, for I took her to a café on the opposite side of the town, where we should not be recognised, and there we sat a long time chatting. She seemed extremely curious to know who I really was, yet the queries she put to me were just a trifle blundering. They betrayed an earnest desire to know more than I intended that she should know.

"I wish Her Highness would go back to Aix-les-Bains, or to Vichy, or to Luchon. I'm tired of this wretched hole, where I know nobody," she complained presently. "I had quite sufficient of Italy when I was with the Duchess of Pandolfini. I did not know we were coming here, otherwise I should not have accepted the engagement, and yet—well, the Princess is very kind and considerate."

"She certainly is to her friends, and I hope the same to her servants," I said; and then we rose to walk back, for it was nearly eleven, and Her Highness, who had gone to the Opera with two of the ladies to whom I had introduced her, would soon be due back, and the dainty Rosalie must be there to receive her.

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Upon our walk across the town I flattered her, pretending to be her devoted admirer, but when I left her I felt more convinced than ever upon three points—namely, that she was much older than twenty-two, as she had declared; that she was unduly inquisitive; and that she certainly was no fool.

That night I sent my master a note to his room warning him to be wary of her, and on the following morning I told Her Highness my suspicions.

From that moment I made it my object in life to keep a watchful eye upon the new French maid. Each evening, after her services were no longer required, she went forth alone and wandered idly up and down the esplanade. Sometimes she walked out to Ardenza, a village a mile and a half distant, halted always at the same stone seat in the little public garden, and then strolled back again, in blissful ignorance of being so closely watched.

If Rosalie had any suspicion that Valentine was not the Princess Helen, then there was, I foresaw, a grave and constant danger. And I, for one, did not intend to run any further risk.

Her Highness had been in Leghorn just over three weeks, and had become intensely popular everywhere, being invited to the houses of many of the principal residents, when one night an incident occurred which afforded me grave food for reflection.

Just after ten o'clock at night I had followed Rosalie along by the sea to Ardenza, where she was sitting alone upon her usual seat in a secluded spot, at the edge of the public garden, on a kind of small promontory that ran in a semicircle out to the sea. Behind her was a dark thicket of azaleas, and in front the calm moonlit Mediterranean.

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I was standing back in the shadow at a spot where I had often stood before, when, after about five minutes, I saw the tall dark figure of a man in a grey deer-stalker hat join her, and sit down unceremoniously at her side.

As soon as they met she began to tell him some long story, to which the stranger listened without comment. Then he seemed to question her closely, and they remained together fully a quarter of an hour, until at last they rose and parted, she walking calmly back to the hotel.

Was it possible that the dainty Rosalie was a spy?

When I got half-way back to the Palace I regretted deeply that I had not followed the stranger and ascertained whom he might be. Next day I told Valentine, but she merely smiled, saying that Rosalie could know nothing, and the fellow was probably some secret lover. The next night, and the next, I watched, until, on the third evening, they met again at the same time and place, and

on that occasion I followed the mysterious stranger. He was a thin, cadaverous-looking Frenchman, hollow-cheeked, rather shabbily dressed, and wore *pince-nez*. I watched him back into the town, and lingered near him in a café until nearly one o'clock, when he entered his quarters at an uninviting, unfashionable hotel, the "Falcon," in the Via Vittorio. From the manner he had treated her I judged him to be a relation, probably her uncle. Yet why she should meet him clandestinely was an utter mystery.

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In order still to keep watch upon the maid I made a fervent protest of affection, and frequently met her between the dinner-hour and midnight. Through all this time, however, Bindo never gave a sign, even in secret, that he was acquainted with Valentine or myself, and this very fact in itself aroused my suspicions that he knew our movements were being closely watched.

Meanwhile, Princess Helen, who had become the most popular figure in Leghorn, and had given her patronage to several functions in the cause of charity, went out a great deal, and I accompanied her very frequently to the best houses.

"Poor Bindo is having a pretty quiet time, I fear," she laughed to me one day in her easy, irresponsible way. "He is lying low."

"Waiting for the *coup*—eh?"

She smiled, but would, even then, tell me nothing.

Among the most devoted of her admirers was the Jew banker of Turin, Jacobi, and his wife, a stout, vulgar, over-dressed person, who was constantly dancing attendance upon her "dear Princess," as she called her. Valentine rather liked her, or pretended to, for on several occasions she lent her Rosalie to dress her hair. Jacobi himself was, it seemed, on friendly terms with Bindo. Sometimes I saw the pair strolling together at Pancaldi's, and once the young Marquis of Rapallo was with them.

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One hot, stifling night, a brilliant ball was held, arranged at the Princess's instigation, in the cause of charity. All the smart world attended, and dancing was almost at an end when Bindo met me alone out upon one of the balconies.

"Go, and change at once," he whispered. "Take the car out of the town beyond the railway station, a little way on the Pisa road. There wait, but attract no attention." And the next instant he had re-entered the ballroom and was making his most elegant bow over a lady's hand.

Wondering what was the nature of the *coup*, I presently slipped away to my room, but as I walked along the corridor I felt almost certain that I saw Rosalie's black skirts flouncing round the corner. It was as though I had discovered her on the wrong floor, and that she had tried to escape me. The movements of that girl were so constantly suspicious.

I threw off my evening clothes, and putting on a rough suit, an overcoat, and motor-cap, went down the back staircase and along to the garage, where, amid the coming and going of the cars of departing guests, I was able to run out without being noticed.

Ten minutes later I was outside the town, and drawing up in the dark lonely road that leads across the plain for fifteen miles to quaint old Pisa, I got down and examined my tyres, pretending I had a puncture should anyone become too inquisitive. Glancing at my watch, I found it was already twenty minutes to two. The moon was overcast, and the atmosphere stifling and oppressive, precursory of a thunderstorm.

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Each minute seemed an hour. Indeed, I grew so nervous that I felt half inclined to escape upon the car. Yet if I left that spot I might leave my audacious friend in the lurch, and in peril of arrest most likely.

It was close upon half-past two, as nearly as I could judge, when I heard a quick footstep in the road. I took off one of the acetylene head-lamps of the car and turned it in that direction, in order to ascertain who was coming along.

A woman in a dark stuff dress, and wearing a veil, approached quickly. A moment later, to my mingled surprise and dismay, I saw it was none other than the dainty Rosalie herself, in a very admirable disguise, which gave her an appearance of being double her age.

"Ah! monsieur!" she gasped, quite out of breath from walking so rapidly. "Drive me at once to Pisa. Don't lose a single instant. The Paris express passes at four minutes past three, and I must catch it. The last train left here three hours ago."

"You—alone?"

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"Yes. I go alone."

"But—well, let us speak quite frankly. Is no one else coming?" I inquired.

"*Non, m'sieur*. You will take me to Pisa at once, please," she said impatiently.

So perforce I had to mount into the car, and when she had settled herself beside me, I drew off upon the dark and execrable road to the city she had indicated, in order to catch the Rome-Paris express.

Was it all a trap? I wondered. What had occurred? I dared not ask her anything, while she, on her

part, preserved an absolute silence. Her only fear seemed lest she lost her train. That something had occurred was very evident, but of its nature I still remained in entire ignorance, even when, a short distance from the great echoing station, I dropped the *chic* little maid with whom I had for the past three weeks pretended to be so violently in love.

On getting down she told me to await her. She would be only a few minutes. This surprised me, as I thought she was leaving for Paris.

She hurried away, and as I watched her going down the road towards the station I saw the dark figure of a man emerge from the shadow and join her. For a moment he became silhouetted against the station lights, and I recognised that it was her mysterious friend.

Five minutes later she rejoined me. Then, on turning back, I was forced to remain at the level crossing until the Paris express, with its long *wagon-lit*, had roared past, and afterwards I put on a move, and we were soon back in Leghorn. She did not return to the hotel with me, but at her request I dropped her just before we entered the town. [Pg 83]

Morning revealed the startling truth. Three women, occupying adjacent rooms, had lost the greater part of their valuable jewels which they had had sent from home on purpose to wear at the ball. The police were ferreting about the hotel, questioning everybody. There was commotion everywhere, and loud among those expressing amazement at the audaciousness of the thief were both Bindo and Her Highness, the latter declaring herself lucky that no attempt had been made to secure any of her own valuable jewels.

At noon I took her for a run on the car, in order to have an opportunity to chat. When we were alone on the road she said—

“You entertained a foolish but quite reasonable suspicion of Rosalie. She and Kampf, the man you saw her with, always work together. They indeed suggested this present little affair, for they knew that Italian women bring lots of jewellery here, in order to show it off. Besides, hotels are their speciality. So there seemed to Bindo no reason why we should not have a little of the best of it. The diamond necklace of the Signora Jacobi is well known to be one of the finest in all Italy; therefore, on several occasions, I lent her Rosalie for hair-dressing, and she, clever girl, very soon discovered where all the best of the stuff was kept. Bindo, in the meantime, was keeping his keen eye open in other quarters. Last night, when the Jewess went up to her room, she found her own maid had gone to bed very unwell, and the faithful Rosalie had, at my orders, taken her place. ‘How kind it was of the dear Princess!’ she said. When Rosalie left the room she carried with her the necklace, together with several other trifles which she had pretended to lock in the jewel-case. Ten minutes later Bindo also slipped into her hands all that he had obtained in a swift raid in two other rooms during the dance, and she left the hotel carrying away gems worth roughly, we believe, about sixteen thousand pounds sterling. Kampf was awaiting her in Pisa, and by this time is already well on his way to the frontier at Modane, with the precious packet in his pocket.” [Pg 84]

“And there is really no suspicion of us?” I asked apprehensively.

“Certainly not. Not a soul knows that Rosalie left the hotel last night. She re-entered by a window Bindo left open.”

“But the garage people know that I was out,” I said.

“Well, and what of that? You have had no hand in it, have you, *mon cher*? No. We shall remain here another week. It is quite pleasant here—and quite safe. To leave might arouse suspicion.”

“Have not the police questioned Rosalie?” [Pg 85]

“Certainly. But they have no suspicion of the maid of Princess Helen of Dornbach-Laxenburg. How could they? Especially as the Prefect and his wife were my guests at dinner last night!”

“Well,” I declared, “the way the whole affair has been managed is perfectly artistic.”

“Of course,” she said. “We do not blunder. Only poor people and fools do that.”

CHAPTER V

THE SIX NEW NOVELS

The car had again undergone a transformation.

With a new racing-body, built in Northampton, and painted dead white picked out with gilt, no one would have recognised it as the car which had carried away the clever jewel-thief from Bond Street.

Since the adventure at Leghorn I had seen nothing of La Belle Valentine. With Bindo, however, I had driven the car across from Rome to Calais by way of Ventimiglia and Marseilles, and, after crossing the Channel, I had gone alone to Northampton, and there awaited the making of the smart new racing-body. [Pg 86]

Count Bindo di Ferraris, who seemed ever on the move, with an eye open for "a good thing," wrote me from Ilfracombe, Southampton, Manchester, Perth, Aberdeen, and other places, remitting me the necessary money, and urging me to push on the work, as he wanted the car again immediately.

At last, when it was finished, I drove it to a garage I knew at the back of Regent Street, and that same evening met him at the Royal Automobile Club. At his request, I dressed smartly and gave no outward appearance of the chauffeur; therefore he invited me to dine, and afterwards, while we sat alone in a corner of the smoking-room, he began to unfold a series of plans for the future. They were, however, hazy, and only conveyed to me an idea that we were going on a long tour in England.

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I ventured to remark that to be in England, after the little affair in Bond Street, might be somewhat dangerous. He replied, however, with his usual nonchalant air—

"My dear Ewart, there's not the slightest fear. Act as I bid, and trust in me. To-morrow, at eleven, we go North together—into Yorkshire. You will be my servant again after to-night. You understand—eh?"

"Perfectly. Shall we start from here?"

"Yes. But before we set out I can only warn you that you'll want all your wits about you this time. If we have luck, we shall bring off a big thing—a very big thing."

"And if we have no luck?"

"Well—well, we shan't bring it off—that's all," he laughed.

"Where are we going?"

"Yorkshire. To spend a week at the seaside. It will do us both good. I've decided that the Scarborough air will be extremely beneficial to us. One of our friends is already there—at the Grand."

"Sir Charles?"

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"Exactly. He's very fond of Scarborough—likes the church parade on Sundays, the music on the Spa, and all that kind of thing. So we'll join him. I wonder if we shall get through in a day?"

"We ought to—with luck," was my response; and then, after urging me to leave everything in his hands, he told me that I'd better get early to bed, and thoroughly overhaul the car early next morning, before starting.

So next day at ten he took his seat by my side outside the Club in Piccadilly, and we drove away into the traffic towards Regent's Park, on our way to that much overrated highway, the Great North Road. The day was warm and dusty, and as it was a Saturday there were police-traps out everywhere. Therefore progress was slow, for I was forced at every few miles to slow down, to escape a ten-pound fine.

Leafy Hatfield, crooked Hitchin, quaint old Stamford, we passed, until we swung into the yard of "The Angel," that antique and comfortable hotel well known to all motorists at Grantham, where we had a hasty meal.

Then out again in the sunset, we headed through Doncaster to York, and in the darkness, with our big head-lamps shining, we tore through Malton, and slipped down the hill into Scarborough. The run had been a long and dusty one, the last fifty miles in darkness and at a high speed, therefore when we pulled up before the Grand I leaned heavily upon the steering-wheel, weary and fagged.

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It was about eleven o'clock at night, and Sir Charles, who had evidently been expecting our arrival in the big hall of the hotel, rushed out and greeted Bindo effusively. Then, directed by a page-boy, who sat in the Count's seat, I took the car round to Hutton's garage, close by.

With Sir Charles I noticed another man, young, with very fair hair—a mere boy, he seemed—in evening clothes of the latest cut. When I returned to the hotel I saw them all seated in the big hall over whiskies and sodas, laughing merrily together. It was late, all the other guests having retired.

Next day Bindo took the young man, whose name I discovered to be Paul Clayton, for a run on the car to Bridlington. Bindo drove, and I sat upon the step. The racing-body gave the "forty" a rakish appearance, and each time we went up and down the Esplanade, or across the Valley Bridge, we created considerable interest. After lunch we went on to Hornsea, and returned to Scarborough at tea-time.

That same evening, after dinner, I saw Bindo's new friend walking on the Esplanade with a fair-haired, well-dressed young girl. They were deep in conversation, and it struck me that she was warning him regarding something.

Days passed—warm, idle August days. Scarborough was full of visitors. The Grand was overrun by a smartly dressed crowd, and the Spa was a picturesque sight during the morning promenade. The beautiful "Belvedere" grounds were a blaze of roses, and, being private property, were regarded with envy by thousands who trod the asphalte of the Esplanade. Almost daily Bindo took

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Paul for a run on the car. To York, to Castle Howard, to Drifffield, and to Whitby we went—the road to the last-named place, by the way, being execrable. Evidently Bindo's present object was to ingratiate himself with young Clayton, but with what ulterior motive I could not conceive.

Sir Charles remained constantly in the background. Well dressed and highly respectable, he presented a rather superior air, and walked on the Spa at certain hours, establishing a kind of custom from which he did not depart. He had now changed his name to Sinclair, while Bindo di Ferraris went under the less foreign cognomen of Albert Cornforth. I alone kept my own name, George Ewart.

As day succeeded day, I kept wondering what was really in the wind. Why were they so friendly with Paul Clayton? Of one fact I felt assured, and it was that jewels were not the object of the manoeuvre on this occasion. That Bindo and his friends had laid some deep plot was, of course, quite certain, but the Count never took me into his confidence until the last moment, when the *coup* was made. Therefore, try how I would, I could not discover the intentions of the gang.

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From Leghorn to Scarborough is a far cry. At least we were safe from detection from all our little business affairs, save that of the Bond Street jewellers. Continually I reflected that our description had been circulated by the police, and that some enterprising constable or detective might pick upon us on the off-chance of being correct.

Count Bindo—or Albert Cornforth, as he now chose to be known—was having a most excellent time. He soon grew to know many people in the hotel, and being so essentially a ladies' man was greatly in request at the dances. Continually he apologised to the ladies for being unable to take them motoring, but, as he explained, the space on a racing-car is limited.

Thus a fortnight passed. Round at the garage were a number of cars from London, Manchester, and elsewhere, and I soon grew friendly with several expert chauffeurs, two of whom were old friends.

One day Bindo and I had been to Harrogate, dined at the Majestic, and returned. After taking the car to the garage, I went out for a turn along the Esplanade, in order to stretch my legs. It was midnight, brightly starlit, and silent save for the low sougning of the waves upon the shore. I had lit my pipe and walked nearly to the Holbeck Gardens, at the extreme end of the South Cliff, when, in the darkness, I discerned two figures sitting upon a seat in the shadow. One was a man, and the other a woman in a light evening dress, with a wrap thrown over her head and shoulders. As I passed I managed to get a glimpse of their faces. One was Paul Clayton, and the other the pretty, fair-haired young woman I had seen him with before. They were sitting in the attitude of lovers. He held her hand and, I believe, had just raised it to his lips.

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I hurried on, annoyed with myself for being so inquisitive. But the beautiful face of the girl became impressed upon my memory.

Count Bindo, the nonchalant, audacious cosmopolitan, who spent money so freely, was a veritable marvel of cleverness and cunning in all matters of chicanery and fraud. He was evidently a man who, though still young, had a pretty dark record. But what it really was he carefully concealed from me. I can only admit that I had now become an adventurer like the others, for in each case I had received a certain portion of the profits of the *coups* which we had assisted each other in effecting. True, we lived a life full of excitement and change, but it was a life I liked, for at heart I was nothing if not a wanderer and adventurer. I liked adventure for adventure's sake, and cared nothing for the constant peril of detection. Strange how easily one can be enticed from a life of honesty into one of fraud, especially if the inducements held out are an adequate recompense for any qualm of conscience.

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The actions of our friend, Sir Charles Blythe, were also rather puzzling. He seemed to be taking no part in whatever scheme was in progress. If I met him in public on the Esplanade, or elsewhere, I saluted him as a chauffeur should, but when we met unobserved I was his equal, and on several occasions I made inquiries which he refused to satisfy.

We had been nearly three weeks in Scarborough when, after dinner one evening in the big hall of the hotel I saw the audacious Bindo seated drinking coffee with a little, queer, wizen-faced, but rather over-dressed old lady, towards whom he seemed to be particularly polite. She was evidently one of those wrinkled, yellow-toothed old tabbies who still believe themselves to be attractive, for, as I watched covertly, I saw how she assumed various poses for the benefit of those seated in her vicinity. Though so strikingly dressed, in a gown trimmed with beautiful old lace, she wore no jewellery, save her wedding ring. Her airs and mannerisms were, however, amusing, and quickly made it apparent that she moved in a good set.

From the hall-porter I presently learned that she was a Mrs. Clayton, of St. Mellions Hall, near Peterborough, the widow of a wealthy Oldham cotton-spinner, who generally spent a month at that hotel each year.

"She's a quaint old girl," he informed me in confidence. "Thinks no end of herself, and always trying to hang on to some woman with a title, even if she's only a baronet's wife. Some ill-natured woman has nicknamed her the Chameleon—because she changes her dresses so often and is so fond of bright colours. But she's a good old sort," he added. "Always pretty free with her tips. Her son is here too."

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Whoever or whatever she was, it was evident that Bindo was busily engaged ingratiating himself

with her, having previously established a firm friendship with her son, who, by the way, had left Scarborough on the previous day.

I happened to have a friend who was chauffeur to a doctor in Peterborough, therefore I wrote to him that evening, making inquiries regarding St. Mellions and its owner. Three days later a reply came to the effect that the Hall was about ten miles from Peterborough, and one of the finest country seats in Northamptonshire. It had been the property of a well-known earl, who, having become impoverished by gambling, had sold it, together with the great estate, to old Joshua Clayton, the Lancashire millionaire. "She keeps a couple of cars," my friend concluded. "One is a Humber voiturette, and the other a twenty-four Mercedes. You know her chauffeur—Saunders—from the Napier works."

Of course I knew Saunders. He was once a very intimate friend of mine, but for the past couple of years I had lost sight of him.

Why, I wondered, was Bindo so intensely interested in the over-dressed old crone? He walked with her constantly on the Spa, or along the Esplanade; he lounged at her side when she sat to watch the parading summer girls and their flirtations, and he idled at coffee with her every evening. After a few days Sir Charles Blythe, alias Sinclair, was introduced. By prearrangement the bogus baronet chanced to be standing by the railings looking over the Spa grounds one morning when Bindo and his companion strolled by. The men saluted each other, and Bindo asked Mrs. Clayton's leave to introduce his friend. The instant the magic title was spoken the old lady became full of smiles and graces, and the trio walking together passed along in the direction of Holbeck.

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Two days later Henderson appeared on the scene quite suddenly. I was walking along Westborough late one evening when somebody accosted me, and, turning, I found it was our friend—whom I believed to be still on the Continent. He was dressed as foppishly as usual, and certainly betrayed no evidence that he was a "crook."

"Well, Ewart?" he asked. "And how goes things? Who's this old crone we've got in tow? A soft thing, Bindo says."

I told him all I knew concerning her, and he appeared to be reassured. He had taken a room at the Grand, he told me, and I afterwards found that on the following morning Bindo pretended to discover him at the hotel, and introduced him to the unsuspecting old lady as young Lord Kelham. Mrs. Clayton was delighted at thus extending her acquaintanceship with England's bluest blood.

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That same afternoon the old lady, who seemed to be of a rather sporting turn of mind, expressed a desire to ride upon a racing-car; therefore I brought round the "forty," and Bindo drove her over to Malton, where we had tea, and a quick run back in the evening. There are no police-traps on the road between Scarborough and York, therefore we were able to put on a move, and the old lady expressed the keenest delight at going so fast. As I sat upon the step at her feet, she seemed constantly alarmed lest I should fall off.

"My own cars never go so quickly," she declared. "My man drives at snail's pace."

"Probably because you have traps in Northamptonshire," Bindo replied. "There are always lurking constables along the Great North Road and the highways leading into it. But you must let me come and take your driver's place for a little while. If the cars are worth anything at all, I'll get the last mile out of them."

"I only wish you would come and pay me a visit, Mr. Cornforth. I should be so very delighted. Do you shoot?"

"A little," Bindo answered. "My friend, Sir Charles Sinclair, is said to be one of the best shots in England. But I'm not much of a shot myself."

"Then can't you persuade him to come with you?"

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"Well, I'll ask him," my employer replied. "He has very many engagements, however. He's so well known—you see."

"He'll come if you persuade him, I'm sure," the old lady said, with what she believed to be a winning smile. "You can drive my Mercedes, and he can shoot. I always have a house-party through September, so you both must join it. I'll make you as comfortable as I can in my humble house. Paul will be at home."

"Humble, Mrs. Clayton? Why, I have, years ago, heard St. Mellions spoken of as one of the show-houses of the Midlands."

"Then you've heard an exaggeration, my dear Mr. Cornforth," was her response, as she laughed lightly. "Remember, I shall expect you, and you can bring your own car if you like. Our roads are fairly good, you'll find."

Bindo accepted with profuse thanks, and shot me a glance by which I knew that he had advanced one step further towards the consummation of his secret intentions—whatever they were. Sir Charles would, no doubt, go with us. What, I wondered, was intended?

Three weeks later we arrived one evening at St. Mellions, and found it a magnificent old Tudor

mansion, in the centre of a lordly domain, and approached from the high road by a great beech avenue nearly a mile in length. The older wing of the house—part of an ancient Gothic abbey—was ivy-covered, while in front of the place was a great lake, originally the fish-pond of the Carmelite monks.

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It wanted an hour before dinner when we arrived, and at sound of our horn nearly a dozen merry men and women of the house-party came forth to greet us.

"They seem a pretty smart crowd," remarked Bindo under his breath to Sir Charles, seated beside him.

"Yes, but we'll want all our wits about us," replied the other. "I hear that the wife of Gilling, the jeweller in Bond Street, is here with her daughter. Suppose her husband takes it into his head to run down here for the week-end—eh?"

"We won't suppose anything of the sort, my dear fellow. I always hate supposing. It's a bad habit when you've got your living to earn, as we have."

And with those words he ran along to the main entrance, and pulled up sharply, being greeted by our hostess herself, who, in a cream serge dress, stood upon the steps and shouted us a warm welcome.

My two friends were quickly introduced by Paul to the assembled party, while several of the men came around the car to admire it, one of them questioning me as to its horse-power, its make, and other details, inquiries which showed his ignorance. Round in the garage I found my friend Saunders, and later on he took me over the splendid old place, filled as it was with the relics of the noble but now decadent English family.

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My eyes and ears were open everywhere. The house-party, numbering eighteen, consisted mostly of the parvenu set, people who having made money by trade were now attempting to pass as county families. The men possessed for the most part the air of "the City," and the womenkind were painfully "smart" without the good breeding necessary to carry it off.

After dinner, under the guidance of Saunders, I managed to get a glimpse of the great hall, where the party had assembled for coffee. It was a fine, lofty, oak-panelled old place, once the refectory of the monks, with great Gothic windows of stained glass, antique cabinets, and stands of armour. Against the dark oak, from floor to ceiling, the dresses of the women showed well, and, amid the laughter and chatter, I saw the gay, careless Bindo—a well-set-up, manly figure in his evening clothes—standing beside his hostess, chatting and laughing with her, while Sir Charles was bending over the chair of a pretty, fair-haired girl in turquoise, whom I recognised as the same girl I had seen with Paul at Scarborough. Her name was Ethel Gilling, Saunders said, and told me that young Clayton was, in secret, deeply in love with her. Would her father arrive and put a premature end to our conspiracy? I feared that he might.

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Saunders asked me a good deal about my berth and position, and I fancy he envied me. He did not know that I had become a "crook" like my master, but believed me to be a mere chauffeur whose duties took him hither and thither across Europe. No chauffeur can bear private service with a cheap car in a circumscribed area. Every man who drives a motor-car—whether master or servant—longs for wide touring and a high-power car.

Contrary to Bindo's declaration, he proved to be a very good shot, while Sir Charles provoked the admiration of all the men when, next morning, they went forth in search of birds. That same afternoon Bindo drove the Mercedes containing Mrs. Clayton and three ladies of the party, while I drove one of the men—a Captain Halliday—in our own car, and we all went over to the ruins of Crowland Abbey. Saunders had told me that he had never driven the Mercedes to her full power, as his mistress was so nervous. But, with Bindo driving, the old lady now seemed to want to go faster and faster. Our car was, of course, the more powerful, and ere we had gone ten miles I put on a move, and passed my master with ease, arriving at Crowland fully twenty minutes before him.

It was, however, very apparent that Bindo, the good-looking adventurer, had wormed himself entirely into the Chameleon's good graces. Both he and Halliday escorted the ladies over the ruins, and after tea at the old-fashioned "George," we made a quick and enjoyable run home in the sunset by way of Eye, Peterborough, Castor, and Wansford.

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The autumn days went by, and, amid such pleasant surroundings, our visit was proving a most merry one. Yet, try how I would, I could not see what Bindo and his friend intended.

The girl in turquoise who flirted so outrageously with young Clayton was, I discovered, also very friendly with Sir Charles. Then I saw that his partiality towards her was with a distinct object—namely, in order to be aware of her father's movements.

Truly, Bindo and Blythe were past-masters in the art of genteel scoundrelism. Adventurers of the very first water, they seldom, if ever, let me into their secrets until their plans were actually matured. Their reason for this reticence was that they believed I might show the white feather. They could not yet rely upon my audacity or courage.

Within a week Bindo was the most popular man in the house-party, the humorist of the dinner-table, and an expert in practical jokes, of which many were being played, one half the party being pitted against the other half, as is so often the case.

In the servants' hall we were also having a pretty merry time. Medhurst, the maid of Mrs. Clayton, was a particularly prepossessing young woman, and I had many chats and a few walks with her. From her, at Bindo's instigation, I learned a good deal regarding her mistress's habits and tastes, all of which I, in due course, reported to my master. A shrewd girl was Medhurst, however, and I was compelled to exercise a good deal of judicious tact in putting my questions to her.

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One evening, however, while sitting alone in the park smoking, just before going to bed, I saw Bindo himself strolling at her side. She was speaking softly, but what about I could not make out. They were in a part of the park into which the guests never went, and it seemed as though she had kept a secret tryst. Not wishing to disturb them, I slipped away unobserved.

Next morning Paul Clayton went up to London in order to see his mother's solicitors, and that same afternoon, about four o'clock, Mrs. Clayton received a very urgent telegram to come at once, as her lawyers desired some instructions immediately. The message she received evidently caused her very great anxiety, for she took Medhurst, and drove in the Mercedes to Peterborough Station, where she caught the up-express at seven o'clock.

She had apologised to her house-party for her absence, explained the urgency of her presence in London, and promised to be back in time for dinner on the morrow.

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She left the Hall at half-past six. At seven Bindo called me out of the servants' hall and whispered —

"Hold yourself in readiness. Go to my room at nine punctually, and you'll find on the table half a dozen novels done up in a strap. Just take them carefully, put them in the car, and then get away, first to Northampton to change the body of the car, and then to Parkeston Quay. Wait for me there at the Great Eastern Hotel, in the name of Parker. Take great care of the books. I shall give you other instructions before people presently, but take no notice of them. I'll join you as soon as it's safe."

And with that, he turned upon his heel and left me.

The dressing-gong was just sounding as I walked across to the garage, in order to look through the car and charge the lamps, prior to my night journey. I was wondering what was about to happen. That some *coup* was to be made that night was very evident. I spent half an hour on the car, and had all in order, when a servant came to say that my master wanted me.

I found Bindo in the hall, laughing gaily with some ladies, prior to going in to dinner.

"Oh, Ewart," he said, when I entered, cap in hand, "I want you to run the car over to Birmingham to-night, and bring Colonel Fielding here to-morrow. You know where he lives—at Welford Park. He's expecting you. The roads are all right, so you'll make good time. You'd better get a couple of outer covers, too, when you're there. You'll bring the Colonel back in time for dinner to-morrow—you understand?"

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"Yes, sir," I replied, and, bowing, went out, while with the ladies he turned in the direction of the dining-room.

I idled about until the stable clock was just on the point of striking nine, when I made my way by the servants' staircase to my master's room. The corridor was in semi-darkness. I rapped, but there being no one there, I entered, switched on the light, and there upon the table found the small pile of new, cloth-bound six-shilling novels, held together with a strap of webbing, such as lawyers use to tie up their papers.

I took them up, switched off the light, and carried them downstairs to the car, which I had previously brought out into the stable-yard. My lamps were already lit, and I was in the act of putting on my frieze coat when Saunders, driving the Mercedes, passed me, going towards the main entrance of the Hall. He had a passenger—a guest from the station, judging from his dress.

As the stranger descended from the car the light over the steps revealed his face. I started. It was the jeweller I had spoken to in Bond Street—the man I had taken for the manager, but who was none other than Mr. Gilling himself!

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I saw that all was lost. In a few moments he would come face to face with Bindo!

In an instant, however, I had made up my mind, and, re-entering the house, I made my way quickly through into the large hall. But Gilling was already there, kissing his wife and daughter. I glanced round, but was reassured to see both Bindo and Sir Charles were absentees. Did they know of Gilling's impending arrival?

I ran up to the rooms of both my friends, but could not find them. In Bindo's room a dress-coat had been thrown upon the bed. He had changed since I had been up there for the books. Alarmed by the news of the jeweller's arrival, they had, in all probability, changed hurriedly and slipped away. Therefore I ran down to the car, and, telling Saunders that I was off to Birmingham and should return on the morrow, I ran quietly down the long, dark avenue.

From St. Mellions to Harwich, as the crow flies, is about one hundred and thirty miles. First, however, I went to Northampton, and put the previous body on the car. Then the road I took was by Huntingdon, Cambridge, Halstead, and Colchester—in all, about one hundred and seventy miles. The night was dark, but the roads were in fairly good condition, therefore I went at as high

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a speed as I dared, full of wonder as to what had really happened.

Bindo's dress-coat on the bed showed that he had left, therefore I had every hope that he had not been recognised by the jeweller. After I had changed the body at the coachbuilder's at Northampton, the run to the Essex coast proved an exciting one, for I had one narrow escape at a level crossing. But to give details of the journey would serve no purpose. Suffice it to say that I duly arrived at the Great Eastern Hotel at Parkeston next morning, and registered there in the name of Parker.

Then I waited in patience until, two days later, I received a note from Bindo, and met him at some distance from the hotel. His personal appearance was greatly altered, and he was shabbily dressed as a chauffeur.

"By Jove!" he said, when we were alone, "we've had a narrow squeak. We had no idea when Henderson sent that telegram from London calling the old crone up to town that Gilling had been invited. We only heard of his impending arrival at the very moment we were bringing off the *coup*. Then, instead of remaining there, becoming indignant, and assisting the police, we were compelled to fly, thus giving the whole game away. If we had stayed, Gilling would have recognised us. By Jove! I never had such a tough quarter of an hour in all my life. Blythe has gone up to Scotland, and we shall ship the car across to Hamburg by to-night's boat from Parkeston. You've got those books all right? Don't lose them."

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"I've left them in the car," I replied.

"Left them in the car!" he cried, glaring at me. "Are you mad?"

"Mad! Why?"

"Go and get them at once and lock them up in your bag. I'll show you something when we get an opportunity."

The opportunity came three days later, when we were alone together in a room in Höfer's Hotel, in the Bahnhofs-Platz, in Hamburg. He took the books from me, undid the buckle, and, to my surprise, showed me that the centres of the popular books had been cleverly cut out, so that they were literally boxes formed by the paper leaves. And each book was filled with splendid jewels!

The haul was a huge one, for several of the diamond ornaments which had been taken from the Chameleon's safe were of great value. The old lady was passionately fond of jewellery, and spent huge sums with Mr. Gilling. We afterwards discovered that several of the finest pieces we had taken had actually been sent to her on approval by Gilling, so, curiously enough, we had touched his property on a second occasion.

"It was a difficult affair," Bindo declared. "I had to pretend to make love to Medhurst, or I should never have been able to get a cast of the safe-key. However, we've been able to take the best of the old lady's collection, and they'll fetch a good price in Amsterdam, or I'm a Dutchman myself. Of course, there's a big hue-and-cry after us, so we must lie very low over here for a bit. Fancy your leaving those novels kicking about in the car! Somebody might have wanted to read them!"

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CHAPTER VI

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THE GENTLEMAN FROM LONDON

Months had passed since the affair of the six new novels.

In Hamburg Bindo had left me and gone to see the old Jew in Amsterdam, while I had driven the "forty" south through Lüneburg, Brunswick, and Nordhausen to Erfurt, where, passing as an English gentleman of means, I remained for three weeks at a very comfortable hotel, afterwards moving on to Dresden.

At regular intervals the Count sent me money, but he was, as usual, travelling constantly. I wrote to him to a newspaper-shop in the Tottenham Court Road, reporting my movements and my whereabouts; therefore I knew not from one day to another when I should receive sudden orders to rejoin him.

The London papers had been full of the affair of the six novels, for it was now well known that the person who had abstracted the jewels was the same who had executed such a neat manœuvre at Gilling's. One or two of the papers actually published leaderettes upon the subject, severely criticising the incompetency of the police in such matters. I have since heard, however, that at Scotland Yard there is a proverb that the wealthier the thief the less chance of his being caught. Bindo and his friends certainly did not lack funds. The various hauls they had made, even since my association with them, must have put many thousands into their pockets.

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They were a clever and daring trio. They never met unless absolutely necessary in order to arrange some ingenious piece of trickery, and they could all live weeks at the same hotel without either, by word or sign, betraying previous knowledge of each other. Indeed, Count Bindo di Ferraris was the very acme of well-dressed, well-groomed scoundrelism.

Under the name of Ernest Crawford I was idling away some pleasant weeks at the Europäischer Hof, in the Altstadt, in Dresden, where I had made the acquaintance of a fair-haired Englishman named Upton, and his wife, a fluffy little woman some five years his junior. They had arrived at the hotel about a week after I had taken up my quarters, and as they became friendly I often took them for runs. Upton was the son of a rich Lancashire cotton-spinner, and was, I believe, on his honeymoon. Together we saw the sights of Dresden, the Royal Palace, the Green Vault, the museums and galleries, and had soon grown tired of them all. Therefore, almost daily we went for runs along the Elbe valley, delightful at that season of the vintage.

One evening, while we were sitting at coffee in the lounge and I was chatting with Mrs. Upton, her husband was joined by a friend from London, a tall, rather loud-spoken, broad-shouldered man, with a pair of merry, twinkling eyes and a reddish moustache. He was a motor-expert, I soon discovered, for on the afternoon following his arrival, when I brought the car round to the hotel, he began to examine it critically.

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I had invited him to go with us to the Golden Höhe, about six miles distant, and take tea at the restaurant, and he sat at my side as I drove. While passing through the little village of Rächnitz, Mr. Gibbs—for that was his name—suddenly asked—

“What make of car is yours?”

No wonder he asked, for so constantly had its identity been disguised that it nowadays bore about as much resemblance to a Napier as it did to a Panhard. I had always before me the fact that the police were on the look-out for a forty “Napier”; therefore I had managed to disguise it outwardly, although a glance within the “bonnet” would, of course, reveal the truth.

“Oh,” I replied lightly, “it’s quite an unknown make—Bellini, of Turin. I’ve come to the conclusion that small makers can turn out just as good a car as, and perhaps even better than, the larger firms—providing you pay a fair price.”

“I suppose so,” he said rather thoughtfully. “From her general build I took her to be an English Napier.”

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“She has the Napier cut,” I remarked. “I think Bellini imitates the English style.”

It was fortunate, I thought, that the “bonnet” was strapped down and locked, for the engines were stamped with their maker’s name.

“You travel about a lot on her, I suppose,” he went on. “It’s a fine car, certainly. Did you come across the Continent?”

“Yes. I’ve been about Europe a good deal,” I answered. “Saves railway fares, you know.” And I laughed.

We were travelling quickly, and, the dust being troublesome, we pulled up, and then, after all four of us goggling, went forward again.

After tea at the Golden Höhe Mr. Gibbs again evinced a keen interest in the car, examining it carefully, and declaring it to be a most excellent one. Then, on the run back, he again turned the conversation to motoring topics, with a strenuous desire, it seemed, to know my most recent movements.

A couple of days passed, and I found Upton’s friend a most congenial companion. Each afternoon we all went out for a run, and each evening, after dining, we went to the theatre.

On the fourth day after Mr. Gibbs’s arrival a messenger brought me a note which, to my surprise, I found to be from Blythe, who directed me to meet him in secret in a certain café in the Grosse Garten at eleven o’clock that night.

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Then I knew that something further had been planned.

In accordance with the request, I went to the café at the hour appointed. It was crowded, but I soon discovered him, smartly dressed, and seated at a table in the corner. After we had finished our beer I followed him out into the park, where, halting suddenly, he said—

“Ewart, you’ve placed yourself in a pretty fine predicament!”

“What do you mean?” I asked in surprise.

“Well, I saw you yesterday afternoon driving down the Prager-strasse with the very gentleman to whom you ought to give the widest berth.”

“You mean Gibbs?”

“I mean that cunning old fox, Inspector Dyer, of Scotland Yard.”

“What!” I gasped. “Dyer—is that the famous Dyer?”

“He is. I once, to my cost, had occasion to meet him, and it’s hardly likely that I’d forget his face. I saw you coming along with him, and you could have knocked me down with a feather.”

“But I—well, I really can’t believe that he’s a detective,” I declared, utterly incredulous.

“Believe it, or disbelieve it—it’s a fact, I tell you. You’ve been given away somehow, and Dyer has

now just got you in his palm.”

Briefly I explained how I had met Upton, and how Mr. Gibbs had been introduced.

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“Upton may not be what he pretends, you know,” Blythe replied. “They want us very badly at Scotland Yard, and that’s why the affair has been given over to Dyer. He’s the man who generally does the travelling on the Continent. But you know him well enough by reputation, of course. Everyone does.”

Mr. Gibbs’s intense interest in the car and its maker was thus accounted for. I saw how completely I had been taken in, and how entirely I was now in the renowned detective’s hands. He might already have been round to the garage, unlocked the “bonnet” with a false key, and seen the name “Napier” stamped upon the engine.

How, I wondered, had he been able to trace me? No doubt the fact that we had shipped the car across from Parkeston to Hamburg was well known to Scotland Yard, yet since that night it had undergone two or three transformations which had entirely disguised it. I was rapidly growing a moustache, too, and had otherwise altered my personal appearance since I posed as Bindo’s chauffeur in Scarborough.

“The Count, who is lying low in a small hotel in Düsseldorf, wants you to meet him with the car in Turin in a fortnight’s time—at the Hotel Europe. A Russian princess is staying there—and we have a plan. But it seems very probable that you’ll be waiting extradition to Bow Street if you don’t make a bold move, and slip out of Dyer’s hands.”

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“Yes,” I said thoughtfully. “If Gibbs is really Dyer himself, then, I fear, that although I’ve been discreet—for I make a point of never telling my business to strangers—yet he has more than a suspicion that the car is the same as the one I drove daily on the Esplanade at Scarborough.”

“And if he has a suspicion he has probably wired to England for one of the witnesses to come out and identify you—Gilling himself, most probably.”

“Then we’re in a most complete hole!” I declared, drawing a long face.

“Absolutely. What are you going to do?”

“What can I do?”

“Get out of it—and at once,” replied Blythe coolly. “If Dyer discovers and tries to prevent your escape, make a bold fight for it,” and from his hip-pocket he drew a serviceable-looking plated revolver, and handed it to me with the remark that it was fully loaded.

I saw that my position was one of peril. Even now, Dyer might have watched me keeping this appointment with Blythe.

“I shall leave for Leipzig in an hour,” my friend said. “You’d better return to the hotel, get the car, and make a dash for it.”

“Why should I get the car?” I queried “Why not slip away at once?”

“If you tried to you’d probably be ‘pinched’ at the station. Dyer is an artful bird, you know. Once up with you, he isn’t likely to lose sight of you for very long.”

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As he was speaking I recognised, seated at a table before the café some distance away, my friend Upton, idly smoking a cigar, and apparently unconscious of my proximity.

“That’s all right,” declared Blythe, when I had pointed him out. “It proves two things—first, that this Mr. Upton is really one of the younger men from the Yard, and, secondly, that Dyer has sent him after you to watch where you went to-night. That’s fortunate, for if Dyer himself had come it’s certain he would have recognised me. I gave him a rather nasty jag when he arrested me four years ago, so it isn’t very likely he forgets. And now let’s part. At all hazards, get away from Dresden. But go back to the hotel first, so as to disarm suspicion. When you are safe, wire to the address in the Tottenham Court Road. So long.”

And without another word the well-dressed jewel-thief turned on his heels, and disappeared in the darkness of the leafy avenue.

My feelings were the reverse of happy as I made my way back to the Europäischer Hof. To obtain the car that night would be to arouse suspicion that I had discovered Mr. Gibbs’s identity. My safety lay in getting away quietly and without any apparent haste. Indeed, when I gained my room and calmly thought it all over, I saw that it would be policy to wait until next day, when I could obtain the car from the garage as usual, and slip away before the crafty pair were aware of my absence.

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The reason they had not applied to the German police to arrest me could be but one. They had sent to London for someone to come and identify me. This person might arrive at any moment. Dyer had been in Dresden already four days; therefore, every minute’s delay was dangerous.

After long and careful consideration, I resolved to wait until the morrow. No sleep, however, came to my eyes that night, as you may well imagine. All the scandal of arrest, trial, and imprisonment rose before me as the long night hours dragged on. I lit the stove in my room, and carefully destroyed everything that might give a possible clue to my identity, and then sat at the

window, watching for day to break.

Surely Dyer and Upton had achieved a very clever piece of detective work to discover me as they had. I had done my utmost, as I thought, to efface my identity and to give the car an entirely different appearance from that which it had presented at Scarborough. The only manner in which I had been "given away" was, I believed, by means of some English five-pound notes which Bindo had sent me from Stettin, and which I had cashed in Dresden. If these had been stolen—as most probably they had been—then it would well account for the sudden appearance of Mr. Upton and his very charming wife, who had come holiday-making to Germany. Upton had, in his turn, sent information to his superior officer, Inspector Dyer, who had come out to see for himself.

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What an awful fool I had been! How completely I had fallen into the cunningly baited trap!

At last the grey dawn came, spreading to a bright autumn morning. The roads outside were dry and dusty. I meant, in a few hours, to make a breakneck dash out of Dresden, and to hide somewhere in the country. To attempt to escape by rail would be folly. But if either man was on the watch and invited himself to go for a run with me? What then?

I grasped the weapon in my pocket and set my teeth hard, recollecting Blythe's words.

At eight I ordered my coffee, and, drinking it in feverish haste, went down to the rear of the hotel where the garage was situated. While crossing the courtyard, however, I met Upton, who had a habit of early rising, and was apparently idling about. I purposely did not wear my motor-cap, but my pockets were stuffed with all my belongings that were portable.

"Hulloa!" he cried cheerily. "What are you doing to-day—eh?"

"Well," I said, with apparent indifference, "I'm just going to look round the car before breakfast. Perhaps I'll go for a run later on. The roads are still in perfect condition."

"Then I'll go with you," was his prompt reply. "My wife has a bad headache, and won't go out to-day. Gibbs, too, is full of business in the town. So let's go together."

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Instantly I saw the ruse. He had been awaiting me, and did not mean that I should go for a run unaccompanied.

"Certainly," I replied promptly. "Shall you be ready in half an hour?"

"I'm ready now. I've had my coffee." His response was, to say the least, disconcerting. How was I to get rid of him? My only chance lay in remaining perfectly calm and indifferent. A witness to testify to my identity was, no doubt, on his way out from England, and the two detectives were holding me up until his arrival.

Together we walked to the car, and for nearly half an hour I was occupied in filling the petrol-tank and putting everything in order for a long and hard journey. A breakdown would probably mean my arrest and deportation to Bow Street. My only safety lay in flight. During the night I had studied the road-book with infinite care, and decided to make a dash out of Dresden along the Elbe bank as far as Meissen, and thence by Altenburg across to Erfurt. Upton's self-invitation to go with me had, however, entirely upset my plans.

At last I returned to my room, obtained my motor-cap, coat, and goggles, and, having started the engine, got up at the wheel. My unwelcome friend swung himself up beside me, and we glided out into the Prager-strasse and through the fine capital of Saxony.

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My friend, in his smart motor coat and cap, certainly gave no outward sign of his real profession. Surely no one would have taken him to be an emissary of the Metropolitan Police. As he sat beside me he chatted merrily, for he possessed a keen sense of humour, and it must have struck him that the present position was really amusing—from his point of view.

In half an hour we were out upon a fine level road running on the left bank of the Elbe. It was a bright sunny autumn morning, and, travelling swiftly as we were, it was delightfully exhilarating. Passing through old-world Meissen, with its picturesque gabled houses, we continued on another fifteen miles to a small place called Riesa, and when about three miles farther on I summoned courage to carry out a scheme over which, during the run, I had been deeply pondering.

We were in a lonely part of the road, hidden by the long row of poplars lining the broad winding river. On the one side were the trees, and on the other high sloping vine-lands. The road curved both before and behind us, therefore we were well concealed.

Pulling up suddenly, I said—

"There's something wrong. One cylinder is not working—sparking-plug broken, I suppose."

To allow me to descend he got down. Then having unlocked the "bonnet" and pretended to fiddle with the plug, I again relocked it. Afterwards I felt the axles all round, saw to the tyres, and, having watched my opportunity, while he was at that moment standing with his back to me, his face turned towards the river, I suddenly sprang into the wheel and drew off.

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In an instant, with a loud shout, "No, you don't!" he sprang forward upon the step and raised himself into the seat he had occupied. Quick as thought, I whipped my revolver out with my left hand, and, guiding the car with my right, cried—

"I know you, Mr. Upton. Get down, or I'll shoot you!"

His face blanched, for he had no idea I was armed.

"Get down—quick!" I ordered. "I shan't ask you again."

The car was gathering speed, and I saw that if he attempted to drop off he would probably be hurt. He glanced at the road and then at me.

"You won't escape so easily as this, Mr. Ewart!" he cried. "We want you for several jewel robberies, you know. Don't you think you'd better go quietly? If you shoot me you'll only hang for it. Now do you think that's really worth while? Is such a game worth the candle?"

Without replying, I slowed down again.

"I tell you to get off this car—otherwise you must take the consequences," was my cool response. Those were terribly exciting moments, and how I remained so calm I cannot tell. My whole future depended upon my extrication from that *impasse*. Perhaps that is why my wits had, in that moment, become so sharpened.

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"I shall stay with you," was the police-officer's defiant reply, as, with a sudden movement, he grabbed my left wrist in an endeavour to wrest the weapon from my grasp. Next second I had stopped the car, pressed down the brake, and thus had both my hands free.

In a moment the struggle became desperate. He fought for his life, for he saw that, now he had defied me, I meant what I threatened. No doubt he was physically stronger than myself, and at first he had the advantage; but not for long, because, resorting to a ruse taught me long ago by a man who was a professional wrestler at the music-halls, I succeeded in turning the muzzle of the weapon into his face.

If I had liked, I could have pulled the trigger and blown half his head away. Yet, although I had become the accomplice of a daring gang of jewel-thieves, and though one of them had given me the weapon to use in case of need, I had neither desire nor intention of becoming a murderer.

For fully six or seven minutes we were locked in deadly embrace. Upton, time after time, tried to turn the weapon upon me, and so compel me to give it up under threats of death. In this, however, he was unsuccessful, though more than once he showered at me fierce imprecations.

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He had his thin, sinewy hands in my collar, and was pressing his bony knuckles into my throat, until I was half throttled, when, of a sudden, by dint of an effort of which I had never believed myself capable, I gave his arm a twist which nearly dislocated his shoulder and forced him to release his hold. I still had the revolver tightly clenched in my right hand, for I had now succeeded in changing it from my left, and at last slipped it back into my hip-pocket, leaving both hands free. Then, in our desperate struggle, he tried to force me backwards over the steering-wheel, and would have done so had I not been able to trip him unexpectedly. In a second I had flung my whole weight upon him and sent him clutching at the air over the splashboard, and so across the "bonnet" to the ground.

In a moment I restarted the car, but not before he had risen and remounted upon the step.

"You shan't get away!" he cried. "Even if you leave me here you'll be arrested by the German police before night. They already have your description."

"Enough!" I cried savagely, again whipping out my weapon. "Get down—or I'll shoot!"

"Shoot, then!" he shouted defiantly.

"Take that instead!" I replied, and, with the butt-end of the weapon, I struck him full between the eyes, causing him to fall back into the road, where he lay like a log.

Without a second glance at him, I allowed the car to gather speed, and in a few moments was running across a flat, level plain at quite fifty miles an hour. Upton lay insensible, and the longer he remained so the farther afield I should be able to get without information being sent before me.

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Mine was now a dash for liberty. Having gone twenty miles, I pulled up, and, unfastening one of the lockers within the car, I drew out the complete disguise which Bindo always kept there for emergencies. I had purposely halted in a side road, which apparently only led to some fields, and, having successfully transformed myself into a grey-bearded man of about fifty-five, I drew out a large tin of dark-red enamel and a brush, and in a quarter of an hour had transformed the pale-blue body into a dark-red one. So, within half an hour, both myself and the car were utterly disguised, even to the identification-plates, both back and front. The police would be on the lookout for a pale-blue car, driven by a moustached young man in a leather-peaked motor-cap, while they would only see passing a dark-red car driven by its owner, a respectable-looking middle-aged man in a cloth golf-cap, gloves, and goggles.

I looked at myself in satisfaction by aid of the little mirror, and then I regarded the hastily-daubed car. Very soon the dust would cling to the enamel, and thus effectually disguise the hurriedness of my handiwork. There was, of course, no doubt that Upton and Dyer would move heaven and earth to rediscover me, therefore in my journey forward I was compelled to exercise all caution.

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On consulting my road-book I found that the spot where I had pulled up was about three miles from Wurzen, on the main Leipzig road, therefore I decided to give the latter city a wide berth, and took a number of intricate by-roads towards Magdeburg, hoping to be able to put the car in safe keeping somewhere, and get thence by rail across to Cologne and Rotterdam, in which city I might find a safe asylum.

Any attempt to reach Turin was now impossible, and when late that night I entered the little town of Dessau I sent a carefully worded telegram to Bindo at the little newspaper-shop in the Tottenham Court Road, explaining that, though free, I was still in peril of arrest.

Shortly after midnight, while passing through a little town called Zerbst, half-way between Dessau and Magdeburg, I heard a loud shouting behind me, and, turning, saw a policeman approaching hurriedly.

"Where are you from?" he inquired breathlessly.

"From Berlin," was my prompt answer. "I left there at six o'clock this evening." I know a little German, and made the best use I could of it.

By the light of his lantern he examined my identification-plates, and noted the colour of the car.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, sir, but I must ask you to come with me to the police-office."

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"Why?" I inquired, with well-assumed indignation. "My lamps are all alight, and I have contravened no law, surely!"

"You are an Englishman. I hear that from your speech."

"That is so. My name is Hartley—William Hartley, and I live in Liverpool."

"We shall not detain you long," was his reply. "I am only carrying out an order we have received."

"An order—what order?"

"To arrest an Englishman who is escaping on a motor-car."

"And am I the Englishman, pray?" I asked sarcastically. "Come, this is really too huge a joke! Haven't you got the gentleman's personal description? What has he done that you should be in search of him?"

"I don't know. The chief has all particulars. Let us go together."

"Oh, very well," I laughed reluctantly. "Just get up here, and I'll drive you to the office. Which way is it?"

"Straight along," he said, climbing clumsily into the seat beside me. "Straight along almost to the end of the town, and then sharp to the left. I will show you."

As soon as he had settled himself I put such a move on the car that his breath was almost taken away. Should I take him out into the darkness beyond the town and there drop him? If I did so, I should surely be arrested, sooner or later. No. The car was disguised by its dark-red enamel, and though I had no intention of going into a brilliantly-lighted office, I felt certain that, if I kept cool, I could allay the suspicion of the police-official on night-duty.

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Ten minutes later I pulled up before the police-office and got down. In order not to enter into the light, I made an excuse that my engine was not running properly, unlocked the "bonnet" and tinkered with it until the official came out to inspect me.

He was a burly, fair-bearded man, with a harsh, gruff voice.

In his hand he carried a slip of paper, which he consulted by the light of my glaring head-lamps. I saw that it was a copy of a telegram he had received giving my description, for the previous identification-number of the car was written there.

For a few moments he stood in silence with the man who had arrested my progress, then, seeing from his face that he found both myself and the car the exact opposite of what was reported, I said, in an irritated tone of indignation—

"I must really object to being thus brought here against my will. As a foreigner, I cannot entertain a very high estimate of the intelligence of the police of Zerbst."

"I trust you will pardon us," was the gruff man's reply, bowing. "It was the very fact that you were an Englishman that caused suspicion to rest upon you. It is an Englishman who is wanted for extensive jewel robberies. His name is Ewart."

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"A very common name in England," was my reply. "But will it not appear a little too high-handed if you arrest every Englishman who rides in a motor-car in any part of Germany on suspicion that he is this thief Ewart? How do they describe the car?"

"Pale-blue," he admitted.

"Well, mine is scarcely that—is it?" I asked, as he stood beside me.

The "bonnet" was open, and by the light of the policeman's lantern he was admiring the six bright cylinders.

"No," he responded. Even now, however, the bearded fellow seemed only half convinced. But German officials are a particularly hide-bound genus of mankind.

He saw, however, that I had now grown exasperated, and presently, after putting a few further questions to me, he expressed his regret that I should have suffered any delay or inconvenience, and politely wished me a pleasant journey to my destination.

A lucky escape, I thought, when once again I was out on the broad high road to Magdeburg, my head-lamps showing a stream of white light far along the dusty way.

Instead of getting into Magdeburg, as I believed, I found myself, an hour later, in a dark, ill-lit town upon a broad river, and discovered that I was in Schönebeck, on the main road to Hanover. The distance to the latter city was one hundred miles, and, as I could get away from there by half a dozen lines of railway, I decided to push forward, even though for the past eighteen hours I had only had a piece of bread and a mug of beer at Dessau. [Pg 129]

About eleven o'clock on the following morning, after two tyre troubles, I was passing out of the quaint mediæval town of Hildesheim, intending to reach Hanover before noon. I had come around the Haupt Bahnhof and on to the highway beyond the railroad, when my heart gave a leap as a policeman dashed out into the road in front of me and held up his hand.

"Your name?" he demanded gruffly.

"William Hartley—an Englishman," was my prompt response.

"I must, I regret, insist on your presence at the police-office," he said authoritatively.

"Oh!" I cried, annoyed. "I suppose I must go through the same farce as at Zerbst last night."

"You were at Zerbst—you admit that?" asked the man in uniform.

The instant those words left his lips I saw that I was trapped. It was, no doubt, as I had suspected. The superintendent of police at Zerbst had seen stamped upon the engines the maker's name, "Napier," and this he had reported by telegraph to Dyer in Dresden. Then a second telegraphic order had gone forth for my arrest. [Pg 130]

"Well," I laughed, "it is surely no crime to admit having been to Zerbst, is it? There seems an unusual hue-and-cry over this mysterious Englishman, isn't there? But if you say I must go to the police-office, I suppose I must. Get up here beside me and show me the way."

The man clambered up, when, in a moment, I put on all speed forward. The road was wide and open, without a house on it.

"No!" he cried; "back—into the town!"

I, however, made no response, but let the car rip along at a good fifty miles an hour. She hummed merrily.

"Stop! stop! I order you to stop!" he shouted, but I heeded him not. I saw that he had grown frightened at the fearful pace we were travelling.

Suddenly, when we had gone about seven miles, I pulled up at a lonely part of the road, and, pointing my revolver at his head, ordered him to descend.

He saw that I was desperate. It was a moment for deeds, not words. I saw him make a movement to draw out his own weapon; therefore, ere he was aware of it, I struck him a blow full in the face, practically repeating my tactics with Upton. The fellow reeled out of the car, but before I could get started again he fired twice at me, happily missing me each time.

He made a desperate dash to get on the footboard again, but I prevented him, and in turn was compelled to fire. [Pg 131]

My bullet struck his right shoulder, and his weapon fell to the ground. Then I left him standing in the road, uttering a wild torrent of curses as I waved my hand in defiant farewell.

A mile from Hanover I threw off my grey beard and other disguise, washed my face in a brook, abandoned the car, and at three o'clock that afternoon found myself safely in the express for Brussels, on my way to Paris, the city which at that moment I deemed safest for me.

From that moment to this I have not been upon German soil.

CHAPTER VII

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THE LADY OF THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

It occurred about a month after my return from Germany. A strange affair, assuredly; and stranger still that my life should have been spared to relate it.

After luncheon at the Trocadero I mounted into the car, a new forty six-cylinder "Napier" that we

had purchased only a week before, to drive to Barnack, an old-world Northamptonshire village near Stamford, where I had to meet the audacious rascal Count Bindo. From Piccadilly Circus, I started forth upon my hundred-mile run with a light heart, in keen anticipation of a merry time. The Houghs, with whom Bindo was staying, always had gay house-parties, for the Major, his wife, and Marigold, his daughter, were keen on hunting, and we usually went to the meets of the Fitzwilliam, and got good runs across the park, Castor Hanglands, and the neighbourhood.

Through the grey, damp afternoon I drove on up the Great North Road, that straight, broad highway which you who motor know so well. Simmons, Bindo's new valet, was suffering from neuralgia; therefore I had left him in London, and, sitting alone, had ample time for reflection.

The road surface was good, the car running like a clock, and on the level, open highway out of Biggleswade through Tempsford and Eaton Socon along to Buckden the speed-indicator was registering thirty-five and even forty miles an hour. I was anxious to get to Barnack before dark; therefore, regardless of any police-traps that might be set, I "let her rip." [Pg 133]

The cheerless afternoon had drawn to a close, and rain had begun to fall. In a week or ten days we should be on the Riviera again, amid the sunshine and the flowers; and as I drew on my mackintosh I pitied those compelled to bear the unequal rigour of the English winter. I was rushing up Alconbury Hill on my "second," having done seventy miles without stopping, when of a sudden I felt that drag on the steering-wheel that every motorist knows and dreads. The car refused to answer to the wheel—there was a puncture in the near hind tyre.

For nearly three-quarters of an hour I worked away by the light of one of the acetylene head-lamps, for darkness had now fallen, and at last I recommenced to climb the hill and drop down into Sawtry, the big French lamps illuminating the dark, wet road.

About two miles beyond Sawtry, when, by reason of the winding of the road, I had slackened down to about fifteen miles an hour, I came to cross-roads and a sign-post, against which something white shone in the darkness. At first I believed it to be a white dog, but next moment I heard a woman's voice hailing me, and turning, saw in the lamp-light as I flashed past, a tall, handsome figure, with a long dark cloak over a light dress. She raised her arms frantically, calling to me. Therefore I put down the brakes hard, stopped, and then reversed the car, until I came back to where she stood in the muddy road. [Pg 134]

The moment she opened her mouth I recognised that she was a lady.

"Excuse me," she exclaimed breathlessly, "but would you do me a great favour—and take us on to Wansford—to the railway?" And looking, I made out that she held by the hand a fair-haired little lad about seven years of age, well dressed in a thick overcoat and knitted woollen cap and gloves. "You will not refuse, will you?" she implored. "The life of a person very dear to me depends upon it." And in her voice I detected an accent by which I knew she was not English.

Seeing how deeply in earnest she was, and that she was no mere wayfarer desirous of a "lift," I expressed my readiness to do her a favour, and, getting down, opened the door of the *tonneau*, removed the waterproof rug, and assisted the little lad and herself to get in.

"Ah, sir, this kindness is one for which I can never sufficiently thank you. Others may be able to render you some service in return," she said, "but for myself I can only give you the heartfelt thanks of a distressed woman."

In her refined voice there was a ring of deep earnestness. Who could she be? [Pg 135]

The hood of her heavy, fur-lined cape was drawn over her head, and in the darkness I could not distinguish her features. The little boy huddled close to her as we tore on towards Wansford Station, her destination, fifteen miles distant. The ceaseless rain fell heavier as we entered the long, old-world village of Stilton, and noticing they had no mackintoshes, I pulled up before the "Bell," that well-known inn of the coaching days where the York coaches changed horses.

"You are not surely going to make a stop here, are you? No one must see us. Let us go on!" she urged in apprehension.

"But you can't go through this storm," I said. "No one shall see you. There is a little sitting-room at the side that we may have until the rain has ceased." And then, with apparent reluctance, she allowed me to lead her and the boy through the old stone hall and into the little, low, old-fashioned room, the window of which, with its red blind, looked out upon the village street.

As she seated herself in the high-backed arm-chair beside the fire, her dark, refined face was turned towards me, while the little lad stood huddled up against her, as though half afraid of me. That she was a lady was at once apparent. Her age was about twenty-two, and her countenance one of the most beautiful that I had ever gazed upon. Her dark, luminous eyes met mine with an expression half of innate modesty, half of fear. The white hand lying in her lap trembled, and with the other she stroked the child's head caressingly. [Pg 136]

She had unhooked her dripping cloak, and I saw that beneath she wore a well-cut travelling-gown of pale-grey cloth that fitted admirably, and showed off her neat figure to perfection. Her dress betrayed her foreign birth, but the accent when she spoke was only very slight, a rolling of the "r's," by which I knew that she was French.

"I'm so afraid that someone may see me here," she said, after a slight pause.

"Then I take it, mademoiselle, that you are leaving the neighbourhood in secret?" I remarked in French, with some suspicion, still wondering who she might be. The boy was certainly not her child, yet he seemed to regard her as his guardian.

"Yes, m'sieur," was her brief reply; and then in French she said, after a pause, "I am wondering whether I can trust you further."

"Trust me?" I echoed. "Certainly you can, mademoiselle." And taking out a card, I handed it to her, declaring my readiness to serve her in any way in my power.

She was silent for some moments.

"To-morrow, or the next day, there will be a sensation in the neighbourhood where I joined you," she said at last.

"A mystery, you mean?" I exclaimed, looking straight into her handsome face.

"Yes," she answered in a deep, hoarse voice. "A mystery. But," she added quickly, "you will not prejudge me until you know—will you? Recollect me merely as an unhappy woman whom you have assisted, not as—" She sighed deeply, without concluding the sentence. [Pg 137]

I saw that her splendid eyes were filled with tears—tears of regret, it seemed.

"Not as what?" I inquired softly. "May I not at least know your name?"

"Ah!" she said bitterly. "Call me Clotilde, if you like. The name will be as good as any other—until you know the truth."

"But, mademoiselle, you are in distress, I see. Cannot I do anything else for you now than merely dropping you at the roadside station? I am on my way to Stamford."

"No," she sighed; "you can do nothing more at present. Only deny that you have ever met me."

Her words puzzled me. At one moment I wondered if she were not some clever woman who was abducting the lad, and by whose plausible tale I was being led into rendering her assistance. And yet as I stood with my back to the fire gazing at her as she sat, I recognised a something about her that told me she was no mere adventuress.

Upon her finger was a magnificent ring—a coronet of fine diamonds that flashed and sparkled beneath the lamp-light, and when she smiled at me her face assumed a sweet expression that held me in fascination. [Pg 138]

"Cannot you tell me what has occurred?" I asked at last, in a quiet, earnest voice. "What is the nature of the sensation that is imminent?"

"Ah no!" she answered hoarsely. "You will know soon enough."

"But, mademoiselle, I confess I should like to meet you again in London, and offer you my services. In half an hour we shall part."

"Yes, we shall part; and if we do not meet again I shall always remember you as one who performed one of the greatest services a man can perform. To-night, m'sieur, you have saved my life—and *his*," she added, pointing to the little lad at her side.

"Saved your lives? How?"

"You will know one day," was her evasive reply.

"And who is he?"

"I regret that I am not permitted to tell you," she answered.

At that instant heavy footsteps sounded in the hall, and gruff voices exchanged greetings.

"Hark!" she gasped, starting to her feet in alarm. "Is the door locked?"

I sprang to it, and, as the waiting-maid had left it slightly ajar, I could see the new-comers. I closed it, and slid the bolt into its socket.

"Who are they?" she inquired.

"Two men in dark overcoats and soft felt hats. They look like foreigners." [Pg 139]

"Ah! I know!" she gasped, terrified, her face blanched in an instant. "Let us go! They must not see me! You will help me to escape, won't you? Can I get out without them recognising me?"

Was it possible that she had committed some crime, and they were detectives? Surely this adventure was a strange and mysterious one.

"Remain here," I exclaimed quickly. "I'll go out and prepare the car. When all is ready, I will keep watch while you and the boy slip out."

I went forth into the pelting rain, took off the rugs from the seats, and started the motor. Then returning, and finding no one in the passage—the two men having evidently passed on into the tap-room—I beckoned to her, and she and the lad stole softly along and out into the roadway.

In a moment they were both in the car, and a few seconds later we were tearing along the broad road out of Stilton village at a pace that might have cost me a five-pound fine.

What was the forthcoming "sensation"? Why was she flying from the two strangers?

She feared we might be followed, therefore I decided to drive her to Peterborough. We tore on through the biting wind and driving rain, past Water Newton and Orton, until we drew up at the Great Northern Station at Peterborough, where she descended, and for a moment held my hand in a warm grasp of heartfelt thankfulness.

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"You must thank this gentleman," she said to the lad. "Recollect that to-night he has saved your life. They meant to kill you."

"Thank you, sir," said the little lad simply, holding out his hand.

When they had gone I remounted and drove away to Barnack, utterly dumbfounded. The fair stranger, whoever she was, held me in fascination. Never in all my life had I met a woman possessed of such perfect grace and such exquisite charm. She had fled from her enemies. What startling event had occurred that evening to cause her and the lad to take to the road so ill-prepared?

What was the "sensation" which she had prophesied on the morrow? I longed for day to dawn, when I might learn the truth.

Yet though I chatted with the grooms and other outdoor servants at Barnack during the next day, I heard nothing.

Over the dinner-table that evening, however, old Colonel Cooper, who had driven over from Polebrook, near Oundle, related to the guests a strange story that he had heard earlier in the day.

"A mysterious affair has happened over at Buckworth, near the Great North Road, they say," he exclaimed, adjusting his monocle and addressing his hostess and Bindo, who sat on her right. "It seems that a house called 'The Cedars,' about a mile out of the village, has been rented furnished by some foreigners, a man named Latour and his wife and son, whose movements were rather suspicious. Yesterday they received three visitors, who came to spend a week; but just before dinner one of the servants, on entering the drawing-room, was horrified to find both her master and mistress lying upon the floor dead, strangled by the silken cords used to loop up the curtains, while the visitors and the little boy were missing. So swiftly and quietly was it all done," he added, "that the servants heard nothing. The three visitors are described as very gentlemanly-looking men, evidently Frenchmen, who appeared to be on most intimate terms of friendship with their hostess. One of them, however, is declared by the groom to be a man he had met in the neighbourhood two days before; therefore it would seem as though the affair had been very carefully planned."

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"Most extraordinary!" declared Bindo, while a chorus of surprise and horror went around the table. "And the boy is missing with the assassins?"

"Yes; they have apparently taken him away with them. They say that there's some woman at the bottom of it all—and most probably," sniffed the old Colonel. "The foreigners who live here in England are mostly a queer lot, who've broken the laws of their own country and efface their identity here."

I listened at the open door with breathless interest as the old fellow discussed the affair with young Lady Casterton, who sat next him, while around the table various theories were advanced.

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"I met the man Latour once—one day in the summer," exclaimed Mr. Molesworth, a tall, thin-faced man, rector of a neighbouring parish. "He was introduced to me at the village flower-show at Alconbury, when I was doing duty there. He struck me as a very pleasant, well-bred man, who spoke English perfectly."

I stood in the corridor like a man in a dream. Had I actually assisted the mysterious woman to abduct the child? Every detail of my adventure on the previous night arose vividly before me. That she had been aware of the terrible tragedy was apparent, for without doubt she was in league with the assassins. She had made me promise to deny having seen her, and I ground my teeth at having been so cleverly tricked by a pretty woman.

Yet ought I to prejudge her when still ignorant of the truth, which she had promised to reveal to me? Was it just?

Next day, making excuse that I wished to test the car, I ran over to the sleepy little village of Buckworth, which lay in a hollow about two miles from the sign-post where I had been stopped by Clotilde. "The Cedars" was a large, old-fashioned house, standing away from the village in its own grounds, and at the village inn, where I called, I learned from the landlord many additional details of how the three mysterious visitors had arrived in a station-fly from Huntingdon, how eagerly Mr. Latour had welcomed them, and how they had disappeared at nightfall, after accomplishing their object.

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"I hear it said that a woman is at the bottom of it all," I remarked.

"Of course we can't say, sir," he replied; "but a little while ago Mr. Latour was seen several times

by men working in the fields to meet, down at Alconbury Brook, a rather handsome, dark young lady, and walk with her."

Was that lady Clotilde? I wondered.

The inquest, held two days later, revealed nothing concerning the antecedents of the Latours, except that they had taken "The Cedars" furnished a year before, and very rarely received visitors. Mr. Latour was believed to be French, but even of that nobody was certain.

A week afterwards, after taking Bindo up to Nottingham, I returned to London, and watched daily for some communication, as Clotilde had promised. Weeks passed, but none came, and I gradually became more and more convinced that I had been the victim of an adventuress.

One afternoon, however, I received at my rooms in Bloomsbury a brief note in a woman's handwriting, unsigned, asking me to call at an address in Eccleston Street, Pimlico, that evening, at half-past nine. "I desire to thank you for your kindness to me," was the concluding sentence of the letter.

Naturally, I kept the appointment, and on ringing at the door was shown up by a man-servant to a sitting-room on the first floor, where I stood prepared again to meet the woman who held me entranced by her beauty. [Pg 144]

But instead of a woman there appeared two dark-faced, sinister-looking foreigners, who entered without a word and closed the door behind them. I instantly recognised them as those I had seen in the passage of the "Bell" at Stilton.

"Well? So you have come?" laughed the elder of the two. "We have asked you here because we wish to know something." And I saw that in his hand he held some object which glistened as it caught my eye. It was a plated revolver. I had been trapped!

"What do you want to know?" I inquired, quickly on the alert against the pair of desperate ruffians.

"Answer me, Mr. Ewart," said the elder of the two, a man with a grey beard and a foreign accent. "You were driving an automobile near Alconbury on a certain evening, and a woman stopped you. She had a boy with her, and she gave you something—a packet of papers, to keep in safety for her. Where are they? We want them."

"I know nothing of what you are saying," I declared, recollecting Clotilde's injunction. "I think you must be mistaken."

The men smiled grimly, and the elder made a signal, as though to someone behind me, and next instant I felt a silken cord slipped over my head and pulled tight by an unseen hand. A third man had stepped noiselessly from the long cupboard beside the fireplace, to which my back had been turned. [Pg 145]

I felt the cord cutting into my throat, and tried to struggle and shout, but a cloth was clapped upon my mouth, and my hands secured by a second cord.

"Now," said the elder man, "tell us the truth, or, if not, you die. You understand? Where is that packet?"

"I know nothing of any packet," I gasped with great difficulty.

"It's a lie! She gave it to you! Where did you take her to?"

I was silent. I had given my promise of secrecy, and yet I was entirely helpless in their unscrupulous hands. Again and again they demanded the papers, which they said she had given me to keep for her, and my denial only brought upon me the increased torture of the cord, until I was almost black in the face, and my veins stood out knotted and hard.

I realised, to my horror, that they intended to murder me, just as they had assassinated Latour and his wife. I fought for life, but my struggles only tightened the cord, and thus increased my agony.

"Tell us where you have put those papers," demanded the younger of the villainous, black-eyed pair, while the third man held me helpless with hands of steel. "Where is the boy?" [Pg 146]

"I have no idea," I replied.

"Then die," laughed the man with the grey beard. "We have given you a chance of life, and you refuse to take it. You assisted her to escape and you will share the fate of the others."

I saw that to save myself was impossible, but with a superhuman effort I succeeded in slipping the noose from my hands and hooking my fingers in the cord around my throat. The fellow behind placed his knee in my back, and drew the cord with all his might to strangle me; but I cried hoarsely for help, and clung to the fatal cord.

In an instant the two others, joined by a fourth, fell upon me, but by doing so the cord became loosened, and I ducked my head. For a second my right hand was freed, and I drew from my belt the long Italian knife which I often carry as a better weapon in a scrimmage than a revolver, and struck upward at the fellow who had sentenced me to death. The blade entered his stomach, and he fell forward with an agonised cry. Then slashing indiscriminately right and left, I quickly

cleared myself of them. A revolver flashed close to me, but the bullet whizzed past, and making a sudden dash for the door I rushed headlong down the stairs and out into the Buckingham Palace Road, still holding my knife, my hands smeared with the blood of my enemies, and the cord still around my neck.

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I went direct to the police-station, and within five minutes half a dozen constables were on their way round to the house. But on arrival they found that the men, notwithstanding their severe wounds, had fled, fearing the information I should give. The owner of the house knew nothing, save that he had let it furnished a fortnight before to the grey-bearded man, who had given the name of Burton, although he was a foreigner.

The shock had upset my nerves considerably, but, accompanied by Blythe and Bindo, I drove the car down to Dover, took her across to Calais, and then drove across France to Marseilles, and along the Riviera to Genoa and Pisa, and on to Florence—a delightful journey, which I had accomplished on three previous occasions, for we preferred the car to the stuffy *wagon-lit* of the Rome express.

Times without number I wondered what was the nature of those documents, and why the gang desired to obtain possession of them. But it was all a mystery, inscrutable and complete. And I told the Count nothing.

Our season at Florence was a gay one, and there were many pleasant gatherings at Bindo's villa. The season was, however, an empty one as far as *coups* were concerned. The various *festas* had succeeded one another, and the month of May, the brightest and merriest in Italy, was nearly at an end, when one afternoon I was walking in the Cascine, the Hyde Park of the Florentines, idly watching the procession of carriages, many of whose fair occupants were known to me. Of a sudden there passed a smart victoria-and-pair, among the cushions of which lolled the figure of a well-dressed woman.

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Our eyes met. In an instant the recognition was mutual, and she gave an order to stop. It was the sweet-faced wayfarer of the Great North Road—the woman who had enchanted me!

I stood in the roadway, hat in hand, as Italian etiquette requires.

"Ah! I am so pleased to meet you again," she said in French. "I have much to tell you. Can you call on me—to-night at seven, if you have no prior engagement? We have the Villa Simoncini, in the Viale. Anyone will direct you to it. We cannot talk here."

"I shall be delighted. I know the villa quite well," was my answer; and then, with a smile, she drove on, and somehow I thought that the idlers watching us looked at me strangely.

At seven o'clock I was conducted through the great marble hall of the villa, one of the finest residences on the outskirts of Florence, and into the beautiful salon, upholstered in pale-green silk, where my pretty companion of that exciting run on the Great North Road rose to greet me with eager, outstretched hand; while behind her stood a tall, white-headed, military-looking man, whom she introduced as her father, General Stefanovitch.

"I asked you here for seven," she said, with a sweet smile; "but we do not dine until eight, therefore we may talk. How fortunate we should meet to-day! I intended to write to you."

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I gathered from her subsequent conversation that we might speak frankly before her father, therefore I described to her the exciting adventure that had happened to me in Eccleston Street, whereupon she said—

"Ah! it is only to-day that I am able to reveal to you the truth, relying upon you not to make it public. The secret of the Latours must still be strictly kept, at all hazards."

"What was their secret?" I inquired breathlessly.

"Listen, and I will tell you," she said, motioning me to a seat and sinking into a low lounge-chair herself, while the General stood astride upon the bear-skin stretched before the English fire-grate. "Those men sought the life of one person only—the boy. They went to England to kill him."

"And would have done so, Clotilde, had you not saved him," declared her father.

"It was not I," she said quickly. "It was Mr. Ewart, who snatched us from them. They were following, and we both should have shared the fate of the Latours had he not taken us up and driven us away. The thanks of the State are due to Mr. Ewart." And at that moment the little lad entered shyly, and, walking towards her, took her hand.

"The State—what do you mean?" I asked, puzzled.

"The truth is this," she said, smiling. "Little Paul, here, lived in England incognito as Paul Latour, but he is really His Royal Highness the Crown Prince Paul of Bosnia, heir to the throne. Because there was a conspiracy in the capital to kill him, he was sent to England in secret in the care of his tutor and his wife, who took the name of Latour, while he passed as their son. The revolutionists had sworn to kill the King's son, and by some means discovered his whereabouts in England; whereupon four of them were chosen to go there and assassinate him. By good fortune I learnt the truth, and as maid-of-honour to the Queen resolved to say nothing, but to go alone to England in secret and rescue the Crown Prince. The four conspirators had already left our capital; therefore I went in hot pursuit, travelling across Europe, and reaching London on the day

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before we met. I managed to overtake them, and, watching their movements, I travelled by the same train down to Huntingdon. On arrival there, while they were bargaining with a fly-man to take them on their fateful errand, I got into a cab and drove with all speed out to Buckworth. I had been there before, and knew the place well. I crossed the lawn, entered the drawing-room by the French window, and found little Paul alone. The Latours were out, he said; so I induced him to leave the place with me without the knowledge of the servants. I desired to see the Latours, and also to watch the movements of the assassins; therefore we hid in the wood close to the house at a spot where I had once met Latour secretly with a message from Her Majesty, who somehow mistrusted Latour's wife. In half an hour three of the men arrived, and were met by Latour, who had returned almost at the same moment. They entered, carrying some hand-baggage with them, and I was compelled to remain in hiding, awaiting an opportunity to speak with him. At half-past seven, however, to my great surprise I saw them slip out one by one, and disappear into the wood close to where little Paul and I were hiding in the undergrowth. Then, suspecting something was wrong by the stealthiness of their movements, I crept across the grounds and re-entered the drawing-room from the lawn, where, to my horror, I found Latour and his wife lying dead. I saw that a tragedy had been enacted, and, regaining the wood, hastened on with little Paul in the opposite direction, until I came to the Great North Road, and there met you driving your car. They had heard from Latour that the child had wandered out somewhere, and were, I knew, scouring the country for him. Only by your aid the Crown Prince was saved, and we came here into hiding, the King sending my father to meet me and to live here as his son's protector."

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"But why did they kill the Latours?"

"It was part of the conspiracy. Latour, who had recently been back in Bosnia, had, they discovered, given information to the chief of police regarding a plot against the Queen, and they, the revolutionists, had condemned both him and his wife to death."

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"And the packet which they demanded of me?"

"It contains certain papers concerning the royal family of Bosnia, secrets which the revolutionists desire to obtain and publish," she explained. "The King, distrustful of those about him, gave the packet into the hands of his faithful subject Latour, in England, and he, in preference to putting it into a safe, which might attract the spies of the conspirators, kept it in a small cavity behind the wainscoting in the drawing-room at Buckworth—a spot which he showed me, so that if any untoward event occurred I should at least know where the documents were secreted. When I realised the terrible fate of the unfortunate Latour and noticed the disordered state of the room and study beyond, I suspected that search had been made for them, and going to the spot I pressed the spring, and, finding them still safe, secured them. The revolutionists undoubtedly saw us leaving the inn at Stilton together, and believed that I had secured the documents as well as the boy, and that I had probably, in my flight, handed them to you for safe keeping."

"And the assassins? What has become of them?"

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"They returned to Bosnia when they had recovered from the wounds you inflicted, but were at once arrested on information supplied by me, and have all four been condemned to solitary confinement for life—a punishment which is worse than death."

Since that evening I have been a frequent visitor at the Stefanovitchs', who still live in Florence under the name of Darfour, and more than once has the little Crown Prince thanked me. The pretty, dark-eyed Clotilde and her father are quite popular in society, but no one dreams that little Paul, who is so carefully guarded by the old General and his trusty soldier-servant, is heir to a European throne, or that his life was saved in curious circumstances by "the Count's chauffeur."

CHAPTER VIII

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THE RED ROOSTER

As chauffeur to one of the most ingenious adventurers who ever staked a louis at the tables, and travelling constantly up and down Europe, as I did, I frequently came across strange romances in real life—stranger by far than any in fiction. My profession often took me amid exciting scenes, for wherever there was a centre of unusual excitement on the Continent, and consequent opportunities for pilfering, there we generally were.

I have acquaintances in every capital; I chatter in half a dozen tongues; I have the reputation of being an authority on hotels and the best routes hither and thither; while I believe I am known in most of the chief garages in the capitals.

Yes, mine was a strange life, full of romance, of constant change, of excitement—sometimes of peril.

The latter was quickly apparent when last winter, after two days of hard travelling over those endless frozen roads and through the dark forests of Eastern Poland, I pulled up before a small inn on the outskirts of the dismal-looking town of Ostrog. The place, with its roofs covered with

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freshly fallen snow, lay upon the slight slope of a low hill, beneath which wound the Wilija Goryn, now frozen so hard that the bridge was hardly ever used. It was January, and that month in Poland is always a cold one.

I had come up from Budapest to Tarnopol, crossed the frontier at the little village of Kolodno, and thence driven the "forty" along the valleys into Volynien, a long, weary, dispiriting run, on and on, until the monotony of the scenery maddened me. Cramped and cold I was, notwithstanding the big Russian fur shuba I wore, the fur cap with flaps, fur gloves, and fur rug. The country inns in which I had spent the past two nights had been filthy places, where the stoves had been surrounded by evil-smelling peasantry, where the food was uneatable, and where a wooden bench had served me as a bed.

I was on my way to meet Bindo, who was to be the guest of a Russian countess in Ostrog. Whenever I mentioned my destination, the post-house keepers held up their hands. The Red Rooster was crowing in Ostrog, they said significantly.

It was true. Russia was under the Terror, and in no place in the whole empire were the revolutionists so determined as in the town whither I was bound.

As I stood up and descended unsteadily from the car my eyes fell upon something upon the snow near the door of the inn. There was blood. It told its own tale.

From the white town across the frozen river I heard revolver shots, followed by a loud explosion that shook the whole place. [Pg 156]

Inside the long, low common room of the inn, with its high brick stove, against which half a dozen frightened-looking men and women were huddled, I asked for the proprietor, whereupon an elderly man with shaggy hair and beard came forth, pulling his forelock.

"I want to stay here," I said.

"Yes, your Excellency," was the old fellow's reply in Polish, regarding the car in surprise. "Whatever accommodation my poor inn can afford is at your service;" and he at once shouted orders to a man to bring in my kit, while the women, all of them flat-faced peasants, made room for me at the stove.

From where I stood I could hear the sound of desultory firing across the bridge, and inquired what was in progress.

But there was an ominous silence. They did not reply; for, as I afterwards discovered, they had taken me for a high police official from Petersburg, thus accounting for the innkeeper's courtesy.

"Tell me," I said, addressing the wrinkle-faced old Pole, "what is happening over yonder?"

"The Cossacks," he stammered. "Krasiloff and his Cossacks are upon us! They have just entered the town, and are shooting down people everywhere. The fight for freedom has commenced, Excellency. But it is horrible. A poor woman was shot dead before my door half an hour ago, and her body taken away by the soldiers." [Pg 157]

Terrible reports of the Russian revolution had filtered through to England, but I had no idea when I started that I was bound for the disturbed district. I inquired for the house of the Countess Alexandrovsky, and was directed to it—across the town, they said. With a glance to see that my revolver was loaded, I threw aside my shuba, and leaving the inn walked across the bridge into a poor narrow street of wretched-looking houses, many of them built of wood. A man limped slowly past me, wounded in the leg, and leaving blood-spots behind him as he went. An old woman was seated in a doorway, her face buried in her hands, wailing—

"My poor son!—dead!—dead!"

Before me I saw a great barricade composed of trees, household furniture, paving-stones, overturned carts, pieces of barbed wire—in fact, everything and anything the populace could seize upon for the construction of hasty defence. Upon the top, silhouetted against the clear, frosty sky, was the scarlet flag of the Revolution—the Red Rooster was crowing!

Excited men were there, armed with rifles, shouting and giving orders. Then I saw that a small space had been left open against the wall of a house so that persons might pass and repass.

As I approached, a wild-haired man shouted to me and beckoned frantically. I grasped his meaning. He wished me to come within. I ran forward, entered the town proper, and a few moments later the opening was closed by a dozen slabs of stone being heaped into it by as many willing hands. [Pg 158]

Thus I, an inoffensive chauffeur, found myself in the very centre of the Revolution, behind the barricades, of which there were, it seemed, six or seven. From the rear there was constant firing, and the streets in the vicinity were, I saw to my horror, already filled with dead and wounded. I wondered why Count Bindo should come there—except, perhaps, that the Countess owned certain jewels that my master intended to handle. Women were wailing over husbands, lovers, brothers; men over their daughters and wives. Even children of tender age were lying helpless and wounded, some of them shattered and dead.

Ah! that sight was sickening. It was wholesale butchery.

Above us bullets whistled as the Cossacks came suddenly round a side street and made a desperate attack upon the barricade I had entered only a few minutes before. A dozen of those fighting for their freedom fell back dead at my feet at the first volley. They had been on top of the barricade, offering a mark to the troops of the Czar. Before us and behind us there was firing, for behind was another barricade. We were, in fact, between two deadly fires.

Revolver in hand, I stood ready to defend my own life. In those exciting moments I disregarded the danger I ran from being struck in that veritable hail of lead. Men fell wounded all around me, and there was blood everywhere. A thin, dark-haired young fellow under thirty—a Moscow student I subsequently heard—seemed to be the ringleader, for above the firing could be heard his shouts of encouragement. [Pg 159]

"Fight, my comrades!" he cried, standing close to me and waving the red flag he carried—the emblem of the Terror. "Down with the Czar! Kill the vermin he sends to us! Long live freedom! Kill them!" he shrieked. "They have killed your wives and daughters. Men of Ostrog, remember your duty to-day. Set an example to Russia. Do not let the Moscow fiasco be repeated here. Fight! Fight on as long as you have a drop of life-blood in you, and we shall win, we shall win. Down with the Autocrat! Down with the——"

His sentence was never finished, for at that instant he reeled backwards, with half his face shot away by a Cossack bullet.

The situation was, for me, one of greatest peril. The whole place was in open revolt, and when the troops broke down the defences, as I saw they must do sooner or later, then we should all be caught in a trap, and no quarter would be given.

The massacre would be the same as at Moscow, and many other towns in Eastern Russia, wherein the populace had been shot down indiscriminately, and official telegrams sent to Petersburg reporting "Order now reigns." [Pg 160]

I sought shelter in a doorway, but scarcely had I done so than a bullet embedded itself in the woodwork a few inches from my head. At the barricade the women were helping the men, loading their rifles for them, shouting and encouraging them to fight gallantly for freedom.

A yellow-haired young woman, not more than twenty, emerged from a house close by where I stood, and ran past me to the barricade. As she passed I saw that she carried something in her hand. It looked like a small cylinder of metal.

Shouting to a man who was firing through a loophole near the top of the barricade, she handed it up to him. Taking it carefully, he scrambled up higher, waited for a few moments, and then raising himself, he hurled it far into the air, into the midst of an advancing troop of Cossacks.

There was a red flash, a terrific explosion which shook the whole town, wrecking the houses in the immediate vicinity, and blowing to atoms dozens of the Czar's soldiers.

A wild shout of victory went up from the revolutionists when they saw the havoc caused by the awful bomb. The yellow-haired girl returned again, and brought another, which, after some ten minutes or so, was similarly hurled against the troops, with equally disastrous effect. [Pg 161]

The roadway was strewn with the bodies of those Cossacks which General Kinski, the governor of the town, had telegraphed for, and whom Krasiloff had ordered to give no quarter to the revolutionists. In Western Russia the name of Krasiloff was synonymous with all that was cruel and brutal. It was he who ordered the flogging of the five young women at Minsk, those poor unfortunate creatures who were knouted by Cossacks, who laid their backs bare to the bone. As everyone in Russia knows, two of them, both members of good families, died within a few hours, and yet no reprimand did he receive from Petersburg. By the Czar, and at the Ministry of the Interior, he was known to be a hard man, and for that reason certain towns where the revolutionary spirit was strongest had been given into his hands.

At Kiev he had executed without trial dozens of men and women arrested for revolutionary acts. A common grave was dug in the prison-yard, and the victims, four at a time, were led forward to the edge of the pit and shot, each batch being compelled to witness the execution of the four prisoners preceding them. With a refinement of cruelty that was only equalled by the Inquisition, he had wrung confessions from women and afterwards had them shot and buried. At Petersburg they knew these things, but he had actually been commended for his loyalty to the Czar! [Pg 162]

And now that he had been hurriedly moved to Ostrog the people knew that his order to the Cossacks was to massacre the people, and more especially the Jewish portion of the population, without mercy.

Where was Bindo? I wondered.

"Krasiloff is here!" said a man whose face was smeared with blood, as he stood by me. "He intends that we shall all die, but we will fight for it. The Revolution has only just commenced. Soon the peasants will rise, and we will sweep the country clean of the vermin the Czar has placed upon us. To-day Kinski, the Governor, has been fired at twice, but unsuccessfully. He wants a bomb, and he shall have it," he added meaningly. "Olga—the girl yonder with the yellow hair—has one for him!" and he laughed grimly.

I recognised my own deadly peril. I stood revolver in hand, though I had not fired a shot, for I

was no revolutionist. I was only awaiting the inevitable breaking down of the barricade—and the awful catastrophe that must befall the town when those Cossacks, drunk with the lust for blood, swept into the streets.

Around me, men and women were shouting themselves hoarse, while the red emblem of terror still waved lazily from the top of the barricade. The men manning the improvised defence kept up a withering fire upon the troops, who, in the open road, were afforded no cover. Time after time the place shook as those terrible bombs exploded with awful result, for the yellow-haired girl seemed to keep up a continuous supply of them. They were only seven or eight inches long, but hurled into a company of soldiers their effect was deadly.

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For half an hour longer it seemed as though the defence of the town would be effectual, yet of a sudden the redoubled shouts of those about me told me the truth.

The Cossacks had been reinforced, and were about to rush the barricade.

I managed to peer forth, and there, sure enough, the whole roadway was filled with soldiers.

Yells, curses, heavy firing, men falling back from the barricade to die around me, and the disappearance of the red flag, showed that the Cossacks were at last scaling the great pile of miscellaneous objects that blocked the street. A dozen of the Czar's soldiers appeared silhouetted against the sky as they scrambled across the top of the barricade, but next second a dozen corpses fell to earth, riddled by the bullets of the men standing below in readiness.

In a moment, however, other men appeared in their places, and still more and more. Women threw up their hands in despair and fled for their lives while men—calmly prepared to die in the Cause—shouted again and again, "Down with Krasiloff and the Czar! Long live the Revolution! Victory for the People's Will!"

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I stood undecided. I was facing death. Those Cossacks with orders to massacre would give no quarter, and would not discriminate. Krasiloff was waiting for his dastardly order to be carried out. The Czar had given him instructions to crush the Revolution by whatever means he thought proper.

Those moments of suspense seemed hours. Suddenly there was another flash, a stunning report, the air was filled with débris, and a great breach opened in the barricade. The Cossacks had used explosives to clear away the obstruction. Next instant they were upon us.

I flew—flew for my life. Whither my legs carried me I know not. Women's despairing shrieks rent the air on every hand. The massacre had commenced. I remember I dashed into a long, narrow street that seemed half deserted, then turned corner after corner, but behind me, ever increasing, rose the cries of the doomed populace. The Cossacks were following the people into their houses and killing men, women, and even children.

Suddenly, as I turned into a side street, I saw that it led into a large open thoroughfare—the main road through the town, I expect. And there, straight before me, I saw that an awful scene was being enacted.

I turned to run back, but at that instant a woman's long, despairing cry reached me, causing me to glance within a doorway, where stood a big brutal Cossack, who had pursued and captured a pretty, dark-haired, well-dressed girl.

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"Save me!" she shrieked as I passed. "Oh, save me, sir!" she gasped, white, terrified, and breathless with struggling. "He will kill me!"

The burly soldier had his bearded face close down to hers, his arms clasped around her, and had evidently forced her from the street into the entry.

For a second I hesitated.

"Oh, sir, save me! Save me, and God will reward you!" she implored, her big dark eyes turned to mine in final appeal.

The fellow at that moment raised his fist and struck her a brutal blow upon the mouth that caused the blood to flow, saying with a savage growl—

"Be quiet, will you?"

"Let that woman go!" I commanded in the best Russian I could muster.

In an instant, with a glare in his fiery eyes, for the blood-lust was within him, he turned upon me and sneeringly asked who I was to give him orders, while the poor girl reeled, half stunned by his blow.

"Let her go, I say!" I shouted, advancing quickly towards him.

But in a moment he had drawn his big army revolver, and ere I became aware of his dastardly intention, he raised it a few inches from her face.

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Quick as thought I raised my own weapon, which I had held behind me, and being accredited a fairly good shot, I fired, in an endeavour to save the poor girl.

Fortunately my bullet struck, for he stepped back, his revolver dropped from his fingers upon the

stones, and stumbling forward he fell dead at her feet without a word. My shot had, I saw, hit him in the temple, and death had probably been instantaneous.

With a cry of joy at her sudden release, the girl rushed across to me, and raising my left hand to her lips, kissed it, at the same time thanking me.

Then, for the first time, I recognised how uncommonly pretty she was. Not more than eighteen, she was slim and petite, with a narrow waist and graceful figure—quite unlike in refinement and in dress to the other women I had seen in Ostrog. Her dark hair had come unbound in her desperate struggle with the Cossack and hung about her shoulders, her bodice was torn and revealed a bare white neck, and her chest heaved and fell as in breathless, disjointed sentences she thanked me again and again.

There was not a second to lose, however. She was, I recognised, a Jewess, and Krasiloff's orders were to spare them not.

From the main street beyond rose the shouts and screams, the firing and wild triumphant yells, as the terrible massacre progressed. [Pg 167]

"Come with me!" she cried breathlessly. "Along here. I know of a place of safety."

And she led the way, running swiftly, for about two hundred yards, and then turning into a narrow, dirty courtyard, passed through an evil, forbidding-looking house, where all was silent as the grave.

With a key, she quickly opened the door of a poor, ill-furnished room, which she closed behind her, but did not lock. Then, opening a door on the opposite side, which had been papered over so as to escape observation, I saw there was a flight of damp stone stairs leading down to a cellar or some subterranean regions beneath the house.

"Down here!" she said, taking a candle, lighting it and handing it to me. "Go—I will follow."

I descended cautiously into the cold, dank place, discovering it to be a kind of unlighted cellar hewn out of the rock. A table, a chair, a lamp, and some provisions showed that preparation had been made for concealment there, but ere I had entirely explored the place my pretty fellow-fugitive rejoined me.

"This, I hope, is a place of safety," she said. "They will not find us here. This is where Gustave lived before his flight."

"Gustave?" I repeated, looking her straight in the face.

She dropped her eyes and blushed. Her silence told its own tale. The previous occupant of that rock chamber was her lover. [Pg 168]

Her name was Luba—Luba Lazareff, she told me. But of herself she would tell me nothing further. Her reticence was curious, yet before long I recognised the reason of her refusal.

Candle in hand, I was examining the deepest recesses of the dark cavernous place, while she lit the lamp, when, to my surprise, I discovered at the farther end a workman's bench upon which were various pieces of turned metal, pieces of tube of various sizes, and little phials of glass like those used for the tiny tabloids for subcutaneous injections.

I took one up to examine it, but at that instant she noticed me and screamed in terror.

"Ah! sir, for Heaven's sake, put that down—very carefully. Touch nothing there, or we may both be blown to pieces! See!" she added in a low, intense voice of confession, as she dashed forward, "there are finished bombs there! Gustave could not carry them all away, so he left those with me."

"Then Gustave made these—eh?"

"Yes. And see, he gave me this!" and she drew from her breast a small shining cylinder of brass, a beautifully-finished little object about four inches long. "He gave this to me to use—if necessary!" the girl added, a meaning flash in her dark eyes.

For a moment I was silent.

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"Then you would have used it upon that Cossack?" I said slowly.

"That was my intention."

"And kill yourself as well as your assailant?"

"I have promised him," was her simple answer.

"And this Gustave? You love him? Tell me all about him. Remember, I am your friend, and will help you if I can."

She hesitated, and I was compelled to urge her again and again ere she would speak.

"Well, he is French—from Paris," she said at last, as we still stood before the bomb-maker's bench. "He is a chemist, and being an Anarchist, came to us, and joined us in the Revolution. The petards thrown over the barricades to-day were of his make, but he had to fly. He left yesterday."

"For Paris?"

"Ah! how can I tell? The Cossacks may have caught and killed him. He may be dead," she added hoarsely.

"Which direction has he taken?"

"He was compelled to leave hurriedly at midnight. He came, kissed me, and gave me this," she said, still holding the shining little bomb in her small white hand. "He said he intended, if possible, to get over the hills to the frontier at Satanow."

I saw that she was deeply in love with the fugitive, whoever he might be.

Outside, the awful massacre was in progress we knew, but no sound of it reached us down in that rock-hewn tomb. [Pg 170]

The yellow lamp-light fell upon her sweet, dimpled face, but when she turned her splendid eyes to mine I saw that in them was a look of anxiety and terror inexpressible.

I inquired of her father and mother, for she was of a superior class, as I had, from the first moment, detected. She spoke French extremely well, and we had dropped into that language as being easier for me than Russian.

"What can it matter to you, sir, a stranger?" she sighed.

"But I am interested in you, mademoiselle," I answered. "Had I not been, I should not have fired that shot."

"Ah yes!" she cried quickly. "I am an ingrate! You saved my life;" and again she seized both my hands and kissed them.

"Hark!" I cried, startled. "What's that?" for I distinctly heard a sound of cracking wood.

The next moment men's gruff voices reached us from above.

"The Cossacks!" she screamed. "They have found us—they have found us!" and the light died out of her beautiful countenance.

In her trembling hand she held the terrible little engine of destruction.

With a quick movement I gripped her wrist, urging her to refrain until all hope was abandoned, and together we stood facing the soldiers as they descended the stairs to where we were. They were, it seems, searching every house. [Pg 171]

"Ah!" they cried, "a good hiding-place this! But the wall was hollow, and revealed the door."

"Well, my pretty!" exclaimed a big leering Cossack, chucking the trembling girl beneath the chin.

"Hold!" I commanded the half-dozen men who now stood before us, their swords red with the life-blood of the Revolution. But before I could utter further word the poor girl was wrenched from my grasp, and the Cossack was smothering her face with his hot, nauseous kisses.

"Hold, I tell you!" I shouted. "Release her, or it is at your own peril!"

"Hulloa!" they laughed. "Who are you?" and one of the men raised his sword to strike me, whilst another held him back, exclaiming, "Let us hear what he has to say."

"Then, listen!" I said, drawing from my pocket-book a folded paper. "Read this, and look well at the signature. This girl is under my protection;" and I handed the document to the man who held little Luba in his arms. It was only my Foreign Office passport, but I knew they could not read English and that it was a formidable screed, with its coat-of-arms and visa.

The men, astounded at my announcement, read what they took to be some all-powerful ukase beneath the lamp-light, and took counsel among themselves.

"And who, pray, is this Jewess?" inquired one. [Pg 172]

"My affianced wife," was my quick reply. "And I command you at once to take us under safe escort to General Krasiloff—quickly, without delay. We took refuge in this place from the Revolution, in which we have taken no part."

I saw, however, with sinking heart, that one of the men was examining the bomb-maker's bench, and had recognised the character of what remained there.

He looked at us, smiled grimly, and whispered smoothly to one of his companions.

Again, in an authoritative tone, I demanded to be taken to Krasiloff; and presently, after being marched as prisoners across the town, past scenes so horrible that they are still vividly before my eyes, we were taken into the chief police-office, where the hated official, a fat, red-faced man in a general's uniform—the man without pity or remorse, the murderer of women and children—was sitting at a table. He greeted me with a grunt.

"General," I said, addressing him, "I have to present to you this order of my sovereign, King Edward, and to demand safe conduct. Your soldiers found me and my——"

I hesitated.

"Your pretty Jewess—eh?" and a smile of sarcasm spread over his fat face. "Well, go on;" and he took the paper I handed him, knitting his brows again as his eyes fell upon the Imperial arms and the signature. [Pg 173]

"We were found in a cellar where we had hidden from the revolt," I said.

"The place has been used for the manufacture of bombs," declared one of the Cossacks.

The General looked my pretty companion straight in the face.

"What is your name, girl?" he demanded roughly.

"Luba Lazereff."

"Native of where?"

"Of Petersburg."

"What are you doing in Ostrog?"

"She is with me," I interposed. "I demand protection for her."

"I am addressing the prisoner, sir," was his cold remark.

"You refuse to obey the request of the King of England? Good! Then I shall report you to the Minister," I exclaimed, piqued at his insolence.

"Speak, girl!" he roared, his black eyes fixed fiercely upon her. "Why are you in Ostrog? You are no provincial—you know."

"She is my affianced wife," I said, "and in face of that document she need make no reply to any of your questions. Read what His Majesty commands."

"Thank you, sir. I have already read it." But I knew he could not read English.

A short, stout little man, shabbily dressed, pushed his way forward to the table, saying— [Pg 174]

"Luba Lazareff is a well-known revolutionist, your excellency. The French maker of bombs, Gustave Lemaire, is her lover—not this gentleman. Gustave only left Ostrog yesterday." The speaker was, it was plain, an agent of secret police.

"And where is Lemaire now? I gave orders for his arrest some days ago."

"He was found this morning by the patrol on the road to Schumsk, recognised and shot."

At this poor little Luba gave vent to a piercing scream, and burst into a torrent of bitter tears.

"You fiends!" she cried. "You have shot my Gustave! He is dead—*dead!*"

"There was no doubt, I suppose, as to his identity?" asked the General.

"None, your Excellency. Some papers found upon the body have been forwarded to us with the report."

"Then let the girl be shot also. She aided him in the manufacture of the bombs."

"Shot!" I gasped, utterly staggered. "What do you mean, General? You will shoot a poor defenceless girl—and in face of that ukase before you—in face of my demand for her protection! I have promised her marriage," I cried in desperation, "and you condemn her to execution!"

"My Emperor has given me orders to quell the rebellion, and all who make bombs for use against the Government must die. His Majesty gave me orders to execute all such," said the official sternly. "You, sir, will have safe-conduct to whatever place you wish to visit. Take the girl away." [Pg 175]

"But, General, reflect a moment whether this is not—"

"I never reflect, sir," he cried angrily; and rising from his chair with outstretched hand, he snapped—

"How much of my time are you going to lose over the wench? Take her away—and let it be done at once."

The poor condemned girl, blanched to the lips and trembling from head to foot, turned quickly to me, and in a few words in French thanked me and again kissed my hand, with the brief words, "Farewell, you have done your best. God will reward you!"

Then, with one accord, we all turned, and together went mournfully forth into the street.

A lump arose in my throat, for I saw, as the General pointed out, that my pretended ukase did not extend beyond my own person. Luba was a Russian subject, and therefore under the Russian martial law.

Of a sudden, however, just as we emerged into the roadway, the unfortunate girl, at whose side I still remained, turned, and raising her tearful face to mine, with sudden impetuosity kissed me.

Then, before any of us were aware of her intention, she turned, and rushed back into the room where the General was still sitting. [Pg 176]

The Cossacks dashed back after her, but ere they reached the chamber there was a terrific explosion, the air was filled with débris, the back of the building was torn completely out, and when, a few minutes later, I summoned courage to enter and peep within the wrecked room, I saw a scene that I dare not describe here in cold print.

Suffice it to say that the bodies of Luba Lazareff and General Stephen Krasiloff were unrecognisable, save for the shreds of clothing that still remained.

Luba had used her bomb in revenge for Gustave's death, and she had freed Russia of the heartless tyrant who had condemned her to die.

An hour later I found the blackened ruins of the house of Countess Alexandrovsky, but hearing no news of Bindo I returned to the car, and set out again towards the Austrian frontier.

Yes, that brief run in Russia was full of excitement.

CHAPTER IX

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CONCERNING THE OTHER FELLOW

Last spring Count Bindo again renewed his lease of the furnished villa on the Viale dei Colli, that beautiful drive that winds up behind the Arno from the Porta Romana, in Florence, past San Miniato. It was a fine old place, standing in its own grounds, and was the German Embassy in the days when the Lily City was the Italian capital.

There were reasons for this. Sir Charles Blythe was living at the Grand, and Henderson was at the Hôtel de la Ville. A *coup* was intended at one of the jewellers on the Ponte Vecchio—a place where it was known that there were a quantity of valuable pearls.

It was not, however, successful; for certain difficulties arose that were insurmountable.

The trio left Florence at the beginning of May, but I was left alone with the car and with the Italian servants to idle away the days as best I could. They had all three gone to Aix, I think.

The only other Englishman left in Florence appeared to be a man I had recently re-encountered, named Charlie Whitaker. He and I had become great friends, as we had been several years before. I often took him for a run on the car, to Bologna, Livorno, or Siena, and we used to meet nearly every evening. [Pg 178]

One stifling August night Florence lay gasping.

Above the clatter of the café, the music, the laughter of women and the loud chatter in Italian, the strident cries of the newsvendors rose in the great moonlit Piazza, with its huge equestrian statue of the beloved Vittorio looming dark against the steely sky.

Only the *popolo*, the merry, brown-faced, easy-going Florentines, were still in the sun-baked city. All Society, even the richer tradesmen, and certainly all the foreign residents, had fled—all of the latter save two, Charlie and myself.

You, who know the quaint old mediæval city in the winter "season," when the smart balls are given at the Corsini or the Strozzi, when the Cascine is filled with pretty women at four o'clock, and the jewellers on the Ponte Vecchio put forth their imitation cinquecento wares, would not know it in August, when beneath that fiery Tuscan sun it is as a city of the dead by day, while at night the lower classes come forth from their slums to idle, to gossip, and to enjoy the *bel fresco* after the heat and burden of the day.

On an August night the little dark-eyed seamstress sits and enjoys her ice at the same tin-topped table at the Gambirinus where the foreign Princess has sat in April. In winter Florence is a city of the wealthy; in summer it is given over entirely to the populace. So great is the sweltering, breathless heat, that everyone who can leave Florence in August leaves it. The great villas and palaces are closed; the Florence Club, that most exclusive institution in Europe, is shut up; the hotels move up to Camaldoli, to Pracchia, or to Abetone; and to be seen in Florence in those blazing days causes wonder and comment. [Pg 179]

Charlie and I were the only two foreigners in Florence. I had remained on at the orders of Bindo, and Charlie—well, he remained for the best of reasons, because he hadn't the money with which to go up into the mountains, or down to the sea.

Charlie Whitaker was an "outsider," I knew, but not by any fault of his own. He lived in Florence mostly on the charity of his friends. A tall, lithe, good-looking fellow of thirty-two, he came of a Yorkshire stock, and for seven or eight years had lived the gay life of town, and been a member of the Stock Exchange. Left very well off, he had developed keen business instincts, and had been so successful that in three years he had gained a comfortable fortune by speculation. He bought a bijou house in Deanery Street, off Park Lane, turned it inside out, and made a pretty bachelor

residence of it.

Half London knew Charlie Whitaker. I first met him when he was about to purchase a new "Napier." He gave smart luncheon-parties at the Bachelors, dinners at the Savoy, and was the pet of certain countesses of the smart set. Indeed, he led the London life of a man of ample means untrammelled with a woman, until, of a sudden, he failed. Why, nobody knew; even to his most intimate friends the crisis was a complete mystery.

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I only know that I met him in the Strand one night. He seemed sad and pensive. Then, when he grasped my hand in farewell, he said—

"Well, Ewart, good-night. I may see you again some day."

That "some day" came very soon. Two months later he was living *en pension* at twenty-five lire a week in the attic of a great old mediæval palace close to the Piazza Santa Trinità. Florence, the greatest city for gossip in the whole world, quickly knew his past, and nobody would receive him. Snubbed everywhere, jeered at by the stuck-up foreign colony of successful English shopkeepers, he received no invitations, and I believe I was his only friend.

Even my friendship with him brought criticism upon me—modest chauffeur that I was. Why did I make an intimate of such a man? Some declared him to be an absconding bankrupt; others cast suspicion that he had fled from England because of some grave scandal; while others made open charges against him in the Club that were cruel to a degree.

Up at the villa, however, he was always welcome. I alone knew that he was a man of sterling worth, that his misfortunes were none of his own seeking, and that the charges against him were all false. He had made a big speculation and had unfortunately burnt his fingers—that was all.

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And on this hot, feverish night, with the clear white moon shining down upon the Piazza, we sat to gossip, to drink our iced bock, and to smoke our long Toscano cigars, which, to the resident in Italy, become so palatable.

I knew that Charlie had had his romance, one of the strangest of all that I had known. Crushed, hipped, bankrupt, almost penniless, he had never mentioned it to me. It was his own private affair, and I, as his friend, never referred to so painful a subject.

It is strange how one takes to some men. All my friends looked askance when I walked about Florence with Charlie Whitaker. Some insinuated that his past was a very black one, and others openly declared that he never dare face the Consul, or go back to England, because a warrant was out for him. Truly he was under a cloud, poor fellow, and I often felt sorry for all the open snubs he received.

As we sat that night smoking outside on the pavement, with the merry, careless populace idling to and fro, he seemed a trifle more pensive than usual, and I inquired the reason.

"Nothing, Ewart," he declared, with a faint smile; "nothing very particular. Thoughts—only thoughts of—"

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"Of what?"

"Of town—of our dear old London that I suppose I shall never see again," and his mouth hardened. "Do you remember Pall Mall, the Park, the Devonshire—and Vivi?"

I nodded, and pulled at my cheap cigar.

Vivi! Did I remember her? Why, I had often driven the Honourable Victoria Violet Finlay, the girl—for she was only eighteen—who had once flirted with me when I was in her father's service. Why, I wondered, did he mention her? Could he know the truth? Could he know the galling bitterness of my own heart? I think not. Through the many months I had been the Count's chauffeur I had held my secret, though my heart was full of bitterness.

Mention of her name recalled, under that white Italian moonlight, a vision of her—the tall, slim, graceful girlish figure, the oval delicate face with clear blue eyes, and the wealth of red-gold hair beneath her motor-cap. She rose before me with that sad, bitter smile of farewell that she had given me when, as she was seated beside me in the car, on our way from Guildford to London, I bent over her small white hand for the last time.

Whew! Why are we men given memories? Half one's life seems to be made up of vain regrets. Since that day I had, it was true, never ceased to think of her, yet I had lived a lonely, melancholy life, even though it were fraught with such constant excitement.

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"You knew Vivi, of course?" I remarked, after a long silence, looking my fellow-exile straight in the face.

"I met her once or twice at the house of my aunt, Lady Ailesworth," was his reply. "I wonder where she is now? There was some talk of her marrying Baron de Boek, the Belgian banker. Did you hear it?"

I nodded. The rumour was, alas! too well known to me. How is it that the memory of one woman clings to a man above all others? Why does one woman's face haunt every man, whatever age he may be, or whether he be honest or a thief?

Whitaker was watching my countenance so intently that I was filled with surprise. I had never told a soul of my flirtation.

Three youths passed along the pavement playing upon their mandolines an air from the latest opera at the Arena, laughing at two hatless girls of the people who were drinking coffee at the table next to us, and next moment the *al fresco* orchestra in the balcony above struck up a waltz.

"Faugh!" cried my companion, starting up. "Let's go. This music is intolerable! Let's walk along the Lung Arno, by the river."

I rose, and together we strolled to the river-side along that embankment, the favourite walk of Dante and of Petrarch, of Raphael and of Michelangelo. All was silent, for the great ponderous palaces lining the river were closed till winter, and there were no shops or cafés. [Pg 184]

For a long time we walked in the brilliant night without uttering a word. At last he said in a strange, hard voice—

"I've received news to-day which every other man beside myself would regard as the very worst information possible, and yet, to me, it is the most welcome."

"What's that?" I inquired.

"I saw two doctors, Pellegrini and Gori, to-day, and both have said the same thing—I am dying. In a few weeks I shall have ceased to trouble anybody."

"Dying!" I gasped, halting and staring at him. "Why, my dear fellow, you are the very picture of health."

"I know," he smiled. "But I have for a long time suspected myself doomed. I have a complaint that is incurable. Therefore I wonder if you would do me one small favour. Will you keep this letter until I am dead, and afterwards open it and act upon its instructions? They may seem strange to you, but you will ascertain the truth. When you do know the truth, recollect that though dead I beg of you one thing—your forgiveness."

"Forgiveness? For what? I don't understand you."

"No," he said bitterly. "Of course you don't. And I have no wish that you should—until after I am dead. You are my only friend, and yet I have to ask you to forgive. Here is the letter," he added, drawing an envelope from his pocket and handing it to me. "Take it to-night, for I never know if I may live to see another day." [Pg 185]

I took it, and noting its big black seal, placed it carefully in my inner pocket. Two loafers were standing in the shadow in front of us, and their presence reminded me that that end of the Lung Arno is not very safe at night. Therefore we turned, slowly retracing our steps back to the quaint old bridge with the houses upon it—the Ponte Vecchio.

Just before we reached it my companion stopped, and grasping my hand suddenly, said in a choking voice—

"You have been my only friend since my downfall, Ewart. Without you, I should have starved. These very clothes I wear were bought with money you have so generously given me. I can never thank you sufficiently. You have prolonged a useless and broken life, but it will soon be at an end, and I shall no longer be a burden to you."

"A burden? What rubbish! You're not yourself to-night, Whitaker. Cheer up, for Heaven's sake."

"Can a condemned man laugh? Well," he added, with a mocking smile, "I'll try. Come, old fellow, let's go back to the Gambrinus and have another bock—before we part. I've got a franc—one of yours—so I'll stand it!" [Pg 186]

And we walked on to the big Piazza, with its music and its garish cafés, the customers of which overflowed into the square, where they sat in great groups.

Italy is indeed a complex country, and contains more of the flotsam and jetsam of English derelicts than any other country in all Europe. Every Italian town has its own *coterie* of broken-down Englishmen and Englishwomen, the first-mentioned mostly sharks, and the latter mostly drunkards. Truly the shifty existence led by these exiles presents a strange phrase of life, so essentially cosmopolitan and yet so essentially tragic.

It was half-past one when I left my friend to walk home out of the town through the narrow Via Romana. The ill-lit neighbourhood through which I had to pass was somewhat unsafe late at night, but being well known in Florence I never feared, and was walking briskly, full of thought of my own love-romance, when, of a sudden, two rough-looking men coming out of a side street collided with me, apologetic, and went off hurriedly.

At first I felt bewildered, so sudden was the encounter. My thoughts had been very far away from that dark ancient street. But next moment I felt in my pocket. My wallet—in which one carries the paper currency of Italy—was gone, and with it Whitaker's precious letter! [Pg 187]

Those men had evidently watched me take out my wallet when on the Lung Arno, and waited for me as I walked home.

I turned to look after them, but they had already disappeared into that maze of crooked, squalid

streets around the Pitti. Fortunately, there was not more than a sovereign in it. I was filled with regret, however, on account of my friend's letter. He had trusted me with some secret. I had accepted the confidence he reposed in me, and yet, by my carelessness, the secret, whatever it was, had passed into other hands. Should I tell him? I hesitated. What would you have done in such circumstances?

Well, I decided to say nothing. If the thief knew me, as he most probably did, he might return the letter anonymously when he discovered that it was of no value. And that there was anything of value within was entirely out of the question.

So months went by. I was ordered to take the car back to England, and then went to Germany and to France. Only once Whitaker wrote to me. Florence, he declared, was very dull now I had left.

A *coup* had been made in Biarritz,—a little matter of a few sparklers,—and Bindo and I found ourselves living, early in January, at the Villa Igiea, at Palermo.

As I sat alone, smoking and gazing out upon the blue bay, with the distant mountains purple in the calm sundown, the quick *frou-frou* of silken skirts passed close by me, and a tall, slender girl, very elegantly dressed, went forth alone into the beautiful gardens that slope down to the sea. I noted her neat figure, her gait, the red-gold tint of her hair, and the peculiar manner in which she carried her left hand when walking. [Pg 188]

Could it be Vivi? I sat up, staring after her in wonder. Her figure was perfect, her elegant cream gown was evidently the "creation" of one of the man-milliners of the Rue de la Paix, and I noticed that the women sitting around had turned and were admiring her for her general *chic*.

She turned into the gardens ere I could catch a glimpse of her face, and I sat back again, laughing at my own foolishness. Somehow, during the past three years, I had fancied I saw her a dozen times—in London, in Rome, in Paris, in Nice, and elsewhere. But I had always, alas! discovered it to be an illusion. The figure of this girl in cream merely resembled hers, that was all. I tried to convince myself of it, and yet I was unable to do so. Why, I cannot tell, but I had been seized with a keen desire to see her face. I half rose, but sat back again, ridiculing my own thoughts. And so five minutes passed, until, unable to resist longer, I rose, went forth into the gardens, and wandered among the palms in search of her.

At last I found her standing by a low wall, her face turned towards the sea. Alone, she had paused in her walk, and with her eyes turned across the bay she was in a deep reverie. Then, as she heard my footstep, she turned and faced me. [Pg 189]

"Vivi!" I cried, rushing toward her.

"You!—George!" she gasped, starting back in sudden amazement.

"Yes," I said madly. "At last, after all this long time, I have found you!"

She held her breath. Her beautiful countenance changed, her sweet mouth hardened; I fancied I saw tears welling in her great blue eyes that were so fathomless.

"I—I did not dream that you were here, or I would never have come," she faltered. "Never!"

"Because you still wish to avoid me—eh? Your memory still remains to me—but, alas! only a memory," I said sadly, taking her hand again and holding it firmly within my own. "I am only a chauffeur."

Our eyes met. She looked at me long and steadily. Her chest rose and fell, and she turned her gaze from me, away to the purple mountains across the bay.

"Let me still remain only a memory," she answered in a low, strained voice. "It is as painful to me to meet you—as to you."

"But why? Tell me why?" I demanded, raising her soft hand again to my lips. "Do you remember that day on the Ripley road—the day when we parted?"

She nodded, and her chest rose and fell again, stirred by her own deep emotions.

"You would give me no reason for your sudden decision." [Pg 190]

"And I still can give you none."

"But why?"

She was silent, standing there with the brilliant Southern afterglow falling full upon her beautiful face. Behind her was a background of feathery palms, and we were alone.

I still held her hand, though she endeavoured to withdraw it.

"Ah!" I cried, "you always withhold your reason from me. I am not rich like other men who admire and flatter you, yet I tell you—ah yes, I swear to you—that only you do I love. Ever since you came fresh from your school in Germany I admired you. Do you remember how many times you sat at my side on the old Panhard? Surely you must have known that? Surely you must have guessed the reason why I always preferred you in the front seat?"

"Yes—yes!" she faltered, interrupting me. "I know. I loved you, but I was foolish—very foolish."

"Why foolish?"

She made no reply, but burst suddenly into tears.

Tenderly I placed my arm about her waist. What could I do, save to try and comfort her? In the three years that had passed she had grown into womanhood, and yet she still preserved that sweet girlishness that, in these go-ahead days, is so refreshing and attractive in a woman in her early twenties.

In those calm moments in the glorious Sicilian sundown I recollected those days when at seventeen she had admitted her love for me, and we were happy. Visions of that blissful past arose before me—and then the crushing blow I had received prior to our parting.

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"Vivi, tell me," I whispered at last, "why do you still hold aloof from me?"

"Because I—I must."

"But why? You surely are now your own mistress?"

Her eyes were fixed upon me again very gravely for some moments in silence. Then she answered in a low voice—

"But I can never marry you. It is impossible."

"No, I know. There is such a wide difference in our stations," I said regretfully.

"No, it is not that. The reason is one that is my own secret," was her answer, as she drew her breath and her little hands clenched themselves.

"May I not know it?"

"No—never. It—well, it concerns myself alone."

"But you still love me, Vivi? You still think of me?" I cried.

"Occasionally."

And then she turned away in the direction of the hotel.

I followed, and grasping her by the hand, repeated my question.

"My secret is my own," was all the satisfaction she would give me.

And I was forced at last to allow her to walk back to the hotel, and to follow her alone.

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What was the nature of her secret?

If ever a man's heart sank to the depths of despair mine sank at that moment. She had been all the world to me, and, cosmopolitan adventurer that I had now become, I met a thousand bright-eyed *chic* and attractive women, yet I revered her memory as the one woman who was pure and perfect.

I watched her disappear into the green-carpeted hotel-lounge, where an orchestra of mandolinists were playing an air from *La Bohème*. Then I turned away, full of my own sad thoughts, and strolled in the falling twilight beside the grey sea.

Just before dinner, after re-entering the hotel, I wrote a note and gave it to the hall-porter to send to the Signorina.

"The Signorina and the Signora have left, Signore. They went down to the boat for Naples half an hour ago."

I tore up the note, and next day left Palermo.

Next night I was in Naples, but could find no trace of them. So I went on to Rome, where I was equally unsuccessful. From the Eternal City I took the express to Calais, and on to London, where I learnt that the Viscount her father had died six months before, and that she was travelling on the Continent with her aunt.

Nearly a year passed without any news of my love.

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I spent the spring at Monte Carlo, and in May, the month of flowers, found myself back at Bindo's old villa in Florence, gloomy to me on account of my own loneliness. The two English dogs barked me welcome, and Charlie Whitaker that night came and dined; for Bindo was away.

After dinner we sat in the long wicker chairs out in the garden beneath the palms, taking our coffee in the flower-scented air, with the myriad fire-flies dancing about us.

At table Charlie had been in his best mood, telling me all the gossip of Florence, but out in the garden, with his face in the shadow, he seemed to become morose and uncommunicative. I asked how he had got on during my absence, for I knew he was friendless.

"Oh, fairly well," was his answer. "A bit lonely, you know. But I used to come up here every day and take the dogs out for a run. An outsider like I am can't expect invitations to dinners and

dances, you know;" and he sighed, and drew vigorously at his cigar.

"By the way," I said presently, "you remember you once mentioned that you knew Vivi Finlay in the old days in town. I met her in Palermo in the winter."

He started from his chair, and leaning towards me, echoed—

"You met her!—you? Tell me about her. How did she look? What is she doing?" he asked, with an earnest eagerness that surprised me. [Pg 194]

Briefly I explained how I had walked and chatted with her in the gardens of the Igiea at Palermo, though I did not tell him the subject of our conversation. I tried, too, to induce him to tell me what he knew of her, but he would say nothing beyond what I already knew.

"I wonder she don't marry," I remarked at last; but to this he made no response, though I fancied that in the half light I detected a curious smile upon his face, as though he was aware that we had been lovers.

He deftly turned the conversation, though he became more bitter, as if his life was now even more soured than formerly. Then, at midnight, he took his hat and stick, and I opened the gate of the drive and let him out upon the road.

As he left, he grasped my hand warmly, and in a voice full of emotion said—

"Good-night, Ewart. May you be rewarded one day for keeping from starvation a good-for-nothing devil like myself!"

And he passed on into the darkness beneath the trees, on his way back to his high-up humble room down in the heart of the town.

At eight o'clock next morning, when I met Pietro, Bindo's man, I noticed an unusual expression upon his face, and asked him what had happened.

"I have bad news for you, Signor Ewart," he answered with hesitation. "At four o'clock this morning the Signor Whitaker was found by the police lying upon the pavement of the Lung Arno, close to the Porta San Frediano. He was dead—struck down with a knife from behind." [Pg 195]

"Murdered!" I gasped.

"Yes, Signore. It is already in the papers;" and he handed me a copy of the *Nazione*.

Dumbfounded, unnerved, I dressed myself quickly, and driving down to the police-office, saw the head of the detective department, a man named Bianchi.

The sharp-featured little man sitting at the table, after taking down a summary of all I knew regarding my poor friend, explained how the discovery had been made. The body was quite cold when found, and the deep wound between the shoulders showed most conclusively that he had fallen by the hand of an assassin. I was then shown the body, and looked upon the face of poor Charlie, the "outsider," for the last time.

"He had no money upon him," I told Bianchi. "Indeed, before leaving me he had remarked that he was almost without a soldo."

"Yes. It is that very fact which puzzles us. The motive of the crime was evidently not robbery."

In the days that succeeded the police made most searching inquiries, but discovered nothing. My only regret—and it was indeed a deep one—was that I had lost the letter he had given me with injunctions to open it after his death. Did he fear assassination? I wondered. Did that letter give any clue to the assassin? [Pg 196]

But the precious document, whatever it might be, was now irretrievably lost, and the death of "Mr. Charles Whitaker, late of the Stock Exchange," as the papers put it, remained one of the many murder-mysteries of the city of Florence.

Months had gone by—months of constant travel and loneliness, grief and despair.

I was in my room at the Hotel Bonne Femme in Turin, having a wash after a dusty run with the "forty," when the waiter announced Mr. Bianchi, and the sharp-featured, black-haired little man, recently promoted from Florence to watch the Anarchists in Milan.

"I am very glad, Signor Ewart, that I have been able to catch you here; you are such a bird of passage, you know," he said in Italian. "But in searching the house of a thief in Florence the other day our men found this letter, addressed to you;" and he produced from his pocket the missive that Charlie had on that hot night entrusted to my care.

I broke the black seal and read it eagerly. Its contents held me speechless in amazement.

"Do you know anything of a young man named Giovanni Murri, a Florentine?" I inquired quickly.

"Murri?" he repeated, knitting his brows. "Why, if I remember aright, a young man of that name was found drowned in the Arno on the same day that your friend the Signor Whitaker was [Pg 197]

discovered dead. He had been a waiter in London, it was said."

"That was the man. He killed my poor friend, and then committed suicide;" and I briefly explained how Whitaker had given me the letter which two hours afterwards had been stolen from me.

"The thief was the son of Count di Ferraris' gardener—a bad character. Finding that it was addressed to you, he evidently intended to return it unopened, and forgot to do so," Bianchi said. "But may I not read the letter?"

"No," I replied firmly. "It concerns a purely private affair. All that I can tell you is that Murri killed my friend. It explains the mystery."

Three nights later, I stood with my well-beloved in the elegant drawing-room of a house just off Park Lane, where she was living with her aunt.

I had placed the dead man's letter in her hand, and she was reading it breathlessly, her sweet face blanched, her tiny hands trembling.

"Mr. Ewart," she faltered hoarsely, her eyes downcast as she stood before me, "it is the truth. I ought to have told you long ago. Forgive me."

"I have already forgiven you. You must have suffered just as bitterly as I have done," I said, taking her hand.

"Ah yes. God alone knows the wretched life I have led, loving you and yet not daring to tell you my secret. As Charlie has written here, the young Italian, my father's valet, fell in love with me when I came home from school in Germany, and once I foolishly allowed him to kiss me. From that moment he became filled with a mad passion for me, and though I induced my father to dismiss him, he haunted me. Then I met Charlie Whitaker, and fancied that I loved him. Every girl is anxious to secure a husband. He was rich, kind, good-looking, and all that was eligible, save that he was not of the nobility, and for that reason he knew that my father would discountenance him. He, however, induced me to take a step that I afterwards bitterly regretted. I met him one morning at the registry office at Kensington, and we were married. We lunched together at the Savoy, and then I drove home again. That very afternoon the crash came, and on that same night he was compelled to leave England for the Continent, a ruined man."

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"He must have known of the impending crisis," I remarked simply.

"I fear he did," was her reply. "But it was only a week later that you, who had known me so long, spoke to me. You told me of your love, alas! too late. What could I reply? What irony of Fate!"

"Yes, yes. I see. You could not tell me the truth."

"No. For several reasons. I loved you, yet I knew that if you were in ignorance you would remain Charlie's friend. Ah! you cannot know the awful suspense, and the thousand and one subterfuges I had to adopt. Murri, who was still in London, employed at the Carlton Club, continued to pester me with his passionate letters—the letters of an imbecile. Somehow, a year later, he discovered our marriage, by the official record, I think, and then he met me in secret one day and vowed a terrible vengeance."

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"His threat he carried out," I said; "and you, my darling, are at last free."

Her head fell upon my shoulder, her chiffons rose and fell again, and our lips met in a long, hot, passionate caress, by which I knew that she was still mine—still my own sweet love.

But I was merely a chauffeur—and an adventurer.

That is why I have not married.

CHAPTER X

[Pg 200]

THE LADY IN A HURRY

"Ah! your London is such a strange place. So dull, so triste—so very damp and foggy."

"Not always, mademoiselle," I replied. "You have been there in winter. You should go in June. In the season it is as pleasant as anywhere else in the world."

"I have no desire to return. And yet——"

"Well?"

"And yet I have decided to go straight to Boulogne, and across the Channel."

I had met Julie Rosier under curious circumstances only a few hours before. I was on a run alone, with the forty "Napier," from Limoges to London, and on that particular winter's night had pulled up at the small station of Bersac to send a telegram. I had written out the message, leaving the car outside, and was walking along the platform, when the stationmaster, who had been talking

with a tall, dark-haired, good-looking girl, approached me, cap in hand.

"Excuse me, m'sieur, but a lady wishes to ask a great favour of you."

"Of me? What is it?" I inquired, rising.

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Glancing at the tall figure in black, I saw that she was not more than twenty-two at the outside, and that she had the bearing and manner of a lady.

"Well, m'sieur, she will explain herself," the man said; whereupon the fair stranger approached, bowing, and exclaimed—

"I trust M'sieur will pardon me for what I am about to ask. I know it is great presumption on my part, a total stranger, but the fact is that I am bound to get to Paris to-morrow morning. It is imperative—most imperative—that I should be there and keep an appointment. I find, however, that the last train has gone. I thought——" and she hesitated, with downcast eyes.

"You mean that you want me to allow you to travel in the car, mademoiselle?" I said, with a smile.

"Ah! m'sieur, if you would—if you only would! It would be an act of friendship that I would never forget."

She saw my hesitation, and I detected how anxious she became. Her gloved hands were trembling, and she seemed agitated and pale to the lips.

Again I scrutinised her. There was nothing of the police spy or adventuress about her. On the contrary, she seemed a very charmingly modest young woman.

"But surely it would be rather wearisome, mademoiselle?" I said.

"No, no, not at all. I must get to Paris at all costs. Ah! m'sieur, you will allow me to do as I ask, will you not? Do, I implore you!"

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I made no reply; for, truth to tell, although I was not suspicious, I hesitated to allow the fair stranger to be my travelling companion. It was against my principle. Yet, reading disinclination in my silence, she continued—

"Ah! m'sieur, if you only knew in what deadly peril I am! By granting this favour to me you can ——" and she broke off short. "Well," she went on, "I may as well tell you the truth, m'sieur;" and in her eyes there was a strange look that I had never seen in those of any woman before,—“you can save my life.”

"Your life?" I echoed, but at that moment the stationmaster, standing at the buffet door, said—

"Pardon, m'sieur. I am just closing the station. The last train has departed."

"Do take me!" implored the girl. "Do, m'sieur! Do!"

There was no time for further discussion, therefore I did as she requested, and a few moments later, with a dressing-case, which was all the baggage she had, she mounted into the car beside me, and we moved off northward to the capital.

I offered her the fur rug, and she wrapped it about her knees with the air of one used to motoring.

And so, hour after hour, we sat and chatted. I asked her if she liked a cigarette, and she gladly accepted. So we smoked together, while she told me something of herself. She was a native of Nimes, where her people had been wealthy landowners, she said, but some unfortunate speculation on her father's part brought ruin to them, and she was now governess in the family of a certain Baron de Moret, of the Château de Moret, near Paris.

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A governess! I had believed from her dress and manner that she was at least the daughter of some French aristocrat, and I confess I was disappointed to find that she was only a superior servant.

"I have just come from Nice," she explained, "on very urgent business—business that concerns my own self. If I am not in Paris this morning I shall, in all probability, pay the penalty with my life."

"How? What do you mean?"

In the grey dawn, as we went on towards Paris, I saw that her countenance was that of a woman who held a secret. At first I had been conscious that there was something unusual about her, and suspected her to be an adventuress; but now, on further acquaintance, I became convinced that she held possession of some knowledge that she was yearning to betray, yet feared to do so.

One fact that struck me as curious was that, in the course of our conversation, she showed that she knew my destination was London. This puzzled me.

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"When we arrive in Paris I must leave you to keep my appointments," she said. "We will meet again at the corner of the Rue Royale, if you really will take me on to Boulogne with you?"

"Most certainly," was my reply.

"Ah!" she sighed, looking straight into my face with those great dark eyes that were so luminous,

"you do not know—you can never guess what a great service you have rendered me by allowing me to travel here with you. My peril is the gravest that—well, that ever threatened a woman; yet now, by your aid, I shall be able to save myself. Otherwise, to-morrow my body would have been exposed in the Morgue—the corpse of a woman unknown."

"These words of yours interest me."

"Ah! m'sieur, you do not know. And I cannot tell you. It is a secret—ah! if I only dare speak you would help me, I know;" and I saw in her face a look full of apprehension and distress.

As she raised her hand to push the dark hair from her brow, as though it oppressed her, my eyes caught sight of something glistening upon her wrist, half concealed by the lace on her sleeve. It was a magnificent diamond bangle.

Surely such an ornament would not be worn by a mere governess! I looked again into her handsome face, and wondered if she were deceiving me. [Pg 205]

"If it be in my power to assist you, mademoiselle, I will do so with the greatest pleasure. But of course I cannot without knowing the circumstances."

"And I regret that my lips are closed concerning them," she sighed, looking straight before her despairingly.

"Do you not fear to go alone?"

"I fear them no longer," was her reply, as she glanced at the little gold watch in her bracelet. "We shall be in Paris before ten o'clock—thanks to you, m'sieur."

"Well, when you first made the request I had no idea of the urgency of your journey," I remarked. "But I'm glad, very glad, that I've had an opportunity of rendering you some slight service."

"Slight, m'sieur? Why, you have saved me. I owe you a debt which I can never repay—never;" and the laces at her throat rose and fell as she sighed, her wonderful eyes still fixed upon me.

Gradually the yellow sun rose over the bare frozen lands over which we were speeding, and when at last we entered Paris, I set her down in the Place Vendôme.

"Au revoir, m'sieur, till twelve, at the Rue Royale," she exclaimed, with a merry smile and a bow, as she drove away in a cab, leaving me upon the kerb gazing after her and wondering. [Pg 206]

Was she really a governess, as she pretended?

Her clothes, her manner, her smart chatter, her exquisite *chic*, all revealed good breeding and a high station in life. There was no touch of cheap shabbiness—or at least I could not detect it.

A few moments before twelve she alighted from the cab at the corner of the Rue Royale and greeted me merrily. Her face was slightly flushed, and I thought her hand trembled as I took it. But together we mounted into the car again.

"You seem a constant traveller on the road, m'sieur," she said, as we went along.

"I'm a constant traveller," I replied, with a laugh. "A little too constant, perhaps. One gets wearied with such continual travel as I am forced to undertake. I never know to-morrow where I may be, and I move swiftly from one place to another, never spending more than a day or two in the same place."

I did not, for obvious reasons, tell her my profession.

"But it must be very pleasant to travel so much," she declared. "I would love to be able to do so. I'm passionately fond of constant change."

Together we went on to Boulogne, crossed to Folkestone, and that same night at midnight entered London.

On our journey she gave me an address in the Vauxhall Bridge Road, where, she said, a letter would find her. She refused to tell me her destination or to allow me to see her into a hansom. This latter fact caused me considerable reflection. Why had she so suddenly made up her mind to come to London? and why should I not know whither she went, when she had told me so many details concerning herself? [Pg 207]

Of one fact I felt quite convinced—namely, that she had lied to me. She was not a governess, as she pretended. Besides, I had been seized by suspicion that a tall, thin-faced elderly man, rather shabbily dressed, whom I had noticed idling in the Rue Royale, had followed us by rail. I thought I saw him outside the Tivoli, in the Strand, where she descended.

His reappearance there recalled to me that he had watched us in the Rue Royale, and had appeared intensely interested in all our movements. Whether my pretty travelling-companion noticed him I do not know. I, however, watched her as she walked along the Strand carrying her dressing-bag, and saw the tall man striding after her. Adventurer was written upon the fellow's face. His grey moustache was upturned, and his keen grey eyes looked out from beneath shaggy brows, while his dark threadbare overcoat was tightly buttoned across his chest for greater warmth.

Without approaching her, he stood back in the shadow, and saw her enter a hansom and drive towards Charing Cross. It was clear that she was not going to the address she had given me, for she was driving in the opposite direction.

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My duty was to drive direct to Clifford Street and report to Bindo, but so interested was I in the thin-faced watcher that I turned the car into the courtyard of the Cecil in the Strand and left it there, in order to keep further observation upon the stranger.

Had not mademoiselle declared herself to be in danger of her life? If so, was it not possible that this fellow, whoever he was, was a secret assassin?

I did not like the aspect of the affair at all. I ought to have warned her against him, and I now became filled with regret. She was a complete mystery, and as I dogged the footsteps of the unknown foreigner—for that he undoubtedly was—I became more deeply interested in what was in progress.

He walked to Trafalgar Square, where he hesitated in such a manner as to show that he was not well acquainted with London. He did not know which of the converging thoroughfares to take. At last he inquired of the constable on point duty, and then went up St. Martin's Lane.

As soon as he had turned I approached the policeman and asked what the stranger wanted, explaining that he was a suspicious character whom I was following.

"'E's a Frenchman. 'E wants Burton Crescent."

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"Where's that?"

"Why, just off the Euston Road—close to Judd Street. I've told 'im the way."

I took a hansom, and drove to the place in question, a semicircle of dark-looking, old-fashioned houses of the Bloomsbury type—most of them let out in apartments. Then, alighting, I loitered for half an hour up and down, to await the arrival of the stranger.

He came at last, his tall meagre figure looming dark in the lamp-light. Very eagerly he walked round the Crescent, examining the numbers of the houses, until he came to one, rather cleaner than the others, of which he took careful observation.

I, too, took note of the number.

Afterwards, the stranger turned into the Euston Road, crossed to King's Cross Station, where he sent a telegram, and then went to one of the small uninviting private hotels in the neighbourhood. Having seen him there, I returned to Burton Crescent, and for an hour watched the house, wondering whether the mysterious Julie had taken up her abode there. To me it seemed as though the stranger had overheard the directions she had given the cabman.

The windows of the house were closed by green venetian blinds. I could see that there were lights in most of the rooms, while over the fan-light of the front door was a small transparent square of glass, bearing what seemed to be the representation of some Greek saint. The front steps were well kept, and in the deep basement was a well-lighted kitchen.

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I had been there about half an hour when the door opened, and a middle-aged man in evening dress, and wearing a black overcoat and crush hat, emerged. His dark face was an aristocratic one, and as he descended the steps he drew on his white gloves, for he was evidently on his way to the theatre. I took good notice of his face, for it was a striking countenance—one which once seen could never be forgotten.

A man-servant behind him blew a cab-whistle, a hansom came up, and he drove away. Then I walked up and down in the vicinity, keeping a weary vigil; for my curiosity was now much excited. The stranger meant mischief. Of that I was certain.

The one point I wished to clear up was whether Julie Rosier was actually within that house. But though I watched until I became half frozen in the drizzling rain, all was in vain. So I took a cab and drove to Clifford Street, to report my arrival to Count Bindo.

That same night, when I got to my rooms, I wrote a line to the address Julie had given me, asking whether she would make an appointment to meet me, as I wished to give her some very important information concerning herself, and to this on the following day I received a reply asking me to call at the house in Burton Crescent that evening at nine o'clock.

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Naturally I went. My surmise was correct that the house watched by the stranger was her abode. The fellow was keeping observation upon it with some evil intent.

The man-servant, on admitting me, showed me into a well-furnished drawing-room on the first floor, where sat my pretty travelling-companion ready to receive me.

In French she greeted me very warmly, bade me be seated, and after some preliminaries inquired the nature of the information which I wished to impart to her.

Very briefly I told her of the shabby watcher, whereupon she sprang to her feet with a cry of mingled terror and surprise.

"Describe him—quickly, M'sieur Ewart!" she urged in breathless agitation.

I did so, and she sat back again in her chair, staring straight before her.

"Ah!" she gasped, her countenance pale as death. "Then they mean revenge, after all. Very well! Now that I am forewarned I shall know how to act."

She rose, and pacing the room in agitation, pushed back the dark hair from her brow. Then her hands clenched themselves, and her teeth were set, for she was desperate.

The shabby man was an emissary of her enemies, she told me as much. Yet in all she said was mystery. At one moment I was convinced that she had told the truth when she said she was a governess, and at the next I suspected her of trying to deceive. [Pg 212]

Presently, after she had handed me a cigarette, the servant tapped at the door, and a well-dressed man entered—the same man I had seen leave the house two nights previously.

"May I introduce you?" mademoiselle asked. "M'sieur Ewart—M'sieur le Baron de Moret."

"Charmed to make your acquaintance, sir," the Baron said, grasping my hand. "Mademoiselle here has already spoken of you."

"The satisfaction is mutual, I assure you, Baron," was my reply, and then we re-seated ourselves and began to chat.

Suddenly mademoiselle made some remark in a language which I did not understand. The effect it had upon the new-comer was almost electrical. He started from his seat, glaring at her. Then he began to question her rapidly in the unknown tongue.

He was a flashily-dressed man, of overbearing manner, with a thick neck and square, determined chin. It was quite evident that the warning I had given them aroused their apprehensions, for they held a rapid consultation, and then Julie went out, returning with another man, a dark-haired, lowbred-looking foreigner, who spoke the same tongue as his companions.

They disregarded my presence altogether in their eager consultation, therefore I rose to go; for I saw that I was not wanted. [Pg 213]

Julie held my hand and looked into my eyes in mute appeal. She appeared anxious to say something to me in private. At least that was my impression.

When I left the house I passed, at the end of the Crescent, a shabby man idly smoking. Was he one of the watchers?

Four days went by. Soon my rest would be at an end, and I should be travelling at a moment's notice with Blythe and Bindo to the farther end of Europe.

One evening I was passing through the great hall of the Hotel Cecil to descend to the American bar, where I frequently had a cocktail, when a neatly-dressed figure in black rose and greeted me. It was Julie, who had probably been awaiting me an hour or more.

"May I speak to you?" she asked breathlessly, when we had exchanged greetings. "I wish to apologise for the manner in which I treated you the other evening."

I assured her that no apologies were needed, and together we strolled up and down the courtyard between the hotel entrance and the Strand.

"I really ought not to trouble you with my affairs," she said presently, in an apologetic tone, "but you remember what I told you when you so kindly allowed me to travel with you—I mean of my peril?"

"Certainly. But I thought it was all over."

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"I foolishly believed that it was. But I am watched; I—I'm a marked woman." Then, after some hesitation, she added, "I wonder if you would do me another favour. You could save my life, M'sieur Ewart—if you only would."

"Well, if I can render you such a service, mademoiselle, I shall be only too delighted. As I told you the other day, my next journey is to Petersburg, and I may have to start any hour after midnight to-morrow. What can I do?"

"At present my plans are immature," she answered after a pause. "But why not dine with me to-morrow night? We have some friends, but we shall be able to escape them, and discuss the matter alone. Do come."

I accepted, and she taking a hansom in the Strand, drove off.

On the following night at eight I entered the well-furnished drawing-room in Burton Crescent, where three well-dressed men and three rather smart ladies were assembled, including my hostess. They were all foreigners, and among them was the Baron, who appeared to be the most honoured guest. It was now quite plain that, instead of being a governess as she had asserted, she was a lady of good family and the Baron's social equal.

The party was a very pleasant one, and there was considerable merriment at table. My hostess's apprehension of the previous day had all disappeared, while the Baron's demeanour was one of calm security. [Pg 215]

I sat at my hostess's left hand, and she was particularly gracious to me, the whole conversation at table being in French.

At last, after dessert, the Baron remarked that, as it was New Year's Day, we should have snap-dragon, and, with his hostess's permission, left the dining-room and prepared it. Presently it appeared in a big antique Worcester bowl, and was placed on the table close to me.

Then the electric light was switched off, and the spirit ignited.

Next moment, with shouts and laughter, the blue flames shedding a weird light upon our faces, we were pulling the plums out of the fire—a childish amusement permissible because it was the New Year.

I had placed one in my mouth and swallowed it, but as I was taking a second from the blue flames I suddenly felt a faintness. At first I put it down to the heat of the room, but a moment later I felt a sharp spasm through my heart, and my brain swelled too large for my skull. My jaws were set. I tried to speak, but was unable to articulate a word.

I saw the fun had stopped and the faces of all were turned upon me anxiously. The Baron had risen, and his dark countenance peered into mine with a fiendish, murderous expression.

"I'm ill!" I gasped. "I—I'm sure I'm poisoned!"

The faces of all smiled again, while the Baron uttered some words which I could not understand, and then there was a dead silence, all still watching me intently—all except a fair-haired young man opposite me, who seemed to have fallen back in his chair unconscious. [Pg 216]

"You fiends!" I cried, with a great effort, as I struggled to rise. "What have I done to you that you should—poison—me?"

I know that the Baron grinned in my face, and that I fell forward heavily upon the table, my heart gripped in the spasm of death.

Of what occurred afterwards I have no recollection, for when I slowly regained knowledge of things around me, I found myself lying beneath a bare, leafless hedge in a grass field. I managed to struggle to my feet, and discovered myself in a bare, flat, open country. As far as I could judge it was midday. I got to a gate, skirted a hedge, and gained the main road. With difficulty I walked to the nearest town, a distance of about four miles, without meeting a soul, and to my surprise found myself in Hitchin. The spectacle of a man entering the town in evening dress and hatless in broad daylight was no doubt curious, but I was anxious to return to London and give information against those who had, without any apparent motive, laid an ingenious plot to poison me.

At the "Sun" I learned that the time was eleven in the morning. The only manner in which I could account for my presence in Hitchin was that, believed to be dead by the Baron and his accomplices, I had been conveyed in a car to the spot where I was found. [Pg 217]

What, I wondered, had become of the fair-haired young man whom I had seen unconscious opposite me?

A few shillings remained in my pocket, and, strangely enough, beside me when I recovered consciousness I had found a small fluted phial marked "Prussic acid—poison." The assassins had attempted to make it apparent that I had committed suicide!

Two hours later, after a rest and a wash, I borrowed an overcoat and golf-cap, and took the train to King's Cross. At Judd Street Police Station I made a statement, and with two plain-clothes officers returned to the house in Burton Crescent, only to find that the fair Julie and her friends had flown.

On forcing the door, we found the dining-table just as it had been left after the poisoned snap-dragon of the previous night. Nothing had been touched. Only Julie, the Baron, the man-servant, and the guests had all gone, and the place was deserted.

The police were utterly puzzled at the entire absence of motive.

On my return to my rooms I found orders from Bindo to start at once for Petersburg, which I was compelled to do. So I left London full of wonder at my exciting experience, and not until my arrival at Wirballen, the Russian frontier, six days later, did I discover that, though my passport remained in my wallet, a special police permit to enable me to pass in and out of the districts affected by the revolutionary Terror, was missing! It was a permit which Blythe had cleverly obtained through one of his friends, a high diplomatist, and without which I could not move rapidly in Russia. [Pg 218]

Was it possible that Julie and her friends had stolen it? Was it to be believed that the scoundrelly Baron had attempted to take my life by such dastardly trickery in order to secure that all-powerful document?

That it was of greatest value to any revolutionist I knew quite well, for upon it was the signature of the Minister of the Interior, and its bearer, immune from arrest or interference by the police, might come and go in Russia without let or hindrance.

Were they Russians? Certainly the language they had spoken was not Russian, but it might have been Polish. Where was the young man who had been my fellow-victim?

Loss of this special permit caused me considerable inconvenience, for I had to go to Moscow, and the Terror raging there, I had to get another permit before I could pass and re-pass the military cordon.

Yes, Julie Rosier was a mystery. Indeed, the whole affair was a complete enigma.

I duly returned to London, after assisting Bindo in trying to make a *coup* that was unfortunately in vain, and then learnt that the body of an unknown young man in evening dress had been found in the river Crouch in Essex, and from the photograph shown me at Scotland Yard I identified it as that of my fellow-guest. [Pg 219]

Through the whole year the adventure has sorely puzzled me, and only the other day light was thrown upon it in the following manner—

I was in Petersburg again, when I received a polite note from General Zuroff, the chief of police, requesting me to call upon him. The summons caused me considerable apprehension I must admit.

On entering his room at the Ministry, he gave me a cigarette, and commenced to chat. Then suddenly he touched a bell, another door opened, and I was amazed at seeing before me, between two grey-coated police-officers, a woman—Julie Rosier!

For an instant she glared at me as though she saw an apparition. Then, with a loud scream, she fainted.

“Ah!” exclaimed Zuroff. “Then what is reported is correct—eh? You and your friend the Baron enticed this Englishman to your house in London, for you knew by some means that he carried the order of the Minister allowing the bearer free passage everywhere in Russia. You saw that if you merely stole it he would give information, and it would be immediately cancelled. Therefore you cleverly plotted to take his life and make it appear as a case of suicide.” Then, with a wave of his hand, he said, “Take the prisoner back to the fortress.” [Pg 220]

The woman uttered no word. She only fixed her big dark eyes upon me with an expression of abject terror, and then the guards led her out.

From a drawer Zuroff took the precious document that had been stolen from me, saying—

“Julie Rosier—or Sophie Markovitch, as her real name is—was arrested in a house in the Nevski yesterday, while the Baron was discovered at the Hôtel d’Angleterre. Both are most violent revolutionists, and to them is due the terrible rioting in Moscow a few months ago. The Baron was hand in hand with Gapon and his colleagues, but escaped to England, and has been there for nearly a year, until, as the outcome of the dastardly plot against you, he altered his appearance, and returned as George Ewart, chauffeur to Baron Bindo di Ferraris of Rome. The arrests yesterday were very smartly made.”

“But how do you know the details of the attempt upon me?”

“All men can be bought at a price. They were watched constantly while in London. Besides, one of your fellow-guests of that night—revolutionists all of them—recently turned police spy and reported the facts. It was he who gave us information regarding the whereabouts of Sophie and the Baron.”

“But another man—a young fellow with fair hair—ate some of the plums from the snap-dragon and died.” [Pg 221]

“Yes; he was young Ivan Kinski—a Pole, who, though a Terrorist, was suspected by his friends of being a spy. You took one plum only, while he probably took more. At any rate, you had a very narrow escape. But you at least have the satisfaction of knowing that Julie will never again fascinate, and the Baron will never again be given an opportunity of preparing his fatal snap-dragon.”

My friendliness with Zuroff stood us in good stead; for, a week later, Bindo and Blythe contrived to get a very pretty diamond necklet and pair of earrings from a lady in Petersburg, which fetched six hundred golden louis in Amsterdam.

CHAPTER XI

THE PERIL OF PIERRETTE

I

CONCERNS A STRANGE CONSPIRACY

Dusk was falling early in Piccadilly as I sat in the car outside the Royal Automobile Club, awaiting the reappearance of my master. [Pg 222]

The grey February afternoon had been bitterly cold, and for an hour I had waited there half frozen. Since morning Count Bindo di Ferraris and myself had been on the road, coming up from Shrewsbury, and, tired out, I was anxious to get into the garage.

As chauffeur to a trio of perhaps the most expert "crooks" in Europe, my life was the reverse of uneventful. I was constantly going hither and thither, often on all-night journeys, and always moving rapidly from place to place, often selling the old car and buying a new one, and constantly on the look-out for police-traps of more than one variety.

Only a week previously the Count had handed me five hundred pounds in Bank of England notes, telling me to sell the forty horse-power six-cylinder "Napier," which, still a magnificent car, might easily be "spotted," and to purchase a "sixty" of some other make. By that I knew that some fresh scheme was afoot, and our run to Shrewsbury and Barmouth, in North Wales, had been to test the capabilities of the new "Mercedes" I had purchased a couple of days previously, and in which I now sat.

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It was certainly as fine a car as was on the road, its open exhaust a little noisy perhaps, but capable of getting up a tremendous speed when occasion required. A long, dark-red body, it was fitted with every up-to-date convenience, even to the big electric horn placed in the centre of the radiator, an instrument which emitted a deep warning blast unlike the tone of air-horns, and sounding as long as ever the finger was kept upon the button placed on the driving-wheel.

In every way the car was perfect. I fancy that I know something about cars, but even with my object to lower the price I failed to discover any defect in her in any particular.

Suddenly the Count, in a big motor coat and cap, emerged from the Club, ran hurriedly down the steps, and mounting into the seat beside me, said—

"To Clifford Street, Ewart, as quick as you can. I want to have five minutes' talk with you."

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So next instant we glided away into the traffic, and I turned up Bond Street until I reached his chambers, where, when Simmons the valet came out to mind the car, I ascended to Count Bindo's pretty sitting-room.

"Sit down, Ewart," exclaimed the debonnair young man, who was so thoroughly a cosmopolitan, and who in his own chambers was known as Mr. Bellingham, the son of a man who had suddenly died after making a fortune out of certain railway contracts in the Argentine. "Have a drink," and he poured me out a peg of whisky and soda. He always treated me as his equal when alone. At first I had hated being in his service, yet now the excitement of it all appealed to my roving nature, and though I profited little from a monetary point of view, save the handsome salary I was paid for keeping a still tongue between my teeth, I nevertheless found my post not at all an incongenial one.

"Look here, Ewart," the Count exclaimed, with scarcely a trace of his Italian accent, after he had lit a cigarette: "I want to give you certain instructions. We have a very intricate and ticklish affair to deal with. But I trust you implicitly, after that affair of the pretty Mademoiselle Valentine. I know you're not the man to lose your head over a pretty face. Only fools do that. One can seek out a pretty face when one has made a pile. You and I want money—not toys, don't we?"

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I nodded assent, smiling at his bluntness.

"Well, if this thing comes off, it will mean a year's acceptable rest to us—not rest within four walls, we can easily obtain that, but rest out on one or other of the Greek islands, or on the Bosphorus, or somewhere where we shall be perfectly safe," he said. "Now I want you to start to-night for Monte Carlo."

"To-night!" I exclaimed, dismayed.

"Yes. You have plenty of time to catch the Dieppe boat at Newhaven. I'll wire to them to say you are coming—name of Bellingham, of course. I shall leave by train in the morning, but you'll be at Monty—the Hôtel de Paris—almost as soon as I am. I wouldn't attempt to go by the Grenoble road, because I heard the other day that there's a lot of snow about there. Go down to Valence and across to Die."

I was rather sick at being compelled to leave so suddenly. Of late I had hardly been in London at all. I was very desirous of visiting some aged relations from whom I had expectations.

Bindo saw that my face had fallen.

"Look here, Ewart," he said, "I'm sorry that you have to do this long run at such short notice, but you won't be alone—you'll pick up a lady, and a very pretty young lady, too."

"Where?"

"Well, now I'll explain. Go around Paris, run on to Melun, and thence to Fontainebleau. You remember we were there together last summer, at the Hôtel de France. At Fontainebleau ask for the road through the Forest for Marlotte—remember the name. About seven kilometres along that road you'll come to cross-ways. At eight o'clock to-morrow morning she will be awaiting you there, and you will take her straight on to Monty."

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"How shall I know her?"

"She'll ask if you are from Mr. Bellingham," was his reply. "And look here," he added, drawing a long cardboard box from beneath the couch, "put this in the car, for she won't have motor-clothes, and these are for her. You'd better have some money, too. Here's a thousand francs;" and he took from a drawer in the pretty inlaid Louis XV. writing-table two five-hundred-franc notes and handed them to me, adding, "At present I can tell you nothing more. Go out, find Pierrette—that's her name—and bring her to Monty. At the Paris I shall be 'Bellingham'; and recollect we'll have to be careful. They haven't, in all probability, forgotten the other little affair. The police of Monaco are among the smartest in Europe, and though they never arrest anybody within their tin-pot Principality, they take jolly good care that the Monsieur le Prefect at Nice knows all about their suspects, and leave him to do their dirty work."

I laughed. Count Bindo, so thoroughly a cosmopolitan man-of-the-world, so resourceful, so utterly unscrupulous, so amazingly clever at any subterfuge, and yet so bold when occasion required, held the police in supreme contempt. He often declared that there was no police official between the town of Wick and the Mediterranean who had not his price, and that in many Continental countries the Minister of Police himself could be squared for a few hundreds.

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"But what's the nature of our new scheme?" I inquired, curious to know what was intended.

"It's a big one—the biggest we've ever tried, Ewart," was his answer, lighting a fresh cigarette, and draining his glass as he wished me a successful run due South. "If it works, then we shall bring off a real good thing."

"Do the others come out with you?"

"I hardly know yet. I meet them to-night at supper at the Savoy, and we shall then decide. At any rate, I shall go;" and walking to the little writing-table, he took up the telephone receiver and asked for the Sleeping Car Company's office in Pall Mall. Then, when a reply came, he asked them to reserve a small compartment in the Mediterranean Express on the morrow.

"And," he exclaimed, turning again to me, "I want to impress upon you one thing, Ewart. You and I know each other well, don't we? Now in this affair there may be more than one mysterious feature. You'll be puzzled, perhaps,—greatly puzzled,—but don't trouble your head over the why or the wherefore until we bring off the *coup* successfully. Then I'll tell you the whole facts—and, by Jove! you'll find them stranger than ever you've read in a book. When you know the truth of the affair you'll be staggered."

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My curiosity was, I admit, excited. Count Bindo, the dare-devil Italian adventurer, who cared not a jot for any man living, and who himself lived so well upon the proceeds of his amazing audacity and clever wits, was not in the habit of speaking like this. I pressed him to tell me more, but he only said—

"Go, Ewart. Get a bite of something to eat, for you must surely want it; buy what you want for the car—oil, carbide, and the rest, and get away to meet the pretty Pierrette. And—again good luck to you!" he added, as he mixed a little more whisky and tossed it off.

Then he shook my hand warmly. I left his cosy quarters, and within an hour was crossing Westminster Bridge on the first stage of my hasty run across Europe.

I had plenty of time to get down to Newhaven to catch the boat, but if I was to be in the Forest of Fontainebleau by eight o'clock next morning I would, I knew, be compelled to travel as hard as possible. The road was well known to me, all the way from the Channel to the Mediterranean. Bindo and I had done it together at least a dozen times.

Since leaving Clifford Street I had eaten a hasty meal, picked up a couple of new "non-skids" at the depôt where we dealt, oiled up, filled the petrol tank, and given the engine a general look round. But as soon as I got out of London the cold became so intense that I was compelled to draw on my fur gloves and button my collar up about my chin.

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Who was Pierrette? I wondered. And what was the nature of this great *coup* devised by the three artists in crime who were conjointly my masters?

An uneventful though very cold run brought me to the quay at Newhaven, where the car was shipped quite half an hour before the arrival of the train from London. It proved a dark and dirty night in the Channel, and the steamer tossed and rolled, much to the discomfort of the passengers by "the cheapest route," which, by the way, is the quickest for motorists. But the sea never troubling me, I took the opportunity of having a good square meal in the saloon, got the steward to put a couple of cold fowls and some ham and bread into a parcel, and within half an hour of the steamer touching Dieppe quay I was heading out towards Paris, with my new search-light shining far ahead, and giving such a streak of brilliancy that a newspaper could be read by it half a mile away.

Dark snow-clouds had gathered, and the icy wind cut my face like a knife, causing me to assume my goggles as a slight protection. My feet on the pedals were like ice, and my hands were soon cramped by the cold, notwithstanding the fur gloves.

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I took the road *viâ* Rouen as the best, though there is a shorter cut, and about two kilometres beyond the quaint old city, just as it was getting light, I got a puncture on the off back tyre. A horse-nail it proved, and in twenty minutes I was on the road again, running at the highest speed I dared along the Seine valley towards Paris. The wind had dropped with the dawn, and the snow-

clouds had dispersed with the daybreak. Though grey and very cheerless at first, the wintry sun at last broke through, and it was already half-past seven when, avoiding Paris, I had made a circuit and joined the Fontainebleau road at Charenton, south of the capital.

I glanced at the clock. I had still half an hour to do nearly thirty miles. So, anxious to meet the mysterious Pierrette, I let the car rip, and ran through Melun and the town of Fontainebleau at a furious pace, which would in England have certainly meant the endorsement of my licence.

At the end of the town of Fontainebleau, a board pointed to Marlotte—that tiny river-side village so beloved by Paris artists in summer—and I swung into a great, broad, well-kept road, cut through the bare Forest, with its thousands of straight lichen-covered tree trunks, showing grey in the faint yellow sunlight.

Those long, broad roads through the Forest are, without exception, excellently kept, and there being no traffic, I put on all the pace I dared—a speed which can be easily imagined when one drives a sixty “Mercedes.” Suddenly, almost before I was aware of it, I had flashed across a narrower road running at right angles, and saw, standing back out of the way of the car, a female figure.

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In a moment I put on the brakes, and, pulling up, glanced back.

The woman was walking hurriedly towards me, but she was surely not the person of whom I was in search.

She wore a blue dress and a big white-winged linen headdress.

She was a nun!

I glanced around, but there was no other person in sight. We were in the centre of that great historic Forest wherein Napoleon the Great loved to roam alone and think out fresh conquests.

Seeing the “Sister” hurrying towards me, I got down, wondering if she meant to speak.

“Pardon, m’sieur,” she exclaimed in musical French, rendered almost breathless by her quick walk, “but is this the automobile of M’sieur Bellingham, of London?”

I raised my eyes, and saw before me a face more pure and perfect in its beauty than any I had ever seen before. Contrary to what I had believed, she was quite young—certainly not more than nineteen—with a pair of bright dark eyes which had quite a *soupçon* of mischief in them. For a moment I stood speechless before her.

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And she was a nun! Surely in the seclusion of the religious houses all over the Continent the most beautiful of women live and languish and die. Had she escaped from one of the convents in the neighbourhood? Had she grown tired of prayers, penances, and the shrill tongue of some wizen-faced Mother Superior?

Her dancing eyes belied her religious habit, and as she looked at me in eager inquiry, and yet with modest demeanour, I felt that I had already fallen into a veritable vortex of mystery.

“Yes,” I replied, also in French, for fortunately I could chatter that most useful of all languages, “this car belongs to M’sieur Bellingham, and if I am not mistaken, Mademoiselle is named Pierrette?”

“Yes, m’sieur,” she replied quickly. “Oh, I have been waiting half an hour for you, and I’ve been so afraid of being seen. I—I thought—you were never coming—and I wondered whatever I was to do.”

“I was delayed, mademoiselle. I have come straight from London.”

“Yes,” she said, smiling, “you look as though you have come a long way;” and she noticed that the car was very dusty, with splashes of dried mud here and there.

“You are coming to Monte Carlo with me,” I said, “but you cannot travel in that dress—can you? Mr. Bellingham has sent you something,” I added, taking out the cardboard box.

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Quickly she opened it, and drew out a lady’s motor-cap and veil with a talc front, and a big, heavy, fur-lined coat.

For a moment she looked at them in hesitation. Then, glancing up and down the road to see if she were observed, she took off her religious headdress and collar, twisted around her neck the silk scarf she found in the box, pinned on her hat and adjusted her veil in such a manner that it struck me she was no novice at motoring, even though she were a nun, and then, with my assistance, she struggled into the fur-lined coat.

The stiff linen cap and collar she screwed up and put into the cardboard box, and then, fully equipped for the long journey South, she asked—

“May I come up beside you? I’d love to ride in front.”

“Most certainly, mademoiselle,” I replied. “It won’t then be so lonely for either of us. We can talk.”

In her motor-clothes she was certainly a most dainty and delightful little companion. The hat,

veil, and coat had completely transformed her. From a demure little nun she had in a few moments blossomed forth into a piquante little girl, who seemed quite ready to set the *convenances* at naught as long as she enjoyed herself.

From the business-like manner in which she wrapped the waterproof rug about her skirts and tucked it in herself, I saw that this was not the first time by many that she had been in the front seat of a car. [Pg 234]

But a few moments later, when she had settled herself, and I had given her a pair of goggles and helped her to adjust them, I also got up, and we moved away again along that long white highway that traverses France by Sens, Dijon, Maçon, Lyons, Valence, and Digue, and has its end at the rocky shore of the blue Mediterranean at Cannes—that land of flowers and flashy adventurers, which the French term the Côte d’Azur.

From the very first, however, the pretty Pierrette—for her beauty had certainly not been exaggerated by Bindo—was an entire mystery—a mystery which seemed to increase hourly, as you will quickly realise.

II

PIERRETTE TELLS HER STORY

Pierrette Dumont—for that was her name, she told me—proved a most charming and entertaining companion, and could, I found, speak English quite well.

She had lived nearly seven years in England—in London, Brighton, and other places—and as we set the car along that beautiful road that runs for so many miles beside the Yonne, she told me quite a lot about herself. [Pg 235]

Her admiration for M’sieur Bellingham was very pronounced. It was not difficult to see that this pretty girl, who, I supposed, had escaped from her convent, was madly in love with the handsome Bindo. The Count was a sad lady-killer, and where any profit was concerned was a most perfect lover, as many a woman possessed of valuable jewels had known to her cost. From the pretty Pierrette’s bright chatter, I began to wonder whether or not she was marked down as a victim. She had met the gay Bindo in Paris, it seemed, but how and in what circumstances, having regard to her religious habit, she did not inform me.

That Bindo was using the name of Bellingham showed some chicanery to be in progress.

By dint of careful questioning I tried to obtain from her some facts concerning her escape from the convent, but she would tell me nothing regarding it. All she replied was—

“Ah! M’sieur Bellingham! How kind and good he is to send you for me—to get me clean away from that hateful place!” and then, drawing a deep breath, she added, “How good it is to be free again—free!”

The car was tearing along, the rush of wind already bringing the colour to her soft, delicate cheeks. The bulb of a wind-horn was at her side, and she sat with her hands upon it, sounding a warning note whenever necessary as we flashed through the long string of villages between Sens and Chatillon. The wintry landscape was rather dull and cheerless, yet with her at my side I began to find the journey delightful. There is nothing so dreary, depressing, and monotonous as to cross France alone in a car without a soul to speak to all day through. [Pg 236]

“I wonder when we shall arrive at Monte Carlo?” she queried presently in English, with a rather pronounced accent, turning her fresh, smiling face to me—a face that was typically French, and dark eyes that were undeniably fine.

“It all depends upon accidents,” I laughed. “With good fortune we ought to be there to-morrow night—that is, if we keep going, and you are not too tired.”

“Tired? No. I love motoring! It will be such fun to go on all night,” she exclaimed enthusiastically. “And what a fine big lamp you’ve got! I’ve never been in Monte Carlo, and am so anxious to see it. I’ve read so much about it—and the gambling. M’sieur Bellingham said they will not admit me to the Casino, as I’m too young. Do you think they will?”

“I don’t think there is any fear,” I laughed. “How old are you?”

“Nineteen next birthday.”

“Well, tell them you are twenty-one, and they will give you a card. The paternal administration don’t care who or what you are as long as you are well dressed and you have money to lose. At Monte Carlo you must always keep up an appearance. I’ve known a millionaire to be refused admittance because his trousers were turned up.” [Pg 237]

At this she laughed, and then lapsed into a long silence, for on a stretch of wide, open road I was letting the car rip, and at such a pace it was well-nigh impossible to talk.

A mystery surrounded my *chic* little travelling-companion which I could not make out.

At about two o’clock in the afternoon we pulled up just beyond the little town of Chauceaux,

about thirty miles from Dijon, and there ate our cold provisions, washing them down with a bottle of red wine. She was hungry, and ate with an appetite, laughing merrily, and thoroughly enjoying the adventure.

"I was so afraid this morning that you were not coming," she declared. "I was there at seven, quite an hour before you were due. And when you came you flew past, and I thought that you did not notice me. M'sieur Bellingham sent me word last night that you had started."

"And where are you staying when you get to Monte Carlo?"

"At Beaulieu, I think. That's near Monte Carlo, isn't it? The Hôtel Bristol, I believe, is where Madame is staying."

"Madame? Who is she?"

"Madame Vernet," was all she vouchsafed. Who the lady was she seemed to have no inclination to tell me.

Through Dijon, Beaune, and Châlons-sur-Saône we travelled, but before we ran on to the rough cobbles of old-world Maçon darkness had already fallen, and our big search-light was shedding a shaft of white brilliancy far ahead. [Pg 238]

With the sundown the cold again became intense, therefore I got out my thick mackintosh from the back and made her get into it. Then I wrapped a fur rug around her legs, and gave her a spare pair of fur gloves that I happened to have. They were somewhat oily, but warm.

We reached Lyons half an hour before midnight, and there got some bouillon and roast *poulet* outside the Perache, then off again into the dark cold night, hour after hour ever beside the broad Rhone and the iron way to the Mediterranean.

After an hour I saw that she was suffering intensely from the cold, therefore I compelled her to get inside, and having tucked her up warmly with all the wraps we had, I left her to sleep, while I drove on due south towards the Riviera.

The Drome Valley, between Valence and Die, was snow-covered, and progress was but slow. But now and then, when I turned back, I saw that the pretty Pierrette, tired out, had fallen asleep curled up among her rugs. I would have put up the hood, only with that head-wind our progress would have been so much retarded. But in order to render her more comfortable I pulled up, and getting in, tucked her up more warmly, and placed beneath her head the little leather pillow we always carried. [Pg 239]

I was pretty fagged myself, but drove on, almost mechanically, through the long night, the engines running beautifully, and the roar of my open exhaust resounding in the narrow, rocky gorges which we passed through. Thirty kilometres beyond Die is the village of Aspres, where I knew I should join the main road from Grenoble to Aix in Provence, and was keeping a good look-out not to run past it. Within a kilometre of Aspres, however, something went wrong, and I pulled up short, awakening my charming little charge.

She saw me take off the bonnet to examine the engines, and inquired whether anything was wrong. But I soon diagnosed the trouble—a broken sparking-plug—and ten minutes later we were tearing forwards again.

Before we approached the cross-road the first faint flash of dawn showed away on our left, and by the time we reached Sisterton the sun had risen. At an *auberge* we pulled up, and got two big bowls of steaming *café au lait*, and then without much adventure continued our way down to Mirabeau, whence we turned sharp to the left for Draguignan and Les Arcs. At the last-mentioned place she resumed her seat at my side, and with the exception of her hair being slightly disarranged, she seemed quite as fresh and merry as on the previous day.

Late that night, as in the bright moonlight we headed direct for Cannes, I endeavoured to obtain from her some further information about herself, but she was always guarded. [Pg 240]

"I am searching for my dear father," she answered, however. "He has disappeared, and we fear that something terrible has happened to him."

"Disappeared? Where from?"

"From London. He left Paris a month ago for London to do business, and stayed at the Hotel Charing Cross—I think you call it—for five days. On the sixth he went out of the hotel at four o'clock in the afternoon, and has never been seen or heard of since."

"And that was a month ago, mademoiselle?" I remarked, surprised at her story.

"Nearly," was her answer. "Accompanied by Madame Vernet, I went to see M'sieur Lepine, the Prefect of Police of Paris, and gave him all the information and a photograph of my father. And I believe the police of London are making inquiries."

"And what profession is your father?" I asked.

"He is a jeweller. His shop is in the Rue de la Paix, on the right, going down to the Place Vendôme. Maison Dumont—perhaps you may know it?"

Dumont's, the finest and most expensive jewellers in Paris! Of course I knew it. Who does not

who knows Paris? How many times had I—and in all probability you also—lingered and looked into those two big windows where are displayed some of the most expensive jewels and choicest designs in ornaments in the world.

“Ah! so Monsieur Dumont is your father?” I remarked, with some reflection. “And did he have with him any jewels in London?”

“Yes. It was for that very reason we fear the worst. He went to London expressly to show some very valuable gems to the Princess Henry of Salzburg, at Her Highness’s order. She wanted them to wear at a Court in London.”

“And what was the value of the jewels?”

“They were diamonds and emeralds worth, they tell me at the *magasin*, over half a million francs.”

“And did nobody go with him to London?”

“Yes, Monsieur Martin, my father’s chief clerk. But he has also disappeared.”

“And the jewels—eh?”

“And also the jewels.”

“But may not this man Martin have got rid of your father somehow or other and decamped? That is a rather logical conclusion, isn’t it?”

“That is Monsieur Lepine’s theory; but”—and she turned to me very seriously—“I am sure, quite sure, Monsieur Martin would never be guilty of such a thing. He is far too devoted.”

“To your father—eh?” I asked, with a smile.

“Yes,” she answered, with a little hesitation.

“And how can you vouch for his honesty? Half a million francs is a great temptation, remember.” [Pg 242]

“No, not so much—for him,” was her reply.

“Why?”

She looked straight into my face through the talc front of her motor-veil, and after a moment’s silence exclaimed, with a girl’s charming frankness—

“I wonder, Monsieur Ewart, whether I can trust you?”

“I hope so, mademoiselle,” was my reply. “Mr. Bellingham has entrusted you to my care, hasn’t he?”

I hoped she was about to confide in me, but all she said was—

“Well, then, the reason I am so certain of Monsieur Martin’s honesty is because—because I—I’m engaged to be married to him;” and she blushed deeply as she made the admission.

“Oh, I see! Now I begin to understand.”

“Yes. Has he not more than half a million francs at stake?—for I am my father’s only child.”

“Certainly, that places a fresh complexion on matters,” I said; “but does Monsieur your father know of the engagement?”

“*Mon Dieu!* no! I—I dare not tell him. Monsieur Martin is only a clerk, remember.”

“And how long has he been in the service of the house?”

“Not a year yet.”

I was silent. There was trickery somewhere without a doubt, but where?

As the especial line of the debonnair Count Bindo di Ferraris and his ingenious friends was jewellery, I could not help regarding as curious the coincidence that the daughter of the missing man was travelling in secret with me to the Riviera. But why, if the *coup* had really already been made in London, as it seemed it had, we should come out to the Riviera and mix ourselves up with Pierrette and the mysterious Madame Vernet was beyond my comprehension. To me it seemed a distinct peril.

“Didn’t the Princess purchase any of the jewels of your father?” I asked. “Tell me the facts as far as you know them.”

“Well, as soon as they found poor father and Monsieur Martin missing they sent over Monsieur Boullanger, the manager, to London, and he called upon Her Highness at Claridge’s Hotel—I think that was where she was staying. She said that after making the appointment with my father she was compelled to go away to Scotland, and could not keep it until the morning of the day on which he disappeared. My father, accompanied by Monsieur Martin, called upon her and showed her the gems. One diamond tiara she liked, but it was far too expensive; therefore she decided to have nothing, declaring that she could buy the same thing cheaper in London. The jewels were repacked in the bag, and taken away. That appears to be the last seen of them. Four hours later

my father left the Hotel Charing Cross alone, got into a cab, drove away, and nobody has seen him since. Monsieur Boullanger is still in London making inquiries." [Pg 244]

"And now, mademoiselle, permit me to ask you a question," I said, looking straight at her. "How came you to be acquainted with Mr. Bellingham?"

Her countenance changed instantly. Her well-marked brows contracted slightly, and I saw that she had some mysterious reason for not replying to my inquiry.

"I—I don't think I need satisfy you on that point, m'sieur," she replied at last, with a slight hauteur, as though her dignity were offended.

"Pardon me," I said quickly, "I meant to offer you no offence, mademoiselle. You naturally are in distress regarding the unaccountable disappearance of your father, and when one mentions jewels thoughts of foul play always arise in one's mind. The avariciousness of man, and his unscrupulousness where either money or jewels are concerned, are well known even to you, at your age. I thought, however, you were confiding in me, and I wondered how you, in active search of your father as you are, could have met my employer, Mr. Bellingham."

"I met him in London, I have already told you."

"How long ago?"

"Three weeks."

"Ah! Then you have been in London since the supposed robbery?" I exclaimed. "I had not gathered that fact." [Pg 245]

Her face fell. She saw, to her annoyance, that she had been forced into making an admission which she hoped to evade.

I now saw distinctly that there was some deep plot in progress, and recognised that in all probability my pretty little friend was in peril.

She, the daughter of the missing jeweller of the Rue de la Paix, had been entrapped, and I was carrying her into the hands of her enemies!

Since my association with Bindo and his friends I had, I admit, become as unscrupulous as they were. Before my engagement as the Count's chauffeur I think I was just as honest as the average man ever is; but there is an old adage which says that you can't touch pitch without being besmirched, and in my case it was, I suppose, only too true. I had come to regard their ingenious plots and adventures with interest and attention, and marvelled at the extraordinary resource and cunning with which they misled and deceived their victims, and obtained by various ways and means those bright little stones which, in regular consignments, made their way to the dark little den of the crafty old Goomans in the Kerk Straat at Amsterdam, and were exchanged for bundles of negotiable bank-notes.

The police of Europe knew that for the past two years there had been actively at work a gang of the cleverest jewel-thieves ever known, yet the combined astuteness of Scotland Yard with that of the Paris Sureté and the Pubblica Sicurezza of Italy had never suspected the smart, well-dressed, good-looking Charlie Bellingham, who lived in such ease and comfort in Clifford Street, and whose wide circle of intimate friends at country houses included at least two members of the present Cabinet. [Pg 246]

The very women who lost their jewels so unaccountably—wives of wealthy peers or City magnates—were most of them Charlie Bellingham's "pals," and on more than one occasion it was Charlie himself who gave information to the police and who interviewed thirsty detectives and inquisitive reporters.

The men who worked with him were only his assistants, shrewd clever fellows each of them, but lacking either initiative or tact. He directed them, and they carried out his orders to the letter. His own ever-active brain formulated the plots and devised the plans by which those shining stones passed into their possession, while such a thoroughgoing cosmopolitan was he that he was just as much at home in the Boulevard des Capucines, or the Ringstrasse, as in Piccadilly, or on the Promenade des Anglais.

Yes, Count Bindo, when with his forty "Napier," he had engaged me, and I had on that well-remembered afternoon first made the acquaintance of his friends in the smoking-room at the Hotel Cecil, had promised me plenty of driving, with a leaven of adventure. [Pg 247]

And surely he had fulfilled his promise!

The long white road, winding like a ribbon through the dark olives, with the white villas of Cannes, the moonlit bay La Croisette, and the islands calm in the glorious night, lay before us.

And beside me, interested and trustful, sat the pretty Pierrette—the victim.

III

IN WHICH THE COUNT IS PUZZLED

My sweet-faced little charge had returned into the back of the car, and was sound asleep nestling beneath her rugs when, about three o'clock in the morning, we dashed through the little village of Cagnes, and ran out upon the long bridge that crosses the broad, rock-strewn river Var, a mile or two from Nice.

My great search-light was shining far ahead, and the echoes of the silent, glorious night were awakened by the roar of the exhaust as we tore along, raising a perfect wall of dust behind us.

Suddenly, on reaching the opposite bank, I saw a man in the shadow waving his arms, and heard a shout. My first impression was that it was one of the gendarmes, who are always on duty at that spot, but next instant, owing to the bend of the road, my search-light fell full upon the person in question, and I was amazed to find it to be none other than the audacious Bindo himself—Bindo in a light dust-coat and a soft white felt hat of that type which is *de rigueur* each season at Monty among smartly-groomed men.

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"Ewart!" he shouted frantically. "Ewart, it's me! Stop! stop!"

I put the brakes down as hard as I could without skidding, and brought the car up suddenly, while he ran up breathlessly.

"You're through in good time. I was prepared to wait till daylight," he said. "Everything all right?"

"Everything. The young lady's asleep, I think."

"No, she is not," came a voice in French from beneath the rugs. "What's the matter? Who's that?"

"It's me, Pierrette," replied the handsome young adventurer, mounting upon the step and looking within.

"You! Ah! Why—it's M'sieur Bellingham!" she cried excitedly, raising herself and putting out her hand encased in one of my greasy old fur gloves. "Were you waiting for us?"

"Of course I was. Didn't I tell you I would?" replied Bindo in French—a language which he spoke with great fluency. "You got my telegram to say that Ewart had started—eh? Well, how has the car been running—and how has Ewart treated you?"

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"He has treated me—well, as you say in your English, 'like a father'!" she laughed merrily; "and, oh! I've had such a delightful ride."

"But you must be cold, little one," he said, patting her upon the shoulder. "It's a long run from Paris to Nice, you know."

"I'm not tired," she assured him. "I've slept quite a lot. And M'sieur Ewart has looked after me, and given me hot bouillon, coffee, eggs, and all sorts of things—even to chocolates!"

"Ah! Ewart is a sad dog with the ladies, I'm afraid," he said in a reproving tone, glancing at me. "But if you'll make room for me, and give me a bit of your rug, I'll go on with you."

"Of course, my dear friend," she exclaimed, rising, throwing off the rugs, and settling herself into the opposite corner, "you will come along with us to Monte Carlo. Are those lights over there, on the right, Nice?"

"They are, and beyond that lighthouse there, is Villefranche. Right behind it lies Beaulieu."

And then, the pair having wrapped themselves up, we moved off again.

"Run along the Promenade des Anglais, and not through the Rue de France, Ewart," ordered the Count. "Mademoiselle would like to see it, I daresay, even at this hour."

So ten minutes later we turned out upon that broad, beautiful esplanade which is one of the most noted in all the world, which is always flower-bordered, and where feathery palms flourish even when the rest of Europe is under snow.

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"When did you arrive?" I heard the girl ask.

"At eight o'clock last night. I haven't been to Monte Carlo yet. I went over to Beaulieu, but unfortunately Madame is not yet at the Bristol. I have, however, taken a room for you, and we will drop you there as we pass. Your baggage arrived by rail this afternoon."

"But where is Madame, I wonder?" inquired the girl in a tone of dismay. "She would surely never disappoint us?"

"Certainly she would not. She told me once that she had stayed at the Métropole at Monty on several occasions. She may be there. I'll inquire in the morning. For the next couple of days I may be away, as perhaps I'll have to go on to Genoa on some business; but Ewart and the car will be at your disposal. I'll place you in his hands again, and he will in a couple of days show you the whole Riviera from the Var to San Remo, with the Tenda, the upper Corniche, and Grasse thrown in. He knows this neighbourhood like a Niçois."

"That will be awfully jolly," she responded. "But——"

"Well?"

"Well, I'm sorry you are going away," declared Pierrette, with regret so undisguised that though she had admitted her engagement to her father's missing clerk, showed me only too plainly that she had fallen very violently in love with the handsome, good-for-nothing owner of the splendid car upon which they were travelling.

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I could see that curious developments were, ere long, within the bounds of probability, and I felt sorry for the pretty, innocent little girl; for her journey there was, I felt assured, connected in some way or other with her father's mysterious disappearance from the Charing Cross Hotel.

Why had Bindo taken the trouble to await me there at the foot of the Var bridge, when he had given me instructions where to go at Monte Carlo?

As I drove out of Nice and up the hill to Villefranche, I turned over the whole of the queer facts in my mind, but could discern no motive for Pierrette's secret journey South. Why was she, so young, a nun? Why had she left her convent, if not at the instigation of the merry-eyed, devil-may-care Bindo?

Around Mont Boron and down into Villefranche we went, until around the sudden bend, close to the sea-shore, showed the great white façade of the Bristol at Beaulieu, that fine hotel so largely patronised by kings, princes, and other notabilities.

The gate was open, and I swung the car into the well-kept gravelled drive which led through the beautiful flower-garden up to the principal entrance. The noise we created awoke the night-porter, and after some brief explanation, Pierrette got out, wished us a merry "*Bon jour!*" and disappeared. Then, with the Count mounted at my side, I backed out into the roadway, and we were soon speeding along that switchback of a road with dozens of dangerous turns and irritating tram-lines that leads past Eze into the tiny Principality of His Royal Highness Prince Rouge et Noir—the paradise of gamblers, thieves, and fools.

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"Well, Ewart," he said, almost before we got past Mr. Gordon Bennett's villa, "I suppose the girl's been chattering to you—eh? What has she said?"

"Well, she hasn't said much," was my reply, as I bent my head to the mistral that was springing up. "Told me who she is, and that her father and his jewels have disappeared in London."

"What!" he cried in a voice of amazement. "What's that about jewels? What jewels?"

"Why, you surely know," I said, surprised at his demeanour.

"I assure you, Ewart, this is the first I know about any jewels," he declared. "You say her father and some shiners have disappeared in London. Tell me quickly, under what circumstances. What has she been telling you?"

"Well, first tell me—are you aware of who she really is?"

"No, I don't, and that's a fact. I believe she's the daughter of an old broken-down Catholic marquise—one of the weedy sort—who lives at Troyes, or some such dead-alive hole as that. Her mother tried to make her take the veil, and hasn't succeeded."

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"She prefers the motor-veil, it appears," I laughed. "But that isn't the story she's told me."

The red light of a level-crossing gave warning, and I pulled up, and let out a long blast on the electric horn, until the gates swung open.

"Her real name is, I believe, Pierrette Dumont, only daughter of that big jeweller in the Rue de la Paix."

"What!" cried Bindo, in such a manner that I knew he was not joking. "Old Dumont's daughter? If that's so, we *are* in luck's way."

"Yes, Dumont went to London, and took his clerk, a certain Martin, with him, and a bagful of jewels worth the respectable sum of half a million francs. They stayed at the Charing Cross Hotel, but five days later both men and the jewels disappeared."

Bindo sank back in his seat utterly dumbfounded.

"But, Ewart," he gasped, "do you really think it is true? Do you believe that she is actually Dumont's daughter, and that the shiners have really been stolen?"

"The former question is more difficult to answer than the latter. A wire to London will clear up the truth. In all probability the police are keeping the affair out of the papers. The girl went over to London to try and find her father, and met you, she says."

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"She met me, certainly. But the little fool told me nothing about her father's disappearance or the missing jewels."

"Because the Paris police had warned her not to, in all probability."

"Well——" he gasped. "If that story is really true, it is the grandest slice of luck we've ever had, Ewart," he declared.

"How? What do you mean?"

"What I say," was his brief answer. "I shall go back to London after breakfast. You'll remain here,

look after the girl and Madame Vernet. I don't envy you the latter. She's got yellow teeth, and is ugly enough to break a mirror," he laughed.

"But why go to London?" I queried.

"For reasons best known to myself, Ewart," he snapped; for he never approved of inquisitiveness when forming any plans.

Then for a long time he was silent, his resourceful brain active, plunged in thought.

"Well!" he exclaimed, "this is about the queerest affair that I've ever had on hand. I came out here to-day from London on one big thing, and in an hour or two I'm going back on another!"

Presently, just as we were ascending the hill from La Condamine, and within a few hundred yards of the big Hôtel de Paris garage, which was our destination, he turned to me and said— [Pg 255]

"Look here, Ewart! we've got a big thing on here—bigger than either of us imagine. I wonder what the fellows will think when they hear of it? Now all you have to do is to be pleasant to the little girl—make her believe that you're a bit gone on her, if you like."

"But she's over head and ears in love with you," I observed.

"Love be hanged!" he laughed carelessly. "We're out for money, my dear Ewart—and we'll have a lot of it out of this, never fear!"

A moment later I swung into the great garage, where hundreds of cars were standing—that garage with the female directress which every motorist knows so well.

And I stopped the engines, and literally fell out, utterly done up and exhausted after that mad drive from the Thames to the Mediterranean.

The circumstances seemed even more complicated and mysterious than I had imagined them to be.

But the main question was whether the dainty little Pierrette had told me the truth.

IV

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IS STILL MORE MYSTERIOUS

At ten o'clock that same morning I saw Bindo off by the Paris *rapide*.

Though he did not get to his room at the Hôtel de Paris till nearly six, he was about again at eight. He was a man full of activity when the occasion warranted, and yet, like many men of brains, he usually gave one the appearance of an idler. He could get through an enormous amount of work and scheming, and yet appear entirely unoccupied. Had he put his talents to legitimate and honest business, he would have no doubt risen to the position of a Napoleon of finance.

As it was, he made a call at the Métropole at nine, not to inquire for Madame Vernet, but no doubt to consult or give instructions to one of his friends, who, like himself, was a "crook."

Bindo had a passing acquaintance with many men who followed the same profession as himself, and often, I know, lent a helping hand to any in distress. There is a close fraternity among the class to which he belonged, known to the European police as "the internationals."

The identity of the man in whose bedroom he had an interview that morning I was unaware. I only know that, as the *rapide* moved off from Monte Carlo Station on its way back to Paris, he waved his hand, saying— [Pg 257]

"Remain here, and if anything happens wire me to Clifford Street. At all costs keep Pierrette at Beaulieu. *Au revoir!*"

And he withdrew his head into the first-class compartment.

Then I turned away, wondering how next to act.

After a stroll around Monty, a cigarette on the terrace before the Casino, where the gay world was sunning itself beside the sapphire sea, prior to the opening of the Rooms, and a cocktail at my friend Ciro's, I took my *déjeuner* at the Palmiers, a small and unpretentious hotel in the back of the town, where I was well known, and where one gets a very good lunch *vin compris* for three francs.

In order to allow Pierrette time to rest after her journey, I waited till three o'clock before I got out the car and ran over to Beaulieu. The day was glorious, one of those bright, cloudless, sunny Riviera days in early spring, when the Mediterranean lay without a ripple and the flowers sent forth their perfume everywhere.

Mademoiselle was in the garden, the concierge of the Bristol told me; therefore I went out and found her seated alone before the sea, reading a book. Her appearance was the reverse of that of a religious "Sister." Dressed in a smart gown of cream cloth,—one of those gowns that are so peculiarly the mode at Monte Carlo,—white shoes, and a white hat, she looked delightfully fresh [Pg 258]

and *chic* beneath her pale-blue sunshade.

"Ah, M'sieur Ewart!" she cried, in her broken English, as I approached, "I am so glad you have come. I have been waiting ever so long. I want to go to Monte Carlo."

"Then I'll be delighted to take you," I answered, raising my hat. "Mr. Bellingham has left already, and will be absent, I believe, a day or two. Meanwhile, if you will accept my escort, mademoiselle, I shall be only too willing to be yours to obey."

"*Bien!* What a pretty speech!" she laughed. "I wonder whether you will say that to Madame."

"Has Madame arrived?"

"She came this morning, just before noon. But," she added, "look, here she comes."

I glanced in the direction she indicated, and saw approaching us the short, queer figure of a little old woman in stiff dark-green silk skirts of the style a decade ago.

"Madame, here is M'sieur Ewart!" cried the pretty Pierrette, as the old lady advanced, and I bowed.

She proved to be about the ugliest specimen of the gentler sex that I had ever met. Her face was wrinkled and puckered, wizened and brown; her eyes were close set, and beyond her thin lips protruded three or four yellow fangs, rendering her perfectly hideous. Moreover, on her upper lip was quite a respectable moustache, while from her chin long white hairs straggled at intervals.

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"Where is Mr. Bellingham?" she asked snappishly, in a shrill, rasping voice, like the sharpening of a file.

"He has left, and will be absent a few days, I believe. He has placed this car and myself at your disposal, and ordered me to present his regrets that pressing business calls him away."

"Regrets!" she exclaimed, with a slight toss of her head. "He need not have sent any. I know that he is a very busy man."

"M'sieur Ewart is going to take me to Monte Carlo," Pierrette said. "You will be too fatigued to go, won't you? I will return quite early."

"Yes, my dear," the old woman replied, speaking most excellent English, although I gathered that she was either German or Austrian. "I am too tired. But do be back early, won't you? I know how anxious you are to see the Casino."

So my dainty little charge obtained her fur motor-coat, and ten minutes later we were leaving a trail of dust along the road that leads to the Principality, or—alas!—too often to ruin.

When at Monty I never wore chauffeur's clothes, for the Count treated me as his personal friend, and besides only by posing as a gentleman of means could I obtain the entrée to the Casino. So we put up the car at the garage, and together ascended the red-carpeted steps of the Temple of Fortune.

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At the bureau she had no trouble to obtain her ticket, and a few moments later we passed through the big swing-doors into the Rooms.

For a moment she stood in the great gilded salon as one stupefied. I have noticed this effect often on young girls who see the roulette tables and their crowds for the first time. Above the clink of coin, the rustle of bank-notes, the click-click of the ivory ball upon the disc, and the low hum of voices, there rose the monotonous voices of the croupiers: "*Rien n'va plus!*" "*Quatre premier deux pièces!*" "*Zéro! un louis!*" "*Dernier douzaine un pièce!*" "*Messieurs, faites vos jeux!*"

The atmosphere was, as usual, stifling, and the combined odours of perspiring humanity and Parisian perfumes nauseating, as it always is after the fresh, flower-scented air outside.

My little companion passed from one table to another, regarding the players and the play with keenest interest. Then she passed into the *trente-et-quarante* rooms, where at one of the tables she stood behind a pretty, beautifully-attired Parisienne, watching her play and lose the handful of golden coins her elderly cavalier had handed to her.

While we halted there an incident occurred which caused me considerable thought.

In front of us, on the opposite side of the table, stood a tall, thin-faced, elderly, clean-shaven man of sallow complexion, and very smartly dressed. In his black cravat he wore a splendid diamond pin, and on his finger, as he tossed a louis on the "noir," another fine gem glistened. That man, though so essentially a gentleman from his exterior appearance, was known to me as one of "us," as shrewd and clever an adventurer as ever trod those polished boards. He was Henri Regnier, known to his intimates as "Monsieur le President," because he had once, by personating the President of the Chamber of Deputies, robbed the Crédit Lyonnais of one hundred thousand francs, and served five years at Toulon for it.

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And across at him the pretty Pierrette shot a quick look of recognition and laughed. "The President" nodded slightly, and laughed back in return. He glanced at me. Our eyes met, but we neither of us acknowledged the other. It is the rule with men of our class. We are always strangers, except when it is to the interests of either party to appear friends.

But what did this nod to Pierrette mean? How could she be acquainted with Henri Regnier?

"Do you know that man?" I asked her, as presently we moved away from the table.

"What man?" she inquired, her eyes opening widely in assumed ignorance.

"I thought you nodded recognition to a man across the table," I remarked, disappointed at her attempt to deceive me.

"No," she replied; "I didn't recognise anyone. You were mistaken. He perhaps nodded to somebody else." [Pg 262]

This reply of hers increased the mystery. Had she deceived me when she told me that she was the daughter of old Dumont the jeweller? If so, then I had sent Bindo back to London on a wild goose-chase.

We passed back into the roulette rooms, and for quite a long time she stood at the first table at the left of the entrance, watching the game intently.

A man I knew passed, and I crossed to chat with him. In ten minutes or so I returned to her side, and as I did so she bent and took from the end of the croupier's rake three one-thousand-franc notes, while all eyes at the table were fixed upon her.

One of the notes she tossed upon the "rouge," and the other two she crushed into her pocket.

"What!" I gasped, "are you playing? And with such stakes?"

"Why not?" she laughed, perfectly cool, and watching the ball, which had already begun to spin.

With a final click it fell into one of the red squares, and two notes were handed to her.

The one she had won she passed across to the "noir," and there won again, and again a second time, until people at the table began to follow her lead. Gamblers are always superstitious when they see a young girl playing. It is amazing and curious how often youth will win where middle-age will lose. [Pg 263]

Five times in succession she played upon the colours with a thousand francs each time, and won on each occasion.

I tried to remonstrate, and urged her to leave with her winnings; but her cheeks were flushed, and she was now excited. One of the notes she exchanged with the croupier for nine hundreds, and five louis. The latter she distributed *à cheval*, with one *en plein* on the number eighteen.

It won. She left her stake on the table, and again the same number turned up. Three louis placed on zero she lost, and again on the middle dozen.

But she won with two louis on thirty-six. Then what she did showed me that, if a novice at a convent, she was, at any rate, no novice at roulette, for she shifted her stake to the "first four"—a favourite habit of gamblers—and won again.

Then, growing suddenly calm again, she exchanged her gold for notes, and crushing the bundle into her pocket, turned with me from the table.

I was amazed. I could not make her out in the least. Had all her ingenuousness been assumed? If it had, then I had been sadly taken in over her.

Together we went out, crossed the Place, and sat on the terrace of the Café de Paris, where we took tea—with orange-flower water, of course. While there she took out her money and counted it—eleven thousand two hundred francs, or in English money the respectable sum of four hundred and forty-eight pounds. [Pg 264]

"What luck you've had, mademoiselle!" I exclaimed.

"Yes; I only had two hundred francs to commence, so I won exactly eleven thousand."

"Then take my advice, and don't play again as long as you are in this place, for you're sure to lose it. Go away a winner. I once won five hundred francs, and made a vow never to play again. That's a year ago, and I have never staked a single piece since. The game over there, mademoiselle, is a fool's game," I added, pointing to the façade of the Casino opposite.

"I know," she answered; "I don't think I shall risk anything more. I wonder what Madame will say!"

"Well, she can only congratulate you and tell you not to risk anything further."

"Isn't she quaint?" she asked. "And yet she's such a dear old thing—although so very old-fashioned."

I was extremely anxious to get to the bottom of her acquaintance with that veritable prince of adventurers, Regnier, yet I dare not broach the subject, lest I should arouse suspicion. Who was that ugly old woman at the Bristol? I wondered. She was Madame Vernet, it was true, but what relation they were to each other Pierrette never informed me. [Pg 265]

At half-past six, after I had taken her along the Galerie to look at the shops, and through the Casino gardens to see the pigeon-shooting, I ran her back to Beaulieu on the car, promising to

return for her in the morning at eleven.

Madame seemed a strange chaperon, for she never signified her intention of coming also.

About ten o'clock that night, when in dinner-jacket and black tie I re-entered the Rooms again, I encountered Regnier. He was on his way out, and I followed him.

In the shadow of the trees in the Place I overtook him and spoke.

"Hulloa, Ewart!" he exclaimed, "I saw you this afternoon. Is Bindo here?"

"He's been, but has returned to London on business."

"Coming back, I suppose?" he asked. "I haven't seen anything of any of you of late. All safe, I hope?"

"Up to now, yes," I laughed. "We've been in England a good deal recently. But what I wanted to know was this: You saw me with a little French girl this afternoon. Who is she?"

"Pierrette."

"Yes, I know her name, but who is she?"

"Oh, a little friend of mine—a very charming little friend."

And that was all he would tell me, even though I pressed him to let me into the secret.

V

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WHAT THE REVELLERS REVEALED

After luncheon on the following day I called at Beaulieu and picked up both ladies, who expressed a wish for a run along the coast as far as San Remo.

Therefore I took them across the frontier at Ventimiglia into Italy. We had tea at the Savoy at San Remo, and ran home in the glorious sundown.

Like all other old ladies who have never ridden in a car, she was fidgety about her bonnet, and clung on to it, much to Pierrette's amusement. Nevertheless, Madame seemed to enjoy her ride, for just as we slipped down the hill into Beaulieu she suggested that we should go on to Nice and there dine.

"Oh yes!" cried Pierrette, with delight. "That will be lovely. I'll pay for a nice dinner out of my winnings of yesterday. I've heard that the London House is the place to dine."

"You could not do better, mademoiselle," I said, turning back to her, my eyes still on the road, rendered dangerous by the electric trams and great traffic of cars in both directions. It struck me as curious that I, the Count's chauffeur, should be treated as one of themselves. I wondered, indeed, if they really intended to invite me to dinner.

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But I was not disappointed, for having put the car into that garage opposite the well-known restaurant, Pierrette insisted that I should wash my hands and accompany them.

The ordering of the dinner she left in my hands, and we spent a very merry hour at table, even Madame of the yellow teeth brightening up under the influence of a glass of champagne, though Pierrette only drank Evian.

The Riviera was in Carnival. You who know Nice, know what that means—plenty of fun and frolic in the streets, on the Jetée Promenade, and in the Casino Municipal. Therefore, after dinner, Pierrette decided to walk out upon the pier, or jetée, as it is called, and watch the milk-and-water gambling for francs that is permitted there.

The night was glorious, with a full moon shining upon the calm sea, while the myriad coloured lamps everywhere rendered the scene enchanting. A smart, well-dressed crowd were promenading to and fro, enjoying the magnificent balmy night, and as we walked towards the big Casino at the end of the pier a man in a pierrot's dress of pale-green and mauve silk, and apparently half intoxicated, for his mauve felt hat was at the back of his head, came reeling in our direction. A Parisian and a boulevardier evidently, for he was singing gaily to himself that song of Aristide Bruant's, "La Noire," the well-known song of the 113th Regiment of the Line—

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"La Noire est fille du
canton
Qui se fout du qu'en dira-
t-on.
Nous nous foutons de ses
vertus,
Puisqu'elle a les tetons
pointus.
Voilà pourquoi nous la
chantons:
Vive la Noire et ses

tetons!"

The reveller carried in his hand a wand with jingling bells, and was no doubt on his way to the ball that was to take place later that night at the Casino Municipal—the first *bal masqué* of Carnival.

He almost fell against me, and straightening himself suddenly, I saw that he was about thirty, and rather good-looking—a thin, narrow face, typically Parisian.

"*Pardon, m'sieur!*" he exclaimed, bowing, then suddenly glancing at Pierrette at my side he stood for a few seconds, glaring at her as though utterly dumbfounded. "*Nom d'un chien!*" he gasped. "*P'tite Pier'tte!—Wouf!*"

And next second he placed his hand over his mouth, turned, and was lost in the crowd.

The girl at my side seemed confused, and it struck me that Madame also recognised him.

"Who was he?" I wondered.

The incident was, no doubt, a disconcerting one for them both, because from that moment their manner changed. The gambling within the big rotunda had no interest for either of them, and a quarter of an hour later Madame, with her peculiar rasping voice, said—

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"Pierrette, *ma chère*, it is time we returned," to which the girl acquiesced without comment.

Therefore I took them along to Beaulieu and deposited them at the door of their hotel.

Having seen them safely inside, I turned the car round and went back to Nice.

It was then about ten o'clock, but on the night of a Carnival ball the shops in the Avenue de la Gare are all open, and the dresses necessary for the ball are still displayed. Therefore, having put the car into the garage again, I purchased a pierrot's kit similar to that worn by the reveller, a black velvet *loup*, or mask, put them on in the shop, and then walked along to the Casino.

I need not tell you of the ball, of the wild antics of the revellers of both sexes, of the games of leap-frog played by the men, of the great rings of dancers, joining hand in hand, or of the beautiful effect of the two shades of colour seen everywhere. It has been described a hundred times. Moreover, I had not gone there to dance, I was there to watch, and if possible to speak with the man who had so gaily sung "*La Noire*" among the smart, aristocratic crowd on the *Jetée*.

But in that great crowd, with nearly everyone wearing their masks, it was impossible to recognise him. The only part I recollected that was peculiar about him was that he had a white ruffle around his neck, instead of a mauve or green one, and it occurred to me that on entering the masters of the ceremonies would compel him to remove it as being against the rules to wear anything but the colours laid down by the committee.

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I was looking for a pierrot without a ruffle, and my search was long and in vain.

Till near midnight I went among that mad crowd, but could not recognise him. He might, I reflected, be by that hour in such a state of intoxication as to be unable to come to the ball at all.

Suddenly, however, as I was brushing past two masked dancers who were standing chatting at one of the doors leading from the Casino into the theatre where the ball was in progress, one of them exclaimed with a French accent—

"Hulloa, Ewart!"

"Hulloa!" I replied, for I had removed my mask for a few moments because of the heat. "Who are you?"

"The President," he responded in a low voice, and I knew that it was Henri Regnier.

"You're the very man I want to see. Come over here, and let's talk."

Both of us moved away into a corner of the Casino where it was comparatively quiet, and Regnier removed his mask, declaring that the heat was stifling.

"Look here," he said in a tone of confidence, "I want to know—I'm very interested to know—how you became acquainted with little Pierrette Dumont. I hear you've been about with her all day."

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"How did you know?" I asked.

"I was told," he laughed. "I find out things I want to know."

"Then her name is really Dumont?" I asked quickly.

"I suppose so. That will do as well as any other—eh?" and he laughed.

"But last night you were not open with me, my dear Henri," I replied; "therefore why should I be open with you?"

"Well—for your own sake."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this," said Regnier, with a glance at his silent friend, who still retained his mask, and to

whom he had not introduced me. "You're putting your head into a noose by going about with her. You should avoid her."

"Why? She's most charming."

"I admit that. But for your own sake you should exercise the greatest care. I follow the same profession as you and your people do—and I merely warn you," he said very seriously.

The man standing by him exclaimed in French—

"Phew! What an atmosphere!" and removed his velvet mask.

It was the gay boulevardier whom I had seen on the Jetée Promenade.

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"Why do you warn me?" I inquired, surprised at the reveller's grave face, so different from what it had been when he had shaken his bells and sung the merry chorus of "La Noire."

"Because you're acting the fool, Ewart," Regnier replied.

"I'm merely taking them about on the car."

"But how did you first come across them?" he repeated.

"That's my own affair, *mon cher*," I responded, with a laugh; for I could not quite see why he took such an interest in us both, or why he should have been watching us.

"Oh, very well," he answered in a tone of slight annoyance. "Only tell your people to be careful. And don't say I didn't warn you. I know her—and you don't."

"Yes," interposed his companion. "We both know her, Henri, don't we—to our cost, eh?"

"She recognised you this evening," I said.

"I know. I was amazed to find her here, in Nice—and with the old woman, too!"

"But who is she? Tell me the truth," I urged.

"She's somebody you ought not to know, Ewart," replied "The President." "She can do you no good—only harm."

"How?"

"Well, I tell you this much, that I wouldn't care to run the risk of taking her about as you are doing." [Pg 273]

"You're talking in riddles. Why not?" I queried.

"Because, as I've already told you, it's dangerous—very dangerous."

"You mean that she knows who and what we are?"

"She knows more than you think. I wouldn't trust her as far as I could see her. Would you, Raoul?" he asked his companion.

"But surely she hasn't long been out of the schoolroom."

"Schoolroom!" echoed Regnier. And both men burst out laughing.

"Look here, Ewart," he said, "you'd better get on that demon automobile of yours and run back to your own London. You're far too innocent to be here, on the Côte d'Azur, in Carnival time."

"And yet I fancy I know the Riviera and its ways as well as most men," I remarked.

"Well, however much you know, you're evidently deceived in Pierrette."

"She'd deceive the very devil himself," remarked the man whom my friend had addressed as Raoul. "Did she mention me after I had passed?"

"No. But she seemed somewhat upset at the encounter."

"No doubt," he laughed. "No doubt. Perhaps she'll express a sudden desire to return to Paris tomorrow! I shouldn't wonder." [Pg 274]

"But tell me, Regnier," I urged, "why should I drop her?"

"I suppose Bindo has placed her in your hands, eh? He's left the Riviera, and left you to look after her!"

"Well, and what of that? Do you object? We're not interfering with any of your plans, are we?"

The pair exchanged glances. In the countenances of both was a curious look, one which aroused my suspicion.

"Oh, my dear fellow, not at all!" laughed Regnier. "I'm only telling you for your own good."

"Then you imply that she might betray us to the police, eh?"

"No, not that at all."

"Well, what?"

The pair looked at each other a second time, and then Regnier said—

"Unfortunately, Ewart, you don't know Pierrette—or her friend."

"Friend! Is it a male friend?"

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know. He's a mystery."

"Well," I declared, "I don't fear this Mister Mystery. Why should I?"

"Then I tell you this—if you continue to dance attendance on her as you are doing you'll one night get a knife in your back. And you wouldn't be the first fellow who's received a stab in the dark through acquaintanceship with the pretty Pierrette, I can tell you that!" [Pg 275]

"Then this mysterious person is jealous!" I laughed. "Well, let him be. I find Pierrette amusing, and she adores motoring. Your advice, *mon cher* Regnier, is well meant, but I don't see any reason to discard my little charge."

"Then you won't take my advice?" he asked in an irritated tone.

"Certainly not. I thank you for it, but I repeat that I'm quite well able to look after myself in case of a 'scrap'—and further, that I don't fear the jealous lover in the least degree."

"Then, if you don't heed," he said, "you must take the consequences."

And the pair, turning on their heels, walked off without any further words.

VI

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THE MAN WITH THE LONG NOSE

The next day, the next, and three other succeeding days, I spent nearly wholly with Pierrette and Madame.

A telegram I received from Bindo from the Maritime Station at Calais asked if Mademoiselle was still at Beaulieu, and to this I replied in the affirmative to Clifford Street.

I took the pair up the beautiful Var valley to Puget Theniers, to Grasse and Castellane, and through the Tenda tunnel to Cuneo, in Piedmont—runs which, in that clear, cloudless weather, both of them enjoyed. When alone with my dainty little companion, as I sometimes contrived to be, I made inquiry about her missing father.

Mention of him brought to her a great sadness. She suddenly grew thoughtful and apprehensive—so much so, indeed, that I felt convinced her story as told to me was the truth.

Once, when we were seated together outside a little café up at Puget Theniers, I ventured to mention the matter to Madame.

"Ah! M'sieur Ewart," exclaimed the old lady, holding up both her hands, "it is extraordinary—very extraordinary! The whole affair is a complete mystery."

"But is there no suspicion of foul play? Do not the police, for instance, suspect Monsieur Martin?" [Pg 277]

"Suspect him? Certainly not," was her quick response. "Why should they?"

"Well, he has disappeared also, I understand. He is missing, as well as the jewels."

"Depend upon it, m'sieur, both gentlemen are victims of some audacious plot. Your London is full of clever thieves."

I smiled within myself. Little did Madame dream that she was at that moment talking with a member of the smartest and boldest gang of jewel-thieves who had ever emerged from "the foggy island."

"Yes," I said sympathetically, "there are a good many expert jewel-thieves in the metropolis, and it seems very probable that they knew, by some means, that Monsieur Dumont and his clerk were staying at the Charing Cross Hotel and——" I did not finish my sentence.

"And—what?" asked Madame.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"It must be left to the police, I think, to solve the mystery."

"But they are powerless," complained Madame. "Monsieur Lepine, in Paris, expressed his utter contempt for your English police methods. And, in the meantime, Monsieur the father of Mademoiselle has disappeared as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed him up."

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"What I fear is that my dear father is dead," exclaimed the pretty Pierrette, with tears in her fine eyes. "One reads of such terrible things in the journals."

"No, no," I hastened to reassure her. "I do not think so. If one man alone lay between the thieves and jewels of that value—well, then we might perhaps apprehend such a catastrophe. But there were two—two able-bodied men, who were neither children nor fools. No," I went on, "my own opinion is that there may be reasons—reasons of which you are entirely unaware—which have led your father to bury himself and his clerk for the present, to reappear later. Men often have secrets, mademoiselle—secrets that they do not tell others—not even their wives or daughters."

Mine was a somewhat lame opinion, I knew, but I merely expressed it for want of something better to say.

"But he would never have kept me in this suspense," she declared. "He would have sent me word in secret of his safety."

"He may have gone on a long sea-voyage, and if so, would be unable. Suppose he has gone to Rio de Janeiro or Buenos Ayres?"

"But why should he go?" asked the dark-eyed girl. "His affairs are all in order, are they not, madame?"

"Perfectly," declared the old woman. "As I was saying last evening to the English gentleman whom we have met in the hotel—what was his name, Pierrette?"

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"Sir Charles Blythe," replied the other.

I could not help giving a start at mention of that name.

Blythe was there—at Beaulieu!

I think Pierrette must have noticed the change in my countenance, for she asked—

"Do you happen to know him? He's a most charming gentleman."

"I've heard of him, but do not know him personally," was my response.

I had last seen Sir Charles in Brussels, three months before; but his reappearance at Beaulieu showed quite plainly that there was more in progress concerning the pretty Pierrette than even I imagined.

"Then you told Sir Charles Blythe about Monsieur Dumont's disappearance?" I asked Madame, much interested in this new phase of the affair, and yet at the same time puzzled that Pierrette had apparently not told Bindo about the affair when they met in London.

"Yes," answered the queer old lady with the rough voice. "He was most sympathetic and interested. He said that he knew one of the chiefs at your Scot-len Yarde, and that he would write to him."

The idea of an old thief like Blythe writing to Scotland Yard was, to me, distinctly amusing.

Had Bindo sent him to Beaulieu to keep in touch with Pierrette? I wondered. At any rate, I felt that I must contrive to see him in secret and ascertain what really was in progress.

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"Sir Charles has, I believe, great influence with the police," I remarked, with the idea of furthering my friend's interests, whatever they were. "No doubt he will write home, and whatever can be done to trace Monsieur Dumont will be done."

"He is extremely courteous to us," Madame said. "A lady in the hotel tells me that he is very well known on the Riviera."

"I believe he is. In fact, if I'm not mistaken, he is one of the English members of the Fêtes Committee at Nice."

"Well, I only hope that he will carry out his kind promise," declared Pierrette. "He seems to know everybody. Last night he was taking coffee with the Duchess of Gozzano and her friends, who seem a most exclusive set."

She was not mistaken. Blythe certainly had a very wide circle of friends. It was he who idled about the most expensive hotels at Aix, Biarritz, Pau, Rome, or Cairo, and after fixing upon likely jewels displayed by their proud feminine possessors, mostly wives of aristocrats or vulgar financiers, would duly report to Bindo and his friends, and make certain suggestions for obtaining possession of them.

To the keen observation of the baronet, who moved always in the smartest of cosmopolitan society, were due those robberies of jewels, reports of which one read so constantly in the papers. He was the eye of the little ring of clever adventurers who, with capital at their command, were able to effect *coups* so daring, so ingenious, and so cleverly devised that even Monsieur Lepine and his department in Paris were from time to time utterly aghast and dumbfounded.

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That night I wrote a note to him, and at eleven o'clock next morning we met in a small café down in La Condamine. It was never judicious for any of our quartette to meet openly, and when on the

Riviera we usually used the quiet little place if we wished to consult.

When the pseudo-baronet lounged in and seated himself at my table, he certainly did not present the appearance of a "crook." Tall, erect, of peculiarly aristocratic bearing, and dressed in a suit of light flannels and a soft brown felt hat set jauntily on his head, he was the picture of easy affluence. His face was narrow, his eyes sparkling with good humour, and his well-trimmed beard dark, with a few streaks of grey.

He ordered a "Dubonnet," and then, finding that we were practically alone, with none to overhear, he asked—

"Why did you write to me? What do you want?"

"To know the truth about Pierrette Dumont," I said. "Madame has been telling me about you. When did you arrive?"

"The day before yesterday. Bindo sent me out."

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"What for?"

"I can't tell. He never gives reasons. His only instructions were to go to the Bristol, make the acquaintance of Mademoiselle and her chaperon, and create an impression on them."

"Well, you've done that, if nothing else," I assured him, laughing. "But the whole affair is such a complete mystery that it certainly is to the interests of all of us if I'm let into the secret. At present I'm working in the dark."

"And so am I, my dear fellow," was Sir Charles's response. "Bindo met me in the Constitutional, gave me a hundred pounds, and told me to go out at once. So I came."

"And when is he returning?"

"Only he himself knows that. He seems tremendously busy. Henderson is with him. When I left he was just going to Birmingham."

"You know who Pierrette is?"

"Yes. Daughter of old Dumont, the jeweller in the Rue de la Paix. Bindo told me that much. Her father disappeared from the Charing Cross Hotel, as well as his clerk and a bagful of jewellery."

"Exactly. I suspect Martin, the clerk, don't you?"

He smiled, his eyes fixed upon me.

"Perhaps," he remarked vaguely.

"And you know more about the little affair, Blythe, than you intend to tell me?"

"Bindo ordered me to say nothing," was his reply. "You ought surely to know by this time that when he has a big thing on he never talks about it. That is, indeed, the secret of his success."

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"Yes, but in certain circumstances he ought to let me know what is intended, so that I may be forearmed against treachery."

"Treachery!" he echoed. "What do you mean?"

"What I say. There are other people about here who know Mademoiselle."

"Who?"

"The President, for one."

"What!" he cried, starting up. "Do you mean to say that? Are you sure of it?"

"Quite. I saw them recognise each other in the Rooms the other afternoon. I afterwards met him alone, and he admitted that he knew her."

"Then the affair is far more complicated than I believed," exclaimed my companion, knitting his brows thoughtfully. "I wonder——"

"Wonder what?"

"I wonder if Bindo knows this? Have you told him?"

"No. It was after he had left."

"Then we ought to let him know at once. Where is Regnier staying?"

"At the Hermitage, as usual."

"H'm."

"Anybody with him?"

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"Nobody we know."

"Have you spoken to Pierrette?"

"Yes. But, curiously enough, she denied all knowledge of him."

"Ah! Then it is as I suspected!" Blythe said. "We'll have to be careful—confoundedly careful; otherwise we shall be given away."

"By whom?"

"By our enemies," was his ambiguous response. "Did Regnier tell you anything about the girl?"

"He warned me to have nothing whatever to do with her."

"Exactly. Just as I thought. It was to his interests to do so. We must wire at once to Bindo."

While we were talking, however, a thin, rather well-dressed, long-nosed Frenchman, in a brown suit and grey suede gloves, entered, and sat at a table near. He was not thirty, but about him was the unmistakable air of the *bon viveur*.

At his entry we broke off our conversation and spoke of other things. Neither of us desired the presence of a stranger in our vicinity.

Presently, after the lapse of ten minutes, we paid, rose, and left the café.

"Who was that fellow?" I asked Sir Charles, as we walked through the narrow street down to the quay.

"Couldn't make him out," was my friend's reply. "Looks very suspiciously like an agent of police." [Pg 285]

"That's just my opinion," I said anxiously. "We must be careful—very careful."

"Yes. We mustn't meet again unless absolutely necessary. I'm just going up the hill to the post-office to send a cipher message to Bindo. He ought to be here at once. Good-bye."

And he turned the corner and left me.

The sudden appearance of the long-nosed person puzzled me greatly.

Was it possible that we had fallen beneath the active surveillance of the Sureté?

VII

ON DANGEROUS GROUND

I don't think that in the whole course of my adventurous career as chauffeur to Count Bindo di Ferraris, alias Mr. Charles Bellingham, I spent such an anxious few days as I did during the week following my meeting with the redoubtable Sir Charles Blythe.

On several occasions when I called at the Bristol I saw him sitting in the garden with Madame and Mademoiselle, doing the amiable, at which he was an adept. He was essentially a ladies' man, and the very women who lost their diamonds recounted to him their loss and received his assistance and sympathy. [Pg 286]

Of course, on the occasions I met him either at Beaulieu, on the Promenade des Anglais, or in the Rooms, I never acknowledged acquaintance with him. More than once I had met that long-nosed man, and it struck me that he was taking a very unnecessary interest in all of us.

Where was Bindo? Day after day passed, and I remained at the Paris, but no word came from him—or from Sir Charles, for the matter of that.

Pierrette's ardour for motoring seemed to have now cooled; for, beyond a run to St. Raphael one morning, and another to Castellane, she had each day other engagements—luncheon up at La Turbie, tea with Sir Charles at Rumpelmeyer's, or at Vogarde's. I was surprised, and perhaps a little annoyed, at this; for, truth to tell, I admired Mademoiselle greatly, and she had on more than one occasion flirted openly with me.

Bindo always declared that I was a fool where women were concerned. But I was, I know, not the perfect lover that the Count was.

There were many points about the mysterious affair in progress that I could not account for. If Mademoiselle had really taken the veil, then why did she still retain such a wealth of dark, silky hair? And if she were not a nun, then why had she been masquerading as one? But, further, if her father was actually missing in London, why had she not told Bindo when they had met there? [Pg 287]

Day after day I kept my eye upon the *Journal*, the *Temps*, and the *Matin*, as well as upon the Paris edition of the *Daily Mail*, in order to see whether the mystery of Monsieur Dumont was reported.

But it was not.

Regnier was still about, smart and perfectly attired, as usual. When we passed and there was nobody to observe, he usually nodded pleasantly. At heart "The President" was not at all a bad fellow, and on many an occasion in the past season we had sipped "manhattans" together at Ciro's.

Thus more than a week passed—a week of grave apprehension and constant wonderment—

during which time the long-nosed stranger seemed to turn up everywhere in a manner quite unaccountable.

Late one night, on going to my room in the Paris, I found a welcome telegram from Bindo, dated from Milan, ordering me to meet him with the car at the Hotel Umberto, in Cuneo, on the following day. Now, Cuneo lay over the Italian frontier, in Piedmont, half-way between Monte Carlo and Turin. To cross the Alps by the Col di Tenda and the tunnel would, I knew, take about six hours from Nice by way of Sospel. The despatch was sent from Milan, from which I guessed that for some reason Bindo was about to enter France by the back door, namely, by the almost unguarded frontier at Tenda. At Calais, Boulogne, or Ventimiglia there are always agents of police, who eye the traveller entering France, but up at that rural Alpine village are only idling *douaniers*, who never suspected the affluent owner of a big automobile.

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What, I wondered, had occurred to cause the Count to travel around *viâ* Ostend, Brussels, and Milan, as I rightly suspected he had done?

At nine o'clock next morning I ran along to Nice, and from there commenced to ascend by that wonderful road which winds away, ever higher and higher, through Brois and Fontan to the Tenda, which it passes beneath by a long tunnel lit by electricity its whole length, and then out on to the Italian side. Though the sun was warm and balmy along the Lower Corniche, here was sharp frost and deep snow, so deep, indeed, that I was greatly delayed, and feared every moment to run into a drift.

On both sides of the Tenda were hidden fortresses, and at many points squads of Alpine soldiers were manœuvring, for the frontier is very strongly guarded from a military point of view, and both tunnel and road is, it is said, so mined that it might be blown up and destroyed at any moment.

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In the twilight of the short wintry day I at last ran into the dull little Italian town, where there is direct railway communication from Turin, and at the small, uninviting-looking Hotel Umberto I found Bindo, worn and travel-stained, impatiently awaiting me.

An hour only I remained, in order to get a hot meal, for I was half perished by the cold, and then, after refilling my petrol-tank and taking a look around the engines, we both mounted, and I turned the car back into the road along which I had travelled.

It was already nearly dark, and very soon I had to put on the search-light.

Bindo, seated at my side, appeared utterly worn-out with travel.

I was, I found, quite right in my surmise.

"I've come a long way round, Ewart, in order to enter France unobserved. I've been travelling hard these last three days. Blythe is with Mademoiselle, I suppose?" he asked, as we went along.

I responded in the affirmative.

"Tell me all that's happened. Go on, I'm listening—everything. Tell me exactly, for a lot depends upon how matters now stand," he said, buttoning the collar of his heavy overcoat more tightly around his neck, for the icy blast cut one like a knife at the rate we were travelling.

I settled down to the wheel, and related everything that had transpired from the moment he had left.

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Fully an hour I occupied in telling him the whole story, and never once did he open his mouth. I saw by the reflection of the light upon the snowy road that his eyes were half closed behind his goggles, and more than once feared that he had gone to sleep.

Suddenly, however, he said—

"And who is the long-nosed stranger?"

"I don't know."

"But it's your place to know," he snapped. "We can't have fellows prying into our affairs without knowing who they are. Haven't you tried to discover?"

"I thought it too risky."

"Then you think he's a police-agent, eh?"

"That's just what Blythe and I both think."

"Describe him."

I did so to the best of my ability.

And Bindo gave vent to a grunt of dissatisfaction, after which a long silence fell between us.

"The President' is at the Hermitage, eh?" he asked at last. "Does he know where I've been?"

"I'm not sure. He knows you have not lately been in Monty."

"But you say he nodded to Mademoiselle, and that afterwards she denied acquaintance with him? Didn't that strike you as curious?"

"Of course, but I feared to press her. You don't let me into your secrets, therefore I'm compelled always to work in the dark." [Pg 291]

"Let you into a secret, Ewart!" he laughed "Why, if I did, you'd either go and give it away next day quite unconsciously, or else you'd be in such a blue funk that you'd turn tail and clear out just at the very moment when I want you."

"Well, in London, before we started, you said you had a big thing on, and I've been ever since trying to discover what it is."

"The whole affair has altered," was his quick reply. "I gave up the first idea for a second and better one."

"And what's that? Tell me."

"You wait, my dear fellow. Have the car ready, and leave the brain-work to me. You can drive a car with anybody in Europe, Ewart, but when it comes to a tight corner you haven't got enough brains to fill a doll's thimble," he laughed. "Permit me to speak frankly, for we know each other well enough now, I fancy."

"Yes, you *are* frank," I admitted. "But," I added reproachfully, "in working in the dark there's always a certain element of danger."

"Danger be hanged! If I thought of danger I'd have been at Portland long ago. Successful men in any walk of life are those who have courage and are successfully unscrupulous," he said, for he seemed in one of his quaint, philosophic moods. "Those who are unsuccessfully unscrupulous are termed swindlers, and eventually stand in the dock," he went on. "What are your successful politicians but successful liars? What are your great South African magnates, before whom even Royalty bows, but successful adventurers? And what are your millionaire manufacturers but canting hypocrites who have got their money by paying a starvation wage and giving the public advertised shoddy, a quack medicine, or a soap which smells pleasantly but is injurious to the skin? No, my dear Ewart," he laughed, as we turned into the long tunnel, with its row of electric lights, "the public are not philosophers. They worship the golden calf, and that is for them all-sufficient. At the Old Bailey I should be termed a thief, and they have, I know, a set of my fingerprints at Scotland Yard. But am I, after all, any greater thief than half the silk-hatted crowd who promote rotten companies in the City and persuade the widow to invest her little all in them? No. I live upon the wealthy—and live well, too, for the matter of that—and no one can ever say that I took a pennyworth from man or woman who could not afford it." [Pg 292]

I laughed. It always amused me to hear him talk like that. Yet there was a good deal of truth in his arguments. Many an open swindler nowadays, because he has successfully got money out of the pockets of other people by sharp practice just once removed from fraud, receives a knighthood, and struts in Pall Mall clubs and in the drawing-rooms of Mayfair. [Pg 293]

We had emerged from the tunnel, successfully passed the *douane*, and were again in France.

With our engines stopped, we were silently descending the long decline which runs for miles towards Sospel, when my companion suddenly aroused himself and said—

"You mentioned Regnier's friend—Raoul, I think you called him. Go over that incident again."

I did as I was bidden. And when I had concluded he drew a long breath.

"Ah! Regnier is a wary bird," he remarked, as though to himself. "I wonder what his game could be in warning you?" Then, after a pause, he asked, "Has Mademoiselle mentioned me again?"

"Several times. She is your great admirer."

"Little fool!" he blurted forth impatiently. "Has she said any more about her missing father?"

"Yes, a good deal—always worrying about him."

"That's not surprising. And her lover, the man Martin, what about him?"

"She has said very little. You have taken his place in her heart," I said.

"Quite against my will, I assure you, Ewart," he laughed. "But, by Jove!" he added, "the whole affair is full of confounded complications. I had no idea of it all till I returned to town." [Pg 294]

"Then you've made inquiries regarding Monsieur Dumont and his mysterious disappearance?"

"Of course. That's why I went."

"And were they satisfactory? I mean did you discover whether Mademoiselle has told the truth?" I asked anxiously.

"She told you the exact truth. Her father, her lover, and the jewels are missing. Scotland Yard, at the express request of the Paris police, are preserving the secret. Not a syllable has been allowed to leak out to the Press. For that very reason I altered my plans."

"And what do you now intend to do?"

"Not quite so fast, my dear Ewart. Just wait and see," answered the man who had re-entered

France by the back door.

And by midnight "Monsieur Charles Bellingham, de Londres," was sleeping soundly in his room in the Hôtel de Paris at Monte Carlo.

VIII

[Pg 295]

IN WHICH THE TRUTH IS EXPLAINED

During the next three days I saw but little of Bindo.

His orders to me were not to approach or to worry him. I noticed him in a suit of cream flannels and Panama hat, sunning himself on the terrace before the Casino, or lunching at the Hermitage or Métropole with people he knew, appearing to the world to lead the idle life of a well-to-do man about town—one of a thousand other good-looking, wealthy men whose habit it was annually to spend the worst weeks in the year beside the blue Mediterranean.

To the *monde* and the *demi-monde* Bindo was alike a popular person. More than one member of the latter often received a substantial sum for acting as his spy, whether there, or at Aix, or at Ostend. But so lazy was his present attitude that I was surprised.

Daily I drove him over to Beaulieu to call upon Mademoiselle and her chaperon, and nearly every evening he dined with them.

Madame of the yellow teeth had introduced Sir Charles to him, and the pair had met as perfect strangers, as they had so often done before.

Both men were splendid actors, and it amused me to watch them when, on being introduced, they would gradually begin a conversation regarding mutual acquaintances. [Pg 296]

But in this case I could not, for the life of me, discern what game was being played.

One afternoon I drove Bindo, with Blythe, Madame, and Mademoiselle, over to the Beau Site, at Cannes, to tea, and the party was certainly a very merry one. Yet it puzzled me to discover in what direction Bindo's active brain was working, and what were his designs.

The only facts that were apparent were that first he was ingratiating himself further with Mademoiselle,—who regarded him with undisguised love-looks,—and secondly that, for some purpose known only to himself, he was gaining time.

The solution of the puzzle, however, came suddenly and without warning.

Bindo had been back in Monty a week, and one evening I had seen him with "The President," leaning over the balustrade of the terrace before the Casino, with their faces turned to the moonlit sea and the gaily-lit rock of Monaco.

They were in deep, earnest conversation; therefore I turned back and left them. It would not do, I knew, if Bindo discovered me in the vicinity.

In crossing the Place I came face to face with the long-nosed stranger whom I suspected as a police-agent, but he seemed in a hurry, and I do not think he noticed me.

Next day I saw nothing of Bindo, who, strangely enough, did not sleep at the Paris. We did not meet till about eight o'clock at night, when I caught sight of him ascending the stairs to go and dress for dinner. [Pg 297]

"Ewart!" he called to me, "come up to my room. I want you."

I went up after him, and followed him into his room. When the door had closed, he turned quickly to me and asked—

"Is the car ready for a long run?"

"Quite," I replied.

"Is it at the same garage?"

"Yes."

"Then give me the key. I want to go round there this evening."

I was surprised, but nevertheless took the key from my pocket and handed it to him.

"Are you going to drive her away?" I inquired.

"Don't ask questions," he snapped. "I don't know yet what I'm going to do, except that I want you to go over to Nice and spend the evening. Go to the Casino, and watch to see if Raoul is there. Be back here by the twelve-twenty-five, and come up and report to me."

I went to my own room, dressed, and then took train to Nice. But though I lounged about the Casino Municipal all that evening, I saw nothing of either Regnier or Raoul. It struck me, however, that Bindo had sent me over to Nice in order to get rid of me, and this surmise was somewhat confirmed when I returned after midnight.

Bindo did not question me about the person he had sent me to watch for. He merely said—

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“Ewart, you and I have a long run before us to-morrow. We must be away at seven. The quicker we’re out of this place, the better.”

I saw he had hurriedly packed, and that his receipted hotel bill lay upon the dressing-table.

“Where are we going?”

“I’ll tell you to-morrow. Give this wire to the night-porter and tell him it’s to be sent at ten o’clock to-morrow morning.”

I read the message. It was to Mademoiselle, to say that he could not call, as he was compelled to go to Hyères, but that he would dine at the Bristol that evening.

“And,” he added, “get your traps together. We’re leaving here, and we leave no trace behind—you understand?”

I nodded.

Was the game up? Were we flying because the police suspected us? I recollected the long-nosed man, and a serious apprehension seized me.

I confess I slept but little that night. At half-past six I went again to his room, and found him already dressed.

Motorists often start early on long excursions on the Riviera; therefore it was deemed nothing unusual when, at a quarter-past seven, we mounted on the car and Bindo gave orders—

“Through the town.”

By that I knew we were bound east, for Italy.

He spoke but little. Upon his face was a business-like look of settled determination.

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At the little *douane* post near Ventimiglia, the Italian frontier, we paid the necessary deposit for the car, got the leaden seal attached, and then drew out upon the winding sea-road which leads right along the coast by San Remo, Alassio, and Savona to Genoa.

Hour after hour, with a perfect wall of white dust behind us, we kept on until about three o’clock in the afternoon, when we pulled up at an hotel close to the station in busy Genoa. Here we swallowed a hasty meal, and at Bindo’s directions we turned north up the Ronco valley for Alessandria and Turin, my companion explaining that it was his intention to re-enter France again by crossing the Mont Cenis.

Then I saw that our journey into Italy was in order to throw the French police off the scent. But even then I could not gather what had actually happened.

Through the whole night, and all next day, we travelled as hard as we could go, crossing the frontier and descending to Chambery, where we halted for six hours to snatch a brief sleep. Then on again by Bourg and Maçon. We took it in turns to drive—three hours each. While one slept in the back of the car, the other drove, and so we went on and on, both day and night, for the next forty-eight hours—a race against time and against the police.

From Dijon we left the Paris road and struck due north by Chaumont and Bar-le-duc to Verdun, Sedan, and Givet, where we passed into Belgium. At the Métropole, in Brussels, we spent a welcome twenty-four hours, and slept most of the time. Then on again, still due North, first to Boxtel, in Holland, and then on to Utrecht.

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Until that day—a week after leaving Monte Carlo on our rush across Europe—Bindo practically preserved a complete silence as to his intentions or as to what had happened.

All I had been able to gather from him was that Mademoiselle was still at the Bristol, and that Blythe was still dancing attendance upon her and the ugly old lady who acted as chaperon.

With Utrecht in sight across the flat, uninteresting country, traversed everywhere by canals, we suddenly had a bad tyre-burst. Fortunately we had a spare one, therefore it was only the half-hour delay that troubled us.

Bindo helped me to take off the old cover, adjust a new tube and cover, and worked the pump with a will. Then, just as I was giving the nuts a final screw-up, preparatory to packing the tools away in the back, he said—

“I expect, Ewart, this long run of ours has puzzled you very much, hasn’t it?”

“Of course it has,” I replied. “I don’t see the object of it all.”

“The object was to get here before the police could trace us. That’s why we took such a roundabout route.”

“And now we are here,” I exclaimed, glancing over the dull, grey landscape, “what are we going to do?”

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“Do?” he echoed. “You ought to ask what we’ve *done*, my dear fellow!”

"Well, what have we done?" I inquired.

"About the neatest bit of business that we've ever brought off in our lives," he laughed.

"How?"

"Let's get up and drive on," he said; "we won't stop in Utrecht, it's such a miserable hole. Listen, and I'll explain as we go along."

So I locked up the back, got up to the wheel again, and we resumed our journey.

"It was like this, you see," he commenced. "I own I was entirely misled in the beginning. That little girl played a trick on me. She's evidently not the ingenuous miss that I took her to be."

"You mean Pierrette?" I laughed. "No, I quite agree with you. She's been to Monte Carlo before, I believe."

"Well," exclaimed the debonnair Bindo, "I met her in London, as you know. Our acquaintance was quite a casual one, in the big hall of the Cecil—where I afterwards discovered she was staying with Madame. She was an adventurous little person, and met me at the lions, in Trafalgar Square, next morning, and I took her for a walk across St. James's Park. From what she told me of herself, I gathered that she was the daughter of a wealthy Frenchman. Our conversation naturally turned upon her mother, as I wanted to find out if the latter possessed any jewels worth looking after. She told me a lot—how that her mother, an old marquise, had a quantity of splendid jewellery. Madame Vernet, who was with her at the Cecil, was her companion, and her father had, I understood, a fine château near Troyes. Her parents, religious bigots, were, however, sending her, very much against her will, to the seclusion of a convent close to Fontainebleau—not as a scholastic pupil—but to be actually trained for the Sisterhood! She seemed greatly perturbed about this, and I could see that the poor girl did not know how to act, and had no outside friend to assist her. To me, it at once occurred that by aiding her I could obtain her confidence, and so get to know this mother with the valuable sparklers. Therefore I arranged that you should, on a certain morning, travel to Fontainebleau, and that she should manage to escape from the good Sisters and travel down to Beaulieu. Madame Vernet was to be in the secret, and should join her later."

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"Yes," I said, "I understood all that. She misled you regarding her mother."

"And she was still more artful, for she never told me the truth as to who her father really was, or the reason why they were there in London—in search of him," he remarked. "I learnt the truth for the first time from you—the truth that she was the daughter of old Dumont, of the Rue de la Paix, and that he and his clerk were missing with jewels of great value."

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"Then another idea struck you, I presume?"

"Of course," he answered, laughing. "I wondered for what reason Mademoiselle was to be placed in a convent; why she had misled me regarding her parentage; and, above all, why she was so very desirous of coming to the Riviera. So I returned, first to Paris—where I found that Dumont and Martin were actually both missing. I managed to get photographs of both men, and then crossed to London, and there commenced active inquiries. Within a week I had the whole of the mysterious affair at my fingers' ends, and moreover I knew who had taken the sparklers, and in fact the complete story. The skein was a very tangled one, but gradually I drew out the threads. When I had done so, however, I heard, to my dismay, that certain of our enemies had got to know the direction in which I was working, and had warned the Paris Sureté. I was therefore bound to travel back to Monte Carlo, if I intended to be successful, so I had to come by the roundabout route through Italy and by the Tenda."

"I suspected that," I said.

"Yes. But the truth was stranger than I had ever imagined. As you know, things do not surprise me very often, but in this affair I confess I'd been taken completely aback."

"How?"

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"Because when I returned to Monty I made some absolutely surprising discoveries. Among them was that Mademoiselle was in the habit of secretly meeting a long-nosed man."

"A long-nosed man!" I exclaimed. "You mean the police-agent?"

"I mean Monsieur Martin, the clerk. Don't you recognise him?" he asked, taking the photograph out of his pocket and handing it to me.

It was the same!

"To be away from Martin's influence, my dear Ewart, the good jeweller Dumont had arranged for Mademoiselle to go into the convent. The father had, no doubt, discovered his daughter's secret love affair. Martin knew this, and with the connivance of Pierrette and Madame had decamped with the gems from the Charing Cross Hotel, in order to feather his nest."

"And the missing Dumont?"

"Dumont, when he realised his enormous loss, saw that if he complained to the police it would get into the papers, and his creditors—who had lately been very pressing—would lose confidence in the stability of the business in the Rue de la Paix. So he resolved to disappear, get away to Norway, and, if possible, follow Martin and regain possession of the jewels. In this he very nearly succeeded, but fortunately for us, Martin was no fool."

"How?"

"Why, he took the jewels to Nice with him when he went to meet Pierrette, and, having acquaintance with Regnier through his friend Raoul, gave them over to 'The President' to sell for him, well knowing that Regnier had, like we ourselves, a secret market for such things. I've proved, by the way, that this fellow Martin has had one or two previous dealings with Regnier while in various situations in Paris."

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"Well?" I asked, astounded at all this. "That's the reason they warned me against her. What else?"

"What else?" he asked. "You may well ask what else? Well, I acted boldly."

"How do you mean?"

"I simply told the dainty Mademoiselle, Raoul, Martin, and the rest of them, of my intention—to explain to the police the whole queer story. I knew quite well that Regnier had the jewels intact in a bag in his room at the Hermitage, and rather feared lest he might pitch the whole lot into the sea, and so get rid of them. That there were grave suspicions against him regarding the mysterious death of a banker at Aix six months before—you recollect the case—I knew quite well, and I was equally certain that he dare not risk any police inquiries. I had a tremendously difficult fight for it, I can assure you; but I stood quite firm, and notwithstanding their threats and vows of vengeance—Mademoiselle was, by the way, more full of venomous vituperation than them all—I won."

"You won?" I echoed. "In what manner?"

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"I compelled Regnier to disgorge the booty in exchange for my silence."

"You got the jewels!" I gasped.

"Certainly. What do you think we are here for—on our way to Amsterdam—if not on business?" he answered, with a smile.

"But where are they? I haven't seen them when our luggage has been overhauled at the frontiers," I said.

"Stop the car, and get down."

I did so. He went along the road till he found a long piece of stick. Then, unscrewing the cap of the petrol-tank, he stuck in the stick and moved it about.

"Feel anything?" he asked, giving me the stick.

I felt, and surely enough in the bottom of the tank was a quantity of small loose stones! I could hear them rattle as I stirred them up.

"The settings were no use, and would tell tales, so I flung them away," he explained; "and I put the stones in there while you were in Nice, the night before we left. Come, let's get on again;" and he re-screwed the cap over one of the finest hauls of jewels ever made in modern criminal history.

"Well—I'm hanged!" I cried, utterly dumbfounded. "But what of Mademoiselle's father?"

Bindo merely raised his shoulders and laughed. "Mademoiselle may be left to tell him the truth—if she thinks it desirable," he said. "Martin has already cleared out—to Buenos Ayres, minus everything; Regnier is completely sold, for no doubt the too confiding Martin would have got nothing out of 'The President'; while Mademoiselle and Madame are now wondering how best to return to Paris and face the music. Old Dumont will probably have to close his doors in the Rue de la Paix, for we have here a selection of his very best. But, after all, Mademoiselle—whose plan to go to London in search of her father was a rather ingenious one—certainly has me to thank that she is not under arrest for criminal conspiracy with her long-nosed lover!"

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I laughed at Bindo's final remark, and put another "move" on the car.

At ten o'clock that same night we took out the petrol-tank and emptied from it its precious contents, which half an hour later had been washed and were safely reposing from the eyes of the curious between tissue paper in the safe in the old Jew's dark den in the Kerk Straat, in Amsterdam.

That was a year ago, and old Dumont still carries on business in the Rue de la Paix. Sir Charles Blythe, who is our informant, as always, tells us that although the pretty Pierrette is back in her convent, the jeweller is still in ignorance of Martin's whereabouts, of how his property passed from hand to hand, or of any of the real facts concerning its disappearance.

One thing is quite certain: he will never see any of it again, for every single stone has been recut, and so effectually disguised as to be beyond identification.

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Honesty spells poverty, Bindo always declares to me.

But some day very soon I intend, if possible, to cut my audacious friends and reform.

And yet how hard it is—how very hard! One can never, alas! retract one's downward steps. I am "The Count's Chauffeur," and shall, I suppose, continue to remain so until the black day when we all fall into the hands of the police.

Therefore the story of my further adventures will, in all probability, be recounted in the Central Criminal Court at a date not very far distant.

For the present, therefore, I must write

THE END.

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