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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A DIPLOMATIC WOMAN ***

A Diplomatic Woman

By HUAN MEE

HARPER & BROTHERS
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THE RUSSIAN CIPHER

"Saints defend us!" I pettishly exclaimed. "Is there no one in the world with an atom of brains? I don't want to go as 'Night' or 'Morning,' nor as 'Marguerite' or 'Pierrette,' or 'Madame la Pompadour'; I want something original!" And I stamped my foot to give emphasis to the remark.

"Shall it be as 'Carmen,' madame?"

I sank into a chair in dismay. "Carmen!" This was the creature's idea of originality. It was too ludicrous for anger. I laughed, and then, as I raised my eyes to Madame Viot's indignantly bewildered countenance, my glance fell upon a dress in a wardrobe behind her, and I pointed to it in a flutter of excitement.

"Some one has originality, after all," I cried. "What does that dress represent?"

"An ice palace, madame."

"*Mon Dieu!* It is superb."

"*Mais oui, madame, c'est magnifique, c'est un miracle,*" and then, carried away with enthusiasm, she brought it forth and dilated upon it. A pale green dress, covered with a shimmering, sparkling net-work that looked like frost itself.

"You see, madame, the head-dress forms the snowy pinnacle of the tower, and the *eau de Nil* embroidered skirt follows the frosted outlines of the building, which is a *fac-simile* of the ice palace raised last winter upon the Neva. An emerald satin mask, with tiny crystal icicles hanging from the edge, in place of the usual fringe of lace, completes the costume."

"I must have it," I cried; "it is incomparable."

"It is sold, madame."

"I will pay double."

"Impossible!"

"Treble!"

"I would willingly give it to madame, as it pleases her fancy, but I cannot; it was designed according to sketches sent to me."

"Tush!" I impatiently exclaimed; "make a duplicate."

"It is impossible, madame, for the dress is for the same *bal masqué* that you will attend."

"And for whom?" I superciliously queried, for I was beside myself with vexation. "Some nobody who has secured a card by chance, and wishes to be thought a princess in disguise, eh?"

"I make for no such people," Madame Virot exclaimed, with a reflection of my own annoyance. "The dress is for the Countess Zarfine. If madame will suggest something else—"

I turned my eyes from the dress that tormented me, and racked my brains for something that should excel its splendor, but the idea came not, and with a contemptuous glare I faced the inoffensive milliner, who had tried to please me for years, and had never more than half succeeded.

"To be original nowadays," I said, indifferently, "is, after all, so commonplace, that to be commonplace is to be original. I will go as 'Carmen.'"

The daintiness of my epigram pleased me so well that I was almost content, yet as I drove towards Le Bois the desire for the costume came upon me again, and I was disconsolate. For it was no ordinary *bal masqué*, where everything was to be pretence, from the characters represented to the fable that the dancers knew not one another. It was all to be real, and no dissimulation. There was to be no unmasking time, but every one was to be *incognito* from the beginning to the end. It was rumored that even our host and hostess would drive up to their own house and enter amid the throng. No one was to know any one, and yet every one was to know every one; no master of the ceremonies, no host and hostess, no introductions or formal presentations. The fact that one was there was an official stamp upon one's passport of reputation. It was a Bohemian idea worthy of her who had brought it to Paris—the Countess Zarfine, wife of the Russian Ambassador, and since, perforce, I must be masked, I would have dazzled by art instead of nature; yet it was not to be, and I grew peevish as I nursed my discomfiture.

My landau pulled up as we entered the gates, and Monsieur Roché, the Premier, from whom I had received in the past many diplomatic commissions, raised his hat and extended his hand.

"Madame, the gods love me."

"Monsieur, you are too modest; you should have used the feminine."

"I wanted to see you more than any other woman in Paris," he answered, "and therefore I repeat—'The gods love me.'"

"'Those whom the gods love,' monsieur—" and I smiled, for I would have given worlds to quarrel with some one, and preferably my best of friends.

"'Die young,' eh?" he chuckled. "Well, the danger for me is past." And then, without waiting for an invitation, he calmly stepped into the carriage and seated himself beside me.

Here was, indeed, candor too wonderful for words, and I gazed reprovingly upon him.

"You must help me, *ma chère*," he said, gravely. "It is no pleasantry, but a serious matter—one that touches my reputation nearly."

"Well, *mon ami*?"

"You know our relationship with Russia?"

"The pretty girl with inviting graces to a gallant who hesitates."

"Precisely," he answered, in a tone of appreciation at my simile; "but the pretty girl's love-letters are being opened."

"Humiliating."

"More than that," he cried, impetuously; "detrimental to me. Three times in the past month has the most secret cipher of the government been changed, because identical with the receipt of our message by Russia its import has become public property in the capitals of Europe."

"Then, ineffectually changed," I observed.

"Utterly. I have just left Count Zarfine, the Russian Ambassador, and he has dared to imply, in almost undiplomatic language, that his government suspects us of trifling. *Mon Dieu!*" Monsieur Roché cried in an awe-stricken voice; "trifling with Russia!"

"Who holds this cipher?"

"Myself and Count Zarfine. When it is changed the new cipher is sent to St. Petersburg by him direct to the Minister, and the documents by me, through the diplomatic departments. We have varied the cipher three times, we have sent different messengers each time, but the result has always been the same. The world learned the message at once, and we are fast becoming the laughing-stock of Europe, for the pretty girl is ready to offer so much for alliance."

"And the Count could not help you, *mon ami?*"

"He was brusque almost to rudeness, but his wife—"

"Ah, monsieur, his wife, what of her?" I asked, with a smile, for I well knew the fascinations of the Countess Zarfine.

"She knows, as I know," monsieur answered, "that, as in France, so in Russia, there are powerful influences against this alliance."

He lowered his voice and continued impressively, "Influences so powerful that it might be possible for them to obtain our secret papers, open them, read them, and then reseal them and pass them on to their destination."

"But that would be useless without the key to the cipher, *mon ami.*"

"That is stolen in Paris."

"Ah! from whom?"

"The Count himself, and despatched at once to those awaiting it."

"Childlike in its simplicity," I murmured, with a world of satire.

"The Countess is a wonderful woman," he admitted, and then continued: "You see how easy it is. These people can gain access to the documents passing between France and Russia, but not to the key of the cipher—that is stolen here."

"And, of course, the thief is known already," I cried, disdainfully.

"Almost," he replied, with the first flash of enthusiasm he had manifested—"almost. On Wednesday we shall catch him in the very act. Of one thing we are certain. He moves in diplomatic circles, and knows that our final proposal will be made to Russia by the end of the week. On Wednesday morning I hand the new cipher to the Count, at night he despatches it, but in the hours that intervene the Countess will discover the thief. She suspects one of her husband's secretaries."

"You have enlisted a new and powerful ally, monsieur," with a jealous tremor in my voice.

"Tut, tut," he answered, mildly; "you are the ally I must have, for, frankly, I do not believe a word the Countess says."

"Then the saints be praised," I ejaculated; "you are not the simpleton that I feared you were. But you go too far, *mon ami*, for all is true excepting one thing, the name of the spy, and that is—"

"Let us be diplomatic," he interrupted, "until we are sure. Take the missing quantity X."

"Why not Z?" I replied, and then I own I started with slight surprise at the coincidence, for the Countess herself cantered up to the side of the carriage, and I took her proffered hand.

"I do not believe in Z," Monsieur Roché cried, raising his voice a little. "Zero cannot win the race, notwithstanding her distance allowance;" and then he looked up and bowed to the Countess Zarfine.

"I did not suspect diplomacy found recreation in horse-racing, monsieur," she exclaimed, with an arch smile.

"Age has its follies as well as youth," he answered, and then leaned anxiously towards her and whispered, "Any news?"

"What can there be until then?" she asked. "On the night of the day chosen I shall know. At the *bal masqué* I will tell you his name."

Monsieur Roché looked the picture of despair, and then, with a gesture as though the whole world had been lost to him, spoke in an undertone to the Countess, said something that I judged by a dainty frown she did not favor; but in an instant the cloud had passed, and she smiled again,

and answered, "As you will."

Yet to me it still seemed that she was being forced into some action she would not have elected of her own free choice.

Then Monsieur Roché, still a little embarrassed, turned to me. "A message—a written message—is to be conveyed to me at the *bal masqué*; I cannot be there, and"—how charmingly he was confused—"will you receive it for me?"

"And take it at once to Le Quai d'Orsay," the Countess interjected.

"Bring it myself?" I cried, in simulated surprise.

"Yes," monsieur answered, and tactfully continued, "I am shamed at the greatness of the favor I ask, but it is vital."

"Very well," I reluctantly consented. "If that be so I will do it;" and he murmured his thanks.

"At midnight I shall pass the head of the staircase and slip a note into your hand," the Countess exclaimed; "that will be the message."

"But we are all *incognito*," I observed, with my most ingenuous smile.

"You will easily recognize me—I shall represent the 'Franco-Russe Alliance,'" she answered, with the ready lie of a Russian. "The National emblems and the National colors—the Double Eagle and the *fleur-de-lis*. And you?"

"The 'Lost Provinces,'" I replied, meeting lie with diplomatic evasion.

The look of annoyance still slumbered in the depths of her dark eyes, and I thought, too, there was the glint of a dawning suspicion; but it was swiftly chased away as she turned with a jest to Monsieur Roché, and after the interchange of a few pleasantries, nodded gayly to us both and rode off.

"You are well matched in one thing," Monsieur Roché suavely remarked, as he watched her retreating figure, "your originality of costume."

"And in another," I replied; "the fact that neither will wear what she has said she will."

The dear man's eyebrows shot upward in bewilderment.

"She will represent 'An Ice Palace' I, 'Carmen.'"

He looked at me for a moment in undisguised admiration, and then sank back and whispered with contented appreciation, "*Mon Dieu!* you are a wonderful woman."

"And a fortunate one," I replied, "to win the approbation of so accomplished a diplomat."

"*Ma chère*," he murmured, "men are diplomats by education, women by intuition. It is civilization against nature."

"The dresses we have mentioned," I continued, "will probably be worn by our maids, leaving the Countess Zarfine at liberty to carry out her work, and me free to frustrate her; for I am certain now that it is she who reveals the cipher. Had I not known the costume she really intends to wear I should have devoted the night to watching the 'Franco-Russe Alliance.' As it is, my maid, the 'Lost Provinces,' will do that for the sake of diplomatic appearances, the Countess will be deceived, and I shall be free. So I require another card for the carnival—get it secretly for me."

"Success is assured," he cried, enthusiastically.

"Not so fast, *mon ami*. She already suspects me—I could see it in her eyes—and therefore you must act with consummate tact; you must delay the delivery of the key on some pretence until an hour before the ball, and so render it impossible for it to be revealed to any one except at the carnival. Then I know when it will be done—directly I have left."

"After you have left?" he cried, in bewilderment.

"After my maid has left with the Countess Zarfine's message for you."

"Ah," he sighed, and there was a world of admiration in the utterance of that monosyllable, but a moment after, his face became grave again, as he suggested, "Perhaps the key may be given in such a way that you cannot prevent it—another note, for instance, skilfully passed from hand to hand."

"I think not. She would not risk anything so liable to be discovered. Besides, she suspects; and more," I continued, "does not the whole idea of this *bal masqué* proclaim the lady's love for the theatrical? No, *mon ami*, the cipher will be given in such a manner that if a man watched her actions every minute of the night he would see nothing, but a woman might see much."

Monsieur smiled again, complaisantly.

"Then, too, if I fail, it is not ruin," I said, "for the documents will not be despatched until you have heard from me. If I succeed, the evidence against her will be strong enough to give you all the proofs you need."

"But—"

"No more suppositions, *mon ami*; you weary me."

"You're the cleverest woman in Paris," he said, with a glance of warm admiration, as he alighted and stood by my carriage.

"And you, for one who has left youth behind, are the most gallant man in France," I answered, with a glow of merriment, for I already counted my mission as accomplished.

"Left youth behind," he murmured, despondingly.

"You said so, *mon ami*."

"It was in an undiplomatic moment."

"Therefore true, and your tongue, at least, is still youthful. *Au revoir*, monsieur."

Thérèse created a sensation. There are women even among my chosen acquaintances who insist upon their maids being stiff, and, if possible, ugly. Perhaps they fear the comparison which I am too satisfied with myself to be concerned about, and on that night I was thankful that my choice had fallen upon a girl who could so admirably play the part I had selected for her, one whom I need not fear, by some vulgar *gaucherie*, would spoil my plans or endanger my success.

Thérèse created a sensation, and, as she entered, the audacity of her costume drew all eyes towards her.

Her pretty auburn curls were surmounted by the "Cap of Liberty," draped in crape; her skirt was of the palest yellow silk, with the outlines of our "Lost Provinces" in black; while, symbolical of the day we prayed for, the arms of France were more than half eclipsing those of Germany.

For a moment there was the silence of admiration as she entered, and then a hum of applause burst into a shout as each loyal heart caught the symbolical meaning of the fading colors of the German arms, almost hidden by the simple sweetness of our own dear *fleur-de-lis*, and patriotic voices cried, "*Vive belle Alsace! Vive, vive Lorraine!*"

And Thérèse bore the sensation as I would have done myself. I turned a diamond half-hoop on my finger, reflecting it was the last time I could do so, for to-morrow it should be hers.

Strictly obedient to my instructions, she danced but little, always following, with some ostentation of persistence, the movements of a lady who had attracted passing attention—the embodiment of the "Franco-Russe Alliance." It was a quaint sport we favored—the maid watching the maid.

Midnight struck, and from a secluded corner I saw the note passed to Thérèse, who quietly descended the steps, mingled for a moment in the kaleidoscopic throng, and so departed.

Then I added a new gown to the diamond ring, for what other girl could have left a carnival where she was the belle because she had been told to do so?

Like a modern Cinderella, she left it all, and yet, wiser than the damsel of the fairy tale, left before she was discovered, and I, a commonplace "Carmen"—for I remember there were three of us—now felt the decisive moment had arrived. A man had been watching Thérèse as she descended the staircase, and I touched him lightly upon the arm.

"The Provinces are lost, monsieur," I said, softly. "Be content with operatic Spain," and I hummed a melody of Bizet's.

"You, madame?" he cried, as he recognized my voice.

"Yes, I."

"I thought she who just left was you," he said, as though anxious to explain the attention he had devoted to Thérèse.

"And I, monsieur, know my friends too well to be deceived by a masquerade," I answered, and, of a truth, I believe that there must have been a tell-tale trace of sentiment in my tones. And why not? Even a pretty widow may have sentimental moments at times when her dearest friend is near at hand. He looked straight into my eyes as though he would read my inmost thoughts.

"Do you mean that?"

"I mean this, Gaspard, *mon cher ami*. I want you to do me a favor. Indeed, before the night is out there may be many favors I need to ask, and I want you to grant them all."

"Then they must be renamed," he answered, "not favors, but pleasures."

"See," I cried, "that woman dressed in the frosted green gown—intended, I should think, to represent an ice palace?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who she is?"

"No; who can say?" he replied, with a slight shrug of the shoulders.

"I must be near her for the rest of the night—I want to watch her."

The Countess Zarfine was walking slowly across the ballroom, her hand resting upon the arm of a tall man in the dress of an exquisite of the period of Louis XIV., and, quickly grasping my meaning, Gaspard strolled aimlessly in the same direction, carrying on an animated conversation with me all the while, which raised him greatly in my estimation as a budding diplomat.

"They are going to sit upon the balcony," I found an instant to whisper, and we followed them, my nerves thrilling with delight as I realized the strength of my position, for now the Countess would feel herself secure, thinking that I had departed.

She was seated upon a basket-chair upon the balcony overlooking the Champs Elysées, talking, in a voice that challenged criticism, of the new play at the Renaissance, and Gaspard skilfully led me to a seat facing them, and took one by my side.

And then the clever boy entered with zest into the Bohemian conceit of the *bal masqué*, for without a word of introduction he joined in their conversation, and in an instant we were a quartette discussing the frivolities of life.

Gradually an idle group grew round us—flattering gallants who protested with glowing compliments "that it was too cruel of their hostess to hide all the lovely faces of Paris behind silken masks."

"It must be because she is jealous," the Countess cried, with a smile that showed for an instant the gleam of her teeth; "she fears the contrast."

But then—for men, despite their deceit, are strangely truthful sometimes—no one dared to dispute the beauty of his hostess, and her eyes gleamed with gratified pride as her sneer was left unsupported in the silence—yet perhaps they were suspicious.

"Still, messieurs," she exclaimed, with a ripple of laughter, "since our faces are hidden, our freedom is greater—we may be more Bohemian." And in an instant she produced a gold case, and, extracting a cigarette, placed it with a gesture of impudence between her lips. "Those who love me join with me," she continued, handing the case to the surrounding group.

It seemed to me that there was a falseness in this ingenuous mood that sat but ill upon one so contemptuously proud.

In an instant the blue smoke curled in the air from half a dozen cigarettes.

"Carmen," she cried, reproachfully, with a glance at me, "you who should have led the way still hesitate," and she extended the case, and carefully lighted the cigarette for me from her own.

"And you, monsieur," with a glance at the man who had been her companion from the ballroom.

"It was a privilege I had never anticipated, and so came unprepared."

"Then she who grants permission supplies the means of enjoyment. Take two, or three, or four, or what you will; their fragrance may be even greater in the morning."

There was an intonation in the last words that struck me with a sense of hidden meaning, and as the man carelessly took several, and, after lighting one, slipped the remainder into his pocket, the truth burst upon me in a flash—the key to the cipher had been passed.

On each cigarette paper was the key. I held it between my fingers half consumed, and those around were obligingly burning the others before her eyes, save for that man whom I knew still had three in his possession. What a thoughtless fool I had been, I who held all I needed in my grasp had myself destroyed it. The cigarette had burned down to my fingers. I was compelled to drop it, and he trod it to dust beneath his foot.

But he still had three. With an *abandon* worthy of "Carmen" herself I turned my fascinations upon him; with a swift glance at Gaspard, who instantly comprehended, I sent him to the side of the Countess, and she, nothing loath to be the centre of a group of admirers, elated because her mission was over, encouraged them, and kept them from her with the arts of one born to coquetry.

The saints be praised, all men are young—or, at least, feel they are—when a pretty woman smiles upon them. He was what a diplomat would have called middle-aged, but—saints be praised—I am a pretty woman.

"You are the incarnation of 'Carmen' herself," he whispered, as we found ourselves excluded from the group surrounding the Countess.

"*Merci*, monsieur, you flatter me—it is the dress attracts you."

"No; it is the sparkle of your eyes behind that envious mask, the grace of each gesture, the soul of music in your voice, the poetry in every motion that proclaims you the ideal 'Carmen.'"

"Save for one thing: a cigarette, *s'il vous plait*, monsieur," and I extended my hand.

Slowly, even as though he realized that he was being drawn into a trap, he took one of them from his pocket and hesitatingly handed it to me.

Half suspiciously, half in a fashion of tenderness, he held a match to the cigarette, and then, almost before the paper had caught, it dropped through my fingers to the ground; and I, with a laugh at my carelessness, placed my heel upon it and edged it beneath my skirt.

My shoe pressed upon it lightly, my lips smiled apologetically, yet murmured, "*Merci, monsieur*," as I awaited another to replace it.

I saw his features tighten as his eyes followed my movements, yet what could he do? Realizing that I had discovered him, and I could not but feel that he knew it, he gave me another, and I lighted it.

For a second we measured glances, and I knew that he fathomed my plans as truly as I did his.

"You are a clever little devil!" he said, with almost a touch of appreciation.

"Monsieur!"

"You have my cigarette under your shoe, but what of that? In a minute I shall offer you my arm, you will take it, we shall go to the ballroom and dance the cotillion."

"You are sure?"

"Perfectly. I have only to raise my voice and say 'The air is cool,' and the Countess will understand; she will rejoin us, and that being so, a lady cannot search for a half-burned cigarette. You have the desire of your quest within your reach, and yet as far removed as the north is from the south."

I looked disdainfully at him and calmly smoked.

"You are too clever to waste yourself upon such pettiness," he whispered. "In Russia I would find you a sphere worthy of your talents, and make you a duchess."

"I fail to understand, monsieur."

He leaned forward until his eyes looked straight into mine, and spoke with deliberate emphasis.

"I am going to stoop and take from under your chair a cigarette, and you must perforce permit me."

"Why?"

"Because if you attempted to resist I should prevent it. See, I slowly stoop to regain my own."

He bent as he spoke, and then, as the inspiration flashed upon me, my hands went swiftly to my throat, and with a sudden clutch I snapped my necklace, and a shower of pearls scattered upon the balcony.

"My pearls!" I cried in dismay, and brushing past him to save them as they fell, I picked up the cigarette from beneath my skirt and looked mockingly into his face.

"You are a clever little devil!" he said, with chagrined appreciation.

I smiled, for the key to the cipher was safe in my possession.

But men count for nothing in such matters, for men can even hold admiration for a victorious enemy—here there was a woman to deal with.

While the gallants who had clustered around the Countess were collecting my truant pearls, she walked across and glared into my face with eyes that blazed with fury.

In passion she tore the mask from her face, and so, because she was pleased to confess herself, I accepted the challenge and removed mine. She forgot her civilization, her breeding, her position, everything, and dropped back into the barbarous language of her ancestors.

"If I only had you in Russia!" she gasped, her lips almost touching my ear. "I'd have you flogged for this; I'd have your lying tongue torn out, and those shoulders you're so proud of branded 'Spy,' God! If I had you in Russia!"

"And yet," I murmured, "methinks these charms of Russia must be enjoyed by you alone, and swiftly, too, for surely—his Excellency will resign at once."

"God!" she cried, "if I had you in Russia!"

I turned away, but stole a backward glance at her as she stood, her whole body trembling, her fingers clutching the balustrade to support her quivering figure, and then he came forward and handed me my pearls.

It was the third time he had said it, and there was a crescendo of meaning in the phrase he whispered:

"You are a clever little devil!"

LE DIABLE

We were a gathering of diplomacy, science, and beauty. Monsieur Roché, the Premier, the first, Monsieur Vicenne, the Minister of Marine, the second, and it was I who completed the trio.

"I have offered five million francs!" Monsieur Vicenne exclaimed, with a gesture as though he had mentioned the total of the Treasury of the Republic.

"But that is not so very much, monsieur," I ventured to suggest, "if the invention be all that is pretended for it."

"Five million francs!" he ejaculated again, with wide-opened eyes, until I feared that his eyebrows would altogether disappear into his bushy hair.

"It is the method of calculating that is at fault," I said. "Five million francs. It sounds stupendous; but what is it? In Napoleons, merely two hundred and fifty thousand; in English sovereigns, only two hundred thousand. What do you really estimate the invention to be worth?"

"It is priceless. *Mon Dieu!* Imagine." The dear man always spoke in this staccato manner. "A boat—a submarine boat. Sixty knots an hour. *Mon Dieu!* If we—if France could possess it. England! Bah!" He snapped his fingers disdainfully.

"And all for five million francs?"

"I would pay ten. *Nom de Diable!* Fifteen—twenty."

"Ah!" I smiled.

Monsieur Roché laid his long fingers upon my arm.

"A commission, eh, *ma chère?*"

"Mercy, no! What do I know of such affairs?"

"Twenty million francs. *Mon Dieu!* If you could buy for ten, sell for twenty—eh?" sharply interjected Monsieur Vicenne.

Monsieur Roché tapped him upon the shoulder, somewhat irritably.

"Madame is the loveliest woman in Paris," he observed.

The Minister of Marine interrupted.

"You talk commonplaces," he cried. "Tell me next that the sun is shining."

And I was constrained to rise and bow my acknowledgments for the twin compliment.

"But she is one of the richest," Monsieur Roché continued. "Money can be no inducement."

"To serve France?" Monsieur Vicenne hazarded.

"And the love of adventure," I added. "Monsieur, I will do my best. If I am successful, I will claim as my reward that the first boat built upon this invention shall be named after me."

"*L'Incomparable,*" suggested M. Vicenne.

"*Merci, monsieur, mais non, 'L'Aide.'*"

I had started on my journey before I had seriously considered what a mad-brained scheme I had taken in hand. I, who knew nothing of such things, was about to attempt to persuade where the whole diplomatic tact of French administrators had failed. I was to be a bidder for this wonderful boat that had startled the world; appearing to-day at Ostend, to-morrow a thousand miles away, and all the power in the hands of a man who was deaf to entreaty, impervious to persuasion.

The experts of the navy had pleaded to be allowed to inspect the boat. His answer had been, "Keep level with it, and watch."

"Keep level, and watch"—it was a pleasant satire. England's latest toy, the *Turbina*, steamed only thirty-four knots an hour, and there were those who swore that this submarine boat at times got near to sixty.

Still the die was cast. I was to obtain, somehow, an interview with the inventor, who was so unlike others of his species that he invented for his own satisfaction, and not to sell his discovery. I was to offer whatever I liked. And if, as was probable, he refused, try and induce him to take me for a cruise, and learn what I could as fortune favored me.

It was as foolish a scheme for them to suggest as for me to undertake; but everything about the vessel was so secret and mysterious, that even if I could bring back the vaguest idea of how this craft was propelled it would be of inestimable value.

It was to the wild coast of Normandy that I was speeding, clad in a rusty black gown and a still rustier mantle that libelled nature in the manner it distorted me; and the day was as wild and boisterous as I could wish for the first act of the play, comedy, or tragedy, as Fate decreed.

The gray eve was fading to a dirty twilight, and inky clouds scurried across the gloomy sky, as I alighted some four kilometres from the Chateau de Lorme, and, setting my face resolutely to the wind, started to walk the distance.

The wind, howling and biting from the sea, brought with it merciless sheets of hail and sleety rain; and after the first ten minutes I realized that I could get no wetter, and so I mechanically battled onward, my wretched, ill-shapen garments streaming with water, and flapping miserably around me.

Saints! what a walk! A dozen times I was for relinquishing the whole thing and turning back in despair, but something kept me struggling on until more than half the distance had been traversed, and then it was better to press forward than to return.

On and on, the sharp hailstones stinging my cheeks, until I felt it must be seclusion for a month before I dared appear in Paris again, and then a turn of the road brought me before a house standing on the edge of the cliff, an enormous mansion shrouded in blackness, and apparently deserted.

Night had fallen, and everywhere was darkness and solitude. An avenue of trees led to the door, and while I walked under their shelter I had an opportunity of gaining my breath before I grasped the heavy iron knocker, and, with determined hand, knocked until the house seemed to shake with the echoes.

"Well?" at last came a gruff shout above my head. "Well, what is it?"

"I want shelter," I cried, irritably, and not with feigned annoyance, for I was shivering with the damp and cold, and wished I had never left Paris.

"This is not an inn."

"No, but it's a house," I cried, defiantly. "I must have shelter. I can pay for it."

A man's voice chuckled—what a mirthless chuckle it was!—the window was banged down with a thud, and I had seized the knocker to hammer again, when the entrance-hall blazed into light, and the door was opened.

A gust of wind threw me forward, and as I recovered myself and stepped across the threshold I caught my breath in amazement, for I, who have viewed the mansions of the greatest, never before beheld such barbaric splendor. It was an entrance-hall fit for the palace of a prince, and lighted with enormous clusters of incandescent lamps.

My wretched rain-soaked dress was making pools upon the parquet, and I moved to a rug and surveyed my host, who was as striking as his surroundings—a tall, thin individual, with long, gray, straggling hair that hung round his shoulders, and a wild, unkempt beard. His eyes, which flashed fiercely, and seemed to read one through and through, were overhung by heavy, jet-black eyebrows.

He looked the very embodiment of Eugene Sue's Wanderer, and yet he was politeness personified, for his eyes did not turn to the pools upon the polished floor, nor to the wet trail I had made with my bedraggled skirt.

"I am favored, madame," he said, bowing, with a thin, transparent hand upon his breast.

"And I am cold and wet and hungry," I answered, prosaically, for I was determined to be in no wise awed by these unexpected surroundings.

"Three evils so easily remedied that it is scarcely worth designating them even as evils," he replied; and then, with another bow, escorted me up the staircase into a spacious corridor, where he opened a door, and stood aside for me to enter.

"I have so many guests to-night," he murmured, apologetically, "that I fear I cannot treat you as I would wish; but you will find all your needs supplied in the dressing-room beyond."

He paused in the doorway.

"There is only hunger left now," he exclaimed, with another chuckle, "and dinner is at eight. May I expect you in the reception-room a few minutes before that hour?"

"With pleasure," I answered. "And, monsieur, you have my gratitude."

He shrugged his shoulders ever so slightly, and then, with a momentary glance at my costume, waved his hand towards the adjoining room.

"You will dress to meet my guests, madame, and look your best, for you will meet the greatest men the world has ever seen."

With that he chuckled again, closed the door, and left me; while I shot the bolt behind him, and stood—I confess it—and laughed—laughed a long peal of merriment. The greatest men of the world visiting here. It was too droll.

But I was in the house of the inventor of *Le Diable*, received as his honored guest. Already I had been startled and surprised, and I wondered what the next few hours might hold in store for me. A shiver brought me back to realities. I passed into the adjoining room, a dressing-room lined

with wardrobes, containing gowns and feminine adornments, before which even my own treasures from the Rue de la Paix were insignificant. Through curtains beyond was the bathroom, with every dainty requisite that a woman of fashion could desire.

In an hour I was ready to do honor to my host and his famous guests. I missed Thérèse. But who could look anything but bewitching in the magnificent creations at my disposal? I passed from my apartment into the lengthy corridor, noticing that on either side, with the doors flung open, were suites of rooms similar to my own.

My gown was, perhaps, an inch shorter than I could have wished, but in every other respect it was perfection, hanging loosely from the low-cut shoulders to the hem, except for an elaborate silver filigree belt that caught in its silken folds at the waist, and I felt confident that, no matter whom I might meet, I had no reason to be ashamed of my appearance.

I descended the stairs, and should have wandered about the building, impelled by natural curiosity; but I caught sight of monsieur standing alone in the middle of a spacious room upon my left, and so I entered and walked towards him, feeling a keen satisfaction in my improved appearance as my train rustled across the floor.

"You have kept us all waiting," he cried, with evident annoyance in his tone.

I glanced round in astonishment, for there was no one save our two selves in the great apartment.

"I will present you to my guests, Madame——?" and he paused interrogatively.

"Lerestelle," I exclaimed, still bewildered.

And then he took me by the hand, and we made the tour of the room.

Truly, as he said, his guests were the greatest ones of the earth; truly my host was hopelessly mad, for no reception-room that the world has ever known has been filled with such a gathering. And truly, too, he and I were alone.

Living and dead, these imaginary creatures of his disordered brain were massed together in hopeless confusion. He flung a witticism at Madame de Staël, a cynicism at Voltaire, a quotation from "Fédora" at Sardou, and a line from a sonnet at Alfred de Musset. And I bowed to the empty chairs, and humored this weird pleasantry.

We reached the climax when my host presented me to Napoleon Bonaparte, and I could scarcely restrain the hysteric laughter which was dangerously near escaping. But relief came as he introduced me to the last imaginary guest of all, the present Minister of Marine, my friend Monsieur Vicenne.

There seemed a certain irony in the fact that the man upon whose behalf I had braved this dwelling should have been, in the crazed mind of my host, included with his illustrious guests. He left me beside my friend, and I sank into a chair, with a vague uneasiness that I could not dispel, a feeling of restless horror that deepened, as monsieur, like an ideal host, sauntered from one chair to another, chatting lightly to these impalpable creatures of his imagination; laughing at some jest with this one, and anon leaning towards another, as though interchanging a whispered confidence.

I felt I was growing hysterical: a moment longer and I should have shrieked. The strain was becoming too great, the horror at being alone with such a man too much; but a gong boomed without, and he, with some imaginary beauty leaning upon his arm, passed from the room, while I sauntered behind, and far behind, too, for I was fearful of the order of precedence.

It was a relief to find that we two were not absolutely alone in the house. I was conducted to a seat near my host in the dining-room by a liveried man-servant, while a dozen more stood around the table.

Noiselessly they moved about the spacious apartment, apparently attending to the wants of the shadowy guests, at that long table set for a score.

The soup was brought, and placed not only before my host and myself, but in front of every empty chair. The wine was poured into every glass, and as each course was finished, so were the untouched plates removed and others brought.

It would have been nearly ludicrous, but for the deadly dreariness of the scene, the ghostly grimness of the picture, the all-pervading nervous atmosphere of the impending unknown. I gazed at the vacant seats, until I could almost fancy an illustrious company filling them; not the witty, animated throng that he could see, but a gathering of chattering skeletons, that grinned and gibed at me over the flower-decked and silver-laden damask.

And all the while he merrily smiled and jested—smiled at this beauty whom only his eyes could see, laughed at that jest which only his ears could hear.

Nerves, I have always proudly averred, I know not, but now I caught at the table to rise and flee from the room, when he fixed his eyes upon my face, and turned confidentially towards me.

Then he raised his glass and pledged his guests. "*A vôtre santé, madame,*" he murmured to me.

"*A la vôtre, monsieur.*"

As he set down his glass he placed his long, bony finger upon my arm. "Do you know why they're all here?" he chuckled. "Ah, to try and steal my invention—my boat, *Le Diable*."

Here, at last, was a gleam of sense, a scrap of rational talk, and it came to me like cold water to the fainting.

"What boat?" I asked, and my brain seemed to quicken to life again.

"Ah! ah! what boat?" he said, with a grim chuckle; "what boat?—*Le Diable*. You're the only innocent one here, and I will madden them all by allowing you to see it. I'll show it to her, Monsieur Vicenne," he cried, glaring fiercely at the empty chair beside me, "but not to you, no, not to any of you," he almost shouted, with a sharp look right down the table.

"When?" I exclaimed, scarcely able to hide my anxiety.

"Never!" he screamed, with a flash of rage. "You want to rob me, like the rest of them; you're all thieves!" he cried, banging his fist upon the table, till the glasses rang again, "a crowd of hypocritical, thieving knaves," and then as suddenly as he blazed forth he calmed down, and resumed his meal in silence, while I, perceiving that he had forgotten me, with the rest of his guests, stepped from my seat, and stole quietly from the room.

I have no shame in confessing that my self-control lasted but to the foot of the staircase, and then, like a frightened child, I caught my skirt in my hands, and flew up the stairs, and along the corridor, never halting until I was back in my room again, with the door securely locked.

To pass the night in such a house was impossible, and I unfastened the casement windows to see if the storm had spent itself. With a vicious howl the wind tore them from my grasp and flung them back with a crash, while the hail and rain streamed in, deadening the delicate tints of the carpet. To leave was worse than to stay. I could not face such a night, and, exerting all my strength, I fastened the windows again, and turned with a nervous gasp as someone knocked upon the door.

It was only a servant with my coffee upon a silver tray, which he placed upon a fancy Oriental stand, saying that monsieur would excuse me.

He seemed inclined to say more had I permitted, but one cannot question the servants of one's host. I thanked him, and he bowed and left.

I had thought of sitting through the night, but the slight indulgence of a spoonful of cognac in my coffee restored my brain to reason, while the fatigue of my journey and the excitement of the evening had worn me to death. I munched a few wafers, for I had scarcely eaten more than the spectral guests, and then crept contentedly between the scented sheets, and it seemed but an instant before the room was bathed in sunshine. The night had passed.

What a blessing is the sunlight! Sleep had completely revived me, and in more borrowed plumes I walked from my room, all intent upon my mission, and with a fixed determination that I would succeed; and then another surprise awaited me, for the dainty breakfast was only set for two, and my host courteously greeted me, and talked as a sane man upon every-day commonplaces.

Only once during the meal he relapsed, and then he leaned towards me and chuckled.

"They've all gone!" he cried; "they come suddenly at times, and try and steal my boat, but they never see it, and then, when they realize they never will, they leave altogether. Sometimes they stay a whole week," he continued, in a whisper, "and threaten me all the time, until I fear I shall go mad, but last night, after you had left, I told them boldly what I thought of them, and silently, one by one, they crept away."

"You promised me that I should see the boat?" I said, softly.

"It is a lie," he cried, with a blaze of fury.

"Very well, it's a lie," I answered, coldly, with simulated scorn.

For an instant he remained silent, and then, with a grave smile, he craved forgiveness.

"If I promised, I will keep my word," he said, quietly. "I will trust you; you shall see what no one in this world has seen, because I know you are an honorable woman, and will not betray my secret."

"Thank you," I said, devoting more attention to my cutlet than I had ever given to a Count, "but if you would rather not—"

"I never break my word," he responded. "Come to this room at five o'clock to-morrow morning, and you shall breakfast off the Isle of Wight at nine," and with that he rose from the table, and, courteously bowing to me, strolled from the apartment.

The day passed swiftly, for I was absorbed in pleasant thoughts at my own good fortune. That I could win him to sell his invention I doubted greatly, but that I should be able to gain some insight into the mechanism of the boat during the promised cruise, I felt assured.

The momentary thought that he was going to trust his secret with me because he believed me an

honorable woman, did uncomfortably occur to me, but I dispelled it with disdain. What right, I asked myself, had a man to keep such an invention to himself, when it would be a crowning laurel to the glory of France?

Throughout the day my heart was high with elation, but as darkness fell my spirits drooped too, for I recollected the events of the previous night, and speculated on the wisdom, or want of wisdom, of a cruise beneath the sea with a man who, to say the least of it, was distinctly eccentric.

Yet he was sane enough now, and I would not waver from my purpose with success so near to my grasp. My fears were groundless. I dined alone, retired at ten, and slept peacefully until a quarter to five, when I rose, and, swiftly dressing, threw a long warm cloak over my arm, and descended the staircase.

The early morning was fine, but cold; no sign was yet apparent of the approaching dawn, and only an indigo sky, dotted with sparkling stars, was visible, as I passed the windows in the corridor.

My host, enveloped in a thick ulster, stood awaiting me in the morning-room, and with a cheery smile he apologized for the hour of our start, and opening a bottle of champagne, poured out for me a glassful.

"To our cruise."

"To our cruise," I responded, touching his glass with mine.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Quite," I answered, with rather a white smile, for I was cold, and, I own, a trifle nervous.

He took a lantern from the table and led the way, while I followed him along the entrance hall and down a steep flight of steps.

"You see, I guard my secret well," he said, unlocking an iron door at the end of what seemed to be a cellar, and then carefully fastening it behind us; "you are the first living soul to see my boat."

With the utmost care he guided me along the narrow passage, warning me of every inequality in the ground, and casting the light, so that I might walk with ease, until we reached a roughhewn flight of steps, seemingly cut from the native rock, that disappeared into the blackness beneath our feet, and there I instinctively paused and drew back.

"It is not tempting to a woman," he murmured, apologetically; "but the house stands on the cliff, and we are descending to the caves below."

Down, down, ever down we went, until I lost count of distance; but at last the steps ceased, and we stood upon a narrow platform of slippery stone, and I could hear the swoosh of the sea against the sides of the cave.

He flashed the light around. We were standing upon a ledge, about four feet above the water, and on every side were wet and greasy rocks; the roof above us was hidden in densest gloom, and at our feet lay the boat!

"My secret is safe, eh?" he cried, and the echoes flung back, "eh? eh? eh?" with a flood of chuckling scorn. "Even at low water," he continued, "the entrance to this cavern is hidden; only you and I, who move beneath the sea, can go to and fro."

He turned the rays of the lamp upon the boat, which lay quietly rocking in the water, a boat which seemed but little different from others of its style; the usual build of submarine vessels, cigar-shaped, with a conning-tower of steel, studded with thick glass port-holes, and a man-hole next to it.

Monsieur handed the lamp to me, and I kept its light fixed upon the vessel, while he strode across the deck, and, unscrewing the circular trap, passed into the interior. In an instant the conning-tower blazed with light, throwing brilliant beams from each of the round windows that looked like eyes staring into vacancy, and then, after what seemed an eternity, he appeared again, and beckoned me to come aboard.

For an instant I hesitated, but he walked towards me, and helped me across the sloping deck, down the man-hole, and into the cabin below.

In one glance I perceived the luxury of the interior, a small saloon, tapering off slightly at one end, upholstered in amber satin, save at the smaller end, where, upon a polished switchboard, was a group of strange handles of brass and ebony. Just in front of them a high seat was placed, which seemed arranged so that the whole of the handles were within the reach of a single operator, whose eyes would be on a level with the windows of the conning-tower. To the right was a steering-wheel, and to the left a compass.

I turned to my companion; he was busy adjusting the screws of the man-hole, and then, when all was finished to his satisfaction, he came towards me, and led me to the group of handles.

"It is your cruise, madame," he said, with a smile, "therefore you shall be the captain. Draw down the handle on the right."

I pulled it sharply downward, and felt the boat sink under my feet—we were beneath the water.

"Up!" he cried, and I obeyed him, and instantly the vessel's descent was arrested.

"The handle next to it," he said, "an inch down," and as I moved it the boat sprang forward, while he stood by my side, his eyes fixed on the compass, and his hand upon the wheel, now giving a turn to the left, and now to the right.

"We are clear of the cave," he cried, after a moment, "and in the open sea." Then, with a glance at the clock, he continued: "It has taken longer than usual to get away. Let *Le Diable* show his power, if you would breakfast where I promised. Pull down that handle, madame, as far as it will go."

Grasping it firmly, I obeyed him, and as I did so the boat bounded forward with such speed and suddenness that I should have fallen had he not caught me by the arm.

"Too sudden!" he cried, with his usual chuckle. "You must not drive even the devil too furiously."

I seated myself on a lounge, while he remained at the wheel, his eyes alternating between the compass and a chart.

Presently he became blurred to me, for I had risen unconscionably early, and the motion of the boat, after the first plunge, was conducive to slumber, so that I sank back and knew no more until I felt a touch upon my arm and found him bending over me.

"In a quarter of an hour you will breakfast," he said.

"*Merci, monsieur*," I answered; "I am hungry."

"This boat is my coffin," he suddenly ejaculated, looking me straight in the face. "That is why I will sell it to no one."

I nodded, and tried to smile in spite of my terror at this sudden change in his manner and the fierceness with which he gripped my wrist.

"When I am tired of life I shall drive into the midst of the Atlantic, sink *Le Diable* to the lowest ocean depths, and die."

"Yes, when you are tired of life," I answered.

"And who knows when that may be!" he cried. "Perhaps to-day, perhaps to-morrow," and he chuckled in a mirthless fashion.

I gazed at him and shivered, but in a few moments his frenzy passed, and, taking my hand, he led me towards the mechanism that controlled the boat, and pointed to the clock. "In ten minutes more we shall be there," he cried.

"How do these handles work the boat?" I asked, gently, with my mind upon my mission. "Where is the actual machinery?"

"That is my secret!" he shouted. "Pull." And he placed my fingers on another handle. Obedient to the touch the vessel slowed, and then stopped.

Again he placed my fingers upon a lever. "Hold it," he cried; and then suddenly he switched out the light, and we were in densest blackness.

"Raise it gently; give me your hand."

He drew me back with him, and I waited nervously in the darkness, until a faint, ghostly light flickered through the glass before me. A deep green grew lighter and lighter, until at last the sunlight streamed full in my eyes and the foam-flecked sea danced before me, with the roofs of a town, backed by English hills, beyond it.

It was Ventnor, and we had reached the spot that he had promised.

Then we breakfasted, and all through the meal, while the morning sunshine streamed through the circular windows, I wondered how I was to tempt the secret from him. Of what use was it for me to return to my friends and say I had cruised in the boat, that it was controlled by a series of handles, and that was all I knew? As well not have ventured at all.

"Now show me what guides the boat," I exclaimed, in my most ingenuous voice, as he rose from the meal and moved towards the tower.

"These handles," he answered. "See!" The sunlight vanished, the opalescent green of the sea grew darker and darker, and then blackness enshrouded all. There was not a sound save the click of the wheel as he moved it, and then the boat sprang forward again.

Then, in the darkness, he seized my arm and drew me towards him.

"There are no works," he whispered, "no mechanism at all. All the power is in my brain—I drive it, I control it."

I laughed a nervous laugh. "You are droll, monsieur."

"And you're a fool!" he shouted, wildly. "It's my brain, I tell you, that controls it all."

I wrenched myself free, and he switched on the light again, and then gave a shriek that froze my blood.

I turned with a start, and my flesh prickled as I saw him standing with madness blazing in his eyes, his attenuated hand extended, pointing to the far end of the cabin. "Who is that?" he gasped.

"There is no one here but ourselves," I cried, trembling with apprehension.

"You lie! Look there, and there, and there," and his bony finger pointed to every corner of the saloon. "And there, and there! *Nom de Diable!* They are all here!"

"Who are here?" I cried, with a weak attempt at bravado.

"They are; those who have tried to rob me of my secret—those whom you met at dinner. Ah!" He turned swiftly and moved slowly towards me, his body half bent, like a wild animal about to spring upon its prey.

"Ah!" he hissed again. "Those you met at dinner. Those you conspired to bring upon the boat to rob me."

"You're mad!" I shrieked, my courage utterly deserting me.

"Mad!" he raved, pointing about the cabin and grimacing at the imaginary intruders. "It's you who are mad. All of you, for you've come to your death. And you're in your coffin now!"

I had gradually crept as far from him as the limited space would allow, but he still advanced with a stealthy tread; and then, when only a few inches separated us, and I hid my face in my trembling hands, I realized that he had halted.

He turned, and, with a bound, made for the switchboard and stopped the boat, pulled the lever right down, and then, snatching a heavy wrench from the side, hammered with the fury of a maniac, until the brass and ebony splintered to fragments, and the handles were snapped off and lay on the floor.

I could feel the vessel sinking rapidly beneath my feet, and he stood grinning hideously, until a slight jar showed that we could descend no farther.

"We are at the bottom of the sea," he chuckled, "and no power on earth can move us."

With two blows he demolished the compass and steering-gear, and then, with a shriek of laughter, stood and viewed the wreckage.

And, dazed and bewildered, deprived of power of speech or movement, I sank back on a seat, the words ringing in my ears, "At the bottom of the sea, and no power on earth can move us."

How long we remained so who can say? for my senses were numbed. I kept no count of time, and was only aroused to consciousness as I saw him, with the wrench still in his hand, creeping towards me again.

I shut my eyes, knowing his purpose, and yet in apathy whether he struck or not. After what seemed ages I opened them, and he had only advanced one step. As I waited, so quietly, so slowly, that I could scarce see any movement, he made another step, and I found myself calculating how many more would be needful, and how long would be the time before he was near enough to strike.

Suddenly, as I watched him, the boat gave a lurch, as though the ground had slipped from beneath it, casting me upon the floor; while he, flinging up his hands to save himself, missed his footing, and fell backwards with a crash, his head striking the jagged edges of the shattered brass-work.

I saw him lying there senseless, and then saw no more, for when I recovered the electric light was spent, and the cabin was in densest darkness. The boat seemed to have righted itself, for the floor was level again, but the air had grown hot and stifling.

Not a sound broke the stillness, unless it was the beating of my heart. There was naught but silence and inky blackness—the silence of the tomb, the loneliness of death.

The air seemed to grow more close and stifling, and my breath came in quick, short gasps. Better any death than this gradual suffocation. If I could only let the water into the boat, and so die swiftly, it would be easier. And so I crawled across the floor. Once I touched him, and drew away; but by his side I found a wrench, and in the darkness I groped on, till I found the steps to the tower and felt for the glass.

Poor Vanity! the reigning passion with us all. I turned my head, so that the flying splinters of glass should not cut my face, and brought the wrench with all my force against the window. It resisted stoutly. But again and again I struck, until at last, with a crash, it flew outwards. And then, in that fraction of a second, so strong is the love of life, I wished I had held my hand.

But there came no torrent of water, only a rush of cold air, and I realized that I was on the surface of the ocean—realized that when the madman fell backwards upon the shattered switchboard he must have moved the lever. But night had fallen again, and so I had not known it.

Trembling the more now that there was hope of escape, I climbed on deck and waited for the dawn.

And with the first faint streaks upon the eastern horizon came rescue, for a French cruiser had seen us, and steamed down like the wind to examine *Le Diable*.

Yet, with it all, the madman kept his secret—and his coffin.

When the boat from the cruiser was but a yard away I glanced through the open man-hole, and saw that he was moving across the cabin below, and as I stepped upon the gunwale of the launch *Le Diable* sank like a stone from beneath my feet.

THE ABDUCTED AMBASSADOR

"Monsieur Roché," Thérèse murmured, and held a card before me.

"I have already told you I will receive no one," I answered, with more than usual tartness, for the afternoon was warm, and the thought of my evening's engagements made me feel that life was unendurable.

"It is a matter of most urgent importance," she so far forgot herself as to urge, and I could scarcely restrain a smile, for through my maid's prim black gown I almost fancied I could hear the rustle of the note that had tempted her to impertinence.

Was it not enough that I had said I was not receiving? And one would assume not, for she still stood there, and the day was too warm to scold her.

But she was an excellent girl, the perfection of maids. To this day I have never met one who could dress my hair as she could, nor one who could understand my peculiar—my dearest friends say exasperating—temper so admirably, and so my heart softened, and, with merely an uplifting of the eyebrows, to show that I noted her persistence, I said I would receive Monsieur Roché. And well I made a virtue of necessity, for he was one who knew not refusal. I turned poor virtue into my necessity, as all did whom Monsieur Roché asked to favor him.

"One would even risk madame's anger for the happiness of seeing her," he murmured, as he took my hand; for, though he held the reputation of one not admiring the sweeter sex, a better gallant for turning a compliment, a more skilful adept in the epigram of flattery, this jaded world has never viewed.

"It is a trying hour for calling, monsieur, unless the reason be most urgent."

"It is most urgent," he gravely assented, as he placed a slender forefinger upon my shoulder. "*Ma chère*," he continued, softly, "you are the cleverest woman in Paris."

"I should have better liked the compliment had you said the prettiest," I answered, demurely.

"Tut, tut! The whole world tells you that. Why proclaim the obvious? I prefer to be original, and pronounce you the cleverest."

"With an object, monsieur, *n'est ce pas?*"

"With a very great object, madame—the desire for your assistance."

Monsieur Roché leaned impressively towards me.

"Have you heard the strange news," he asked, "that is being whispered in diplomatic Paris?"

"There are many strange things whispered in diplomatic Paris," I responded.

"Truly; but this is unprecedented. Sir Edward Rivington, the English Ambassador, has been abducted."

"Yes. It was mentioned to me by a particularly uninteresting gallant at last night's reception; but"—I shrugged my shoulders—"it is too absurd."

"And therefore the more likely to be true! In fact, I know that it is true and also that it is false."

"An enigma, monsieur?"

"Listen. The story is that a closed carriage called for Sir Edward two nights ago. He left the Embassy, saying he would return in an hour. He has not been seen since, and Paris is growing perturbed at this unwarrantable violation of international courtesy. That is the story. But the facts are that Sir Edward has tricked France, has purposely promulgated this mystery, and has departed on a secret mission to England."

"I can see no reason for such ridiculous procedure. *Perfide Anglais* is only a Boulevard cry when there is no domestic sensation to occupy the green hour."

"Tush!" Monsieur Roché impatiently interrupted. *Ma foi*, how impatient these diplomats are! France was in active negotiation with England, and also with Italy, upon the same point. What it

was matters nothing."

"You are reticent, monsieur."

"It is sufficient that it discloses that England was not wholly in our thoughts. Now, by an unpardonable blunder, Sir Edward received among his own certain other papers intended for Signor Faliero."

"France was playing a difficult game, monsieur."

"A delicate and diplomatic one, madame."

"And has failed."

"Been tricked," he hotly retorted. "The superscription upon the cover was plainly to the Italian Ambassador, and Sir Edward knew that even English diplomacy or intrigue could not be stretched to the fine point of not at once returning the packet. He knew that we should immediately demand it, if necessary, and that restitution could not be withheld. The documents were handed to Sir Edward himself by one of my secretaries, who is now open to accept a fresh appointment, and a couple of hours later, when the error was discovered, I was met with this melodramatic fable of abduction."

"But what is to be gained by such a fabrication? Surely Sir Edward could say he had gone to England, if he wished to."

"What is gained," Monsieur Roché answered, incisively, "is a strong hold upon us, we never knowing whether the papers have been inspected or not. When he returns he will, no doubt, send the packet to me, apparently untouched, and we can only assume that England is cognizant of its contents. We shall be compelled to maintain the negotiations now in progress, and all the time Sir Edward Rivington will smile, and placidly await a *coup d'état*. It is maddening, simply maddening. *Mon Dieu!* it binds us hand and foot."

"I do not agree with your theories, monsieur," I said, calmly. "Sir Edward Rivington is an Englishman, and, as a nation, they are honorable."

"Tush! Sir Edward is a diplomat, and the code of honor is different. His aim is to serve his country. Should I hesitate to take advantage of such an opportunity for France?"

"You are unscrupulous, monsieur."

"For what," he cried, "do we all pay millions of francs a year? Secret service: such information as that which Sir Edward has had placed in his hands by chance. Is it reasonable that he would be such a child as to neglect a stroke of policy sufficient to render his country's position impregnable?"

"If all this be as you say, monsieur, then the damage is done, and beyond repair."

"Utterly. There is, however, one favor I would ask of you. To actually, indisputably, know that Sir Edward Rivington has been to England will at least make me sure of my ground. It will be a difficult task, one worthy of the cleverest woman, the prettiest widow in Paris." And, even in his worry of mind, he smiled as he paid me the double compliment. "Ask where you will in London, and they will tell you he is still in Paris. A man would fail miserably, a woman's intuition will succeed."

I pondered over the position. Love for a little excitement, something to relieve the ennui of a solitary existence, had induced me to undertake many little diplomatic services for my friend Monsieur Roché, but in all there had been something of the glamour of romance. This seemed more the task of a secret agency, or even the Quai de l'Horloge itself. What so simple as to discover if a man so well known in Paris as Sir Edward Rivington had crossed the Channel?

And yet, if things were as Monsieur Roché asserted, what infinite pains would be taken to conceal the visit! Looked at from that point of view, the mission appeared more fitting to my disposition, and I accepted.

Why is it ever the fashion to speak of London as a city of smoke and gloom? Paris is not all Champs-Élysées. We have our sunlight and our shadow; and London, sublime in its rugged beauty of stability, common alike to the city and the people, has the same; while Parliament Street, under the bright spring sunshine, might have been one of the boulevards of beloved Paris itself.

A far-seeing Providence must surely have intended women to shine in diplomacy, for men are so impressionable, and some women so fascinating, that the victory is assured before the struggle commences.

And because of this I refused to be satisfied with any of those zealous and most polite officials and secretaries, and ultimately, because I, too, am at times fascinating, found myself in the presence of one of the rulers of the State, whose name in France was as well known as those of our own politicians.

He received me graciously, and waited.

"At a reception in Paris," I said, after a moment, "I had the honor of meeting your Ambassador,

Sir Edward Rivington; the greater honor of giving certain information, to him that was of service."

Monsieur seemed to freeze a little. Secret service is necessary, but its agents, be they even pretty women, do not command more than the coldest respect.

"There were further matters which he deemed it desirable I should obtain details of, and as he was leaving suddenly for London upon a special mission, I was instructed to follow him, and, insisting upon seeing you in person, obtain his address, as it was not general knowledge that he had left Paris."

Monsieur looked at me curiously. He seemed debating in his mind whether he should tell me.

"You are under a strange misapprehension," he said, at length, leaning back in his chair and interlacing his fingers.

"It is impossible that such can exist," I interrupted. "Those were my instructions from Sir Edward himself."

"Then he must have changed his plans," monsieur continued, blandly. "Assuredly he is not in London now, and, so far as I am aware, has not left Paris; certainly on no business that could bring him to the Foreign Office. We have our official messengers for such duties. Sir Edward would not come himself."

"I understood the matter was too secret—"

"I am afraid you have been deceived," he answered, with a quiet smile of amusement; "I can give you no address but the British Embassy, Paris, and that must be well known to you already."

The interview was ended, and as I left I carried with me the conviction that the conversation had been marked by such an absence of diplomacy on his part that it must be truthful, and Sir Edward Rivington had not come to England.

Yet I determined that I would stay in London, at all events until I had something more to show for my efforts—what, I knew not; and while I strolled, the gods came to my rescue.

My dearest friend, Gaspard Levivé, stood, hat in hand, before me.

"Madame, the fates are kinder to me than I deserve."

"Perhaps they have a better knowledge of your merit than you possess yourself," I responded, with an upward glance. "Are you staying in London?"

"Until this evening only. My friend, Sir Edward Rivington, has done me the honor to ask me to be his second. I have accepted, and return to Paris."

I stopped in bewilderment. "Sir Edward Rivington, the English Ambassador?" I said, hurriedly.

"Yes," he answered, with a smile. "It does not sound English, does it? But here is his letter: 'At le Duc d'Eautine's chateau to-morrow morning. I rely upon your honor to hold this secret, and, as you are in London, to deliver, yourself, the enclosed envelope at the Foreign Office.'"

"*Mon Dieu!*" I cried, excitedly. "*Mon cher*, you have not delivered it yet; you have it still?"

"I am on my way," he replied.

"Then you will not. You will hold it back; bring it to Paris, and give it to Monsieur Roché."

"It is impossible!" he exclaimed, glancing at me in surprise.

"It is not. If you deliver this you will ruin France! For the love of France, pause!"

"I will not be a traitor to a friend who trusts me, even for the love of France," he answered. "I have been asked to deliver this letter; how, then, can I carry it to Monsieur Roché? No, not for the love of France!"

"Then, Gaspard, for me!" I said, turning my eyes upon him. "Do this for me. Prove your protestations have not been idle. Do this for me."

His face flushed crimson, and then grew pale and gray, until, in but a few seconds, he seemed to have become death-like before my eyes.

"Why do you ask this'?" he asked, icily.

"For the sake of France," I repeated. And then, like the lifting of a veil, I saw things clearly, realized that I was tempting him, whom I loved to call my dearest friend, to disgrace; realized that it was not for love of France, but for love of victory, and Monsieur Roché's praises. Gaspard seemed to hesitate, and I trembled lest he should consent.

"Not even for your sake can I do this," he answered, slowly; and my heart quickened at the proof that he was as true as I believed him; yet, because I am a woman, I must perforce feign some slight resentment that he would not yield me what I wished he should not.

"Then leave your papers," I said, after a cold pause, "and escort me to Paris."

"You mean it?" he cried, his eyes brightening again.

"Yes, I mean it," I calmly replied; "one cannot break long friendships for the sake of a difference of opinion. Leave your papers, *mon cher*, and then rejoin me."

"I asked a favor yesterday," I said, as we drew near to Paris, "I ask another to-day. I want to accompany you to le Duc d'Eautine's."

Gaspard raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"It is an affair of honor," he protested. "You know what you ask is impossible, unheard of."

"Again?" I pettishly ejaculated.

"But you must see it yourself," he urged, with a half-amused smile. "How can you be present?"

"With the consent of the principals," I retorted. "Be my escort to Versailles, and then I will release you."

"As you will," he laughed; "but may I not know your reason?"

"The merest curiosity, *mon ami*. You, having been absent from Paris, have not heard our latest sensation. Sir Edward Rivington was abducted nearly a week ago, and you and I are two of the very few who know where he is."

"Impossible!"

"May be, but true. He has been abducted, and only we know by whom, and where he is to be found. Monsieur Roché, your chief, never believed in the rumor of abduction. He set it down as a subterfuge to delay the return of certain private papers intended for, no matter whom, that had fallen into Sir Edward's hands. Those papers, *mon cher*, that you delivered yesterday. The ones that concerned my visit to London. It might have been a wonderful thing for you, Gaspard, if you had not delivered them, but I did not mention your own interests."

"No interests of my own," he cried, laying his hand upon mine, "could have weighed like the heart-burning desire to serve you. There is nothing, that my honor would allow, that I would not do to win your faintest gratitude, and then count myself all too richly rewarded. Nothing I would not do—"

But fortunately we steamed into the Gare du Nord; Gaspard's poetic moment was ruined by a descent from the dizzy heights of sentiment to the commonplace confusion of an arrival platform, and, with a diplomat's smile at the inevitable, he accepted the position.

What creatures of impulse the sex we prefer must be. In a four hours' journey from Calais to Paris he must needs choose the last seventy seconds for serious conversation, in order to be interrupted at the instant when I was most attentive. And how those supreme moments, when lost, seem to be lost forever! Commonplaces, commonplaces, small talk and frivolity from Paris on to Versailles, from Versailles to the Chateau of le Duc d'Eautine.

I felt quite serious when he was speaking just before we arrived in Paris; but had he attempted to resume the subject I should have smiled, and he, wise in diplomacy beyond his years, realized the position, and accepted it.

Our carriage drove into the park of the Chateau, and, leaving the main drive, stopped, in a few minutes, where, in the shade of a magnificent cedar, a group of men were standing, evidently awaiting it. Le Duc d'Eautine, Monsieur Faudé, his bosom friend, and Sir Edward Rivington, the lost Ambassador, all seemingly charmed with one another's company, and only a suspicious-looking case, leaning against the tree, spoiled the harmony of the gathering.

It is a thing I have since almost boasted of. I am the only woman who has ever caused that paragon of courtesy, le Duc d'Eautine, to lose his temper and forget all etiquette.

"*Sapristi!*" he gasped, as I alighted—"what pleasantry is this, madame? And you, monsieur," he continued, fiercely, turning upon my poor Gaspard—"you, monsieur, explain this intrusion, or—"

"Tut, tut, *mon cher* Duc," I mildly interjected, "I come as a service to you, one of my oldest friends."

"I need no service, madame."

"You need great service, *mon enfant*," I retorted, reprovingly, for my twenty-seven years afforded me vast superiority over his twenty-five. "You need great service. What is this foolish escapade of abducting the representative of England, and compelling him to fight a duel in your own park before he regains his freedom? What is—"

"It is an affair of my own, madame," he interrupted.

"An affair of your own," I cried, with a suspicion of anger in my tones. "It is an affair of the nation, of France, when you lure an Englishman, an Ambassador, to your house, and force him into a duel."

"I force him to nothing," he said, as we walked aside. "He has been my guest—"

"Tut! Paris knows he has disappeared; you lured him away, and you now hold him a prisoner here

until he fights this duel, *n'est ce pas?*"

"I do not contradict. I but defend my honor; Sir Edward Rivington spoke of me indiscreetly. He alluded to me before my friends as a mere boy; he ridiculed my duels, laughed at our code of honor, mocked at what he described the satisfaction of a scratch, and scoffed as only an Englishman can. A man who has never stood before the sword of his enemy. I challenged him; he laughed, and turned aside with the sneer that Englishmen had neither time nor inclination for such pleasantries. He spoke of his duty to his own country, and, in a word, covered himself with the invulnerability of his official position. He, at the Embassy, was in England, not in France. I removed him from his Embassy. In the grounds of my chateau he is in France, and not in England. In France, where a man avenges insults with his sword."

"Excellent! But if you wound him?"

"Be assured, madame, I shall not. I shall not wound him, nor shall he touch me, but he shall learn that duelling in France is not child's play. I will tire him until he realizes that, and then disarm him; and my sense of honor will be satisfied when he finds his ridicule recoils upon himself."

"And if he wound you?"

He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"Then I will apologize to him, and grant my swordsmanship is but a sport for children."

"May I speak with your prisoner?"

"With my guest, madame."

"As you will. Then with your guest."

He bowed, and he and his friend drew back as I walked towards the English Ambassador.

"Paris is more than anxious concerning you, Sir Edward."

"If Paris meant yourself, madame," he responded, "I could bless my imprisonment."

"Then you call it imprisonment?"

"Englishmen have a manner of calling things by their right names," he suavely observed.

"And you propose to—"

"Fight," he drawled. "I really don't care about it, but there's a medium in all things, you know. Not but what he's been most obliging. Except that I'm imprisoned till I give him what he calls satisfaction, I've been very comfortable. Even allowed, on my word of honor not to communicate the peculiar circumstances, to send my private despatches to England."

I shuddered as I thought of those despatches. Truth to tell, in the excitement of the situation, they and Monsieur Roché's distress had left my memory.

"But if you wound or kill him, Sir Edward?"

"I shall do neither."

"But, if he—" I paused, and Sir Edward gravely shook his head.

"Not the faintest chance in the world," he said. "I shall tire him out, and disarm him, thus abundantly proving my theory that these affairs of honor in France are arranged with the minimum of inconvenience to either party."

I could not repress a smile; there was such a wealth of humor in this duel, where neither party intended to injure the other.

"It is merely an exhibition of swordsmanship, Sir Edward?"

"Merely that, madame."

"Then I may remain?"

"It might be disconcerting to your friend."

"But if he permit?"

"Then to me it will be an honor."

But the Duke was less easy to win. It was impossible, unheard of, and yet, while he spoke he wavered, and graced his consent with a whisper that I was the Tournament's Queen.

"On guard, messieurs!"

Like a flash the swords crossed, and the duel commenced.

There was an uplifting of the eyebrows on the part of the Duke, as the trick which had disarmed many an opponent was skilfully met, a tightening of the lips by Sir Edward as a similar attempt of his own was as easily frustrated.

It was a duel that set my blood tingling with excitement, as pass after pass was parried, thrust

after thrust was turned aside, and neither man gained a point, neither man lost an inch, until it seemed that equals had met, and who was victor would never be determined; that to be vanquished would be almost as great an honor as to vanquish.

The Duke slipped as he parried a thrust, and I thought that the unexpected had happened; but, like lightning, the Englishman's rapier was drawn back, and his adversary acknowledged the courtesy and skill which had saved his life with a bow worthy of himself.

An hour passed, and still the combat waged. I wearied of the eternal "On guard, messieurs!" It seemed so fruitless that two such masters of fence should strive for empty victory.

"On guard, messieurs!"

Sir Edward Rivington was hesitating, and stood with the dawn of a smile upon his face.

"On guard, messieurs! *s'il vous plait.*"

The Ambassador shook his head, and, throwing down his sword, advanced, with hand extended to his adversary.

"I tender you my apologies," he said, gravely. "I admit I spoke triflingly of French duelling. I admit that I sneered at several of your own affairs of honor. I confess that I regarded them as child's play, not knowing then, as I do now, that you are a sublime master of the art of swordsmanship, and could have killed every man who stood before you."

"Every man, save yourself, Sir Edward!" the Duke exclaimed, with a slight smile of satisfaction.

"You were playing, as I was, for the disarm."

"And neither of us succeeded. Frankly, for the first time in my life I have met my equal. Strange that he should be one of the nation that discountenances the use of the rapier."

"You will accept my unconditional withdrawal," Sir Edward continued. "Nay, more, if you desire it, it shall be more openly proclaimed."

For answer le Duc d'Eautine handed his sword to his second, and took Sir Edward's outstretched hand in both of his.

"Sir Edward Rivington," he exclaimed, "I am too honored. Say no more. My greatest pride is that I have won the respect of England's Ambassador; my greatest honor that I have gained the friendship of a splendid swordsman."

These and many other high-flown compliments, dear to our nation, passed between them and between their seconds, until it seemed we must all have floated back to olden times, to the stately days of the Louis—so anxious was each man to pay courtly compliments to the other.

Mon Dieu! what changeable mortals, what creatures of impulse men are; and yet they say that we women are wavering and fickle!

"You will be my guest, *mon ami*, for just another day?" the Duke hazarded, doubtfully, it must be confessed.

"My dear friend," replied the Ambassador, "don't you think that you have delayed the course of diplomatic relations sufficiently long? I expect you will get into disgrace for this attack upon my sacred person, as it is," and he broke into a merry laugh.

"I have made one true friend," returned the Duke, seriously; "what matter the means? Should I find it necessary to suddenly quit France, I shall carry with me the honor of counting yourself among those whom I hold nearest to my heart."

"Quit France! All nonsense," brusquely interjected Sir Edward. "Put your best team to a coach, and I'll drive you all back to Paris; then, for a moment, the urgency of State affairs, *et après*, in a poor way you will permit me to return your hospitality. At seven, *mes amis*, at the 'Bristol.'"

Sir Edward Rivington must have been a past master of all the arts. As he handled his rapier perfectly, so he drove the four-in-hand; and, doubtless, in all other things he was equally admirable. These English are so thorough.

And of a truth he was certainly charming in conversation, for I, who sat beside him, can vouch for it.

"Will the budding flowers of diplomatic relations have withered owing to your absence, Sir Edward?" I ventured to ask as we drove through St. Cloud.

"No; I do not think so," he answered, with a laugh. "But, seriously, it is a little troublesome. They must have been retarded somewhat, and I shall possibly be blamed for taking a brief holiday at such an important moment."

"Then you will call it a holiday?"

He looked at me with a slight elevation of the eyebrows.

"Naturally!"

"You are more than generous, Sir Edward."

"Tut, tut! but still, things may be a trifle unpleasant. For instance, an hour before le Duc d'Eautine's pressing invitation that I should become his guest arrived, I received a bundle of official papers from your Premier, Monsieur Roché, and, not realizing that I was going to take a holiday, placed them at once in my safe, where they now repose, untouched and unlocked at."

"Untouched and unlocked at!" I cried, my blood tingling with delight at the kindness of the fates.

"Yes; it sounds undiplomatic, does it not?"

"Are we driving direct to the Embassy?"

"Why not? It will destroy the ridiculous rumor of abduction."

"Then, Sir Edward, as a distinct favor to me, will you not at once open the bundle and give to me, in order that I may myself return it to my friend, Monsieur Roché, a document placed there by error, which is not addressed to you?"

"Certainly," he replied, flicking the leaders with his whip. "I should have returned it under any conditions, but, since you wish it, I will do so through you."

I sighed a sigh of deep contentment. "You will make me ever your debtor," I murmured.

"Not at all. But is this the reason of your visit to Versailles?" he inquired after a moment, with a strange little smile.

"Suppose you exchange a little small talk with your other friends, and not devote all your attention to me," I suggested, in a tone of mild reproof.

And, generously discreet, Sir Edward obeyed my desires, till we rolled into Paris, I passing the while in thinking what a fortunate thing it was that Gaspard had not given way to my temptations and purloined his Excellency's private despatches.

PRINCE FERDINAND'S ENTANGLEMENT

Monsieur Roché waltzed divinely, and so thoroughly original was that charming man that he never once made allusion to either the crush or the heat. Yet they were both insufferable.

We strolled into the conservatory, and, taking my fan from my hand, he gently waved it before me, keeping time to the distant strains of the waltz, which we preferred to sit out.

"To be beautiful and accomplished," he murmured, as he seated himself beside me, "is no excuse for idleness when a woman is also brilliant."

I recognized the prelude to a commission, and became attentive, for I was *ennui* of the tiring pleasures that make up the daily routine of the existence of a woman of fashion.

"It is different from the English affair," he whispered, reflectively.

"And so it need be!" I replied, a little testily, for Gaspard Levivé and I had been somewhat ill at ease with each other since we journeyed *tête-à-tête* from London to Paris.

"It is what a woman's soul craves for—romance."

"A commission from Monsieur le Premier, and yet romantic," I cried, with a laugh. "Monsieur fears to plead his own cause, and would send a persuasive ambassador, *n'est ce pa?*"

"One as skilful in tact and diplomacy as she is in herself perfection," the flatterer answered; and then, "It is not a service to myself," he added, somewhat stiffly, for my bachelor friend was sensitive on these little matters, and rather prided himself on a flattering unction that he laid to his soul, that no woman in Paris—but I wander, for as he spoke I took my fan abruptly from his hand, and gazed severely right through his perplexed face into the ballroom beyond.

"I fail to understand," I said, stonily. "A commission from some one else? Are my services, then, at the command of any one who condescends to require them?"

He put out his hand deprecatingly.

"I imagined," I said, fluttering my fan viciously, "that I dealt with diplomats who regarded my service as much their secret as my own;" and I spoke with warmth, for I felt I had deserved better of him than this.

From my heart I loved these commissions for the excitement they afforded me, and not for mere gain; for what was that to me? My most hazardous adventure brought me the souvenir I chose—a plain gold bangle engraved with the date; my most romantic, a diamond necklace worthy of an empress.

Monsieur Roché stayed the fan that I was fluttering wildly in my indignation, and gently took my fingers in his own.

"Why is a woman the sternest critic—the harshest judge of her best friends?" he asked. "You are

an accomplished woman, a clever woman, a beautiful woman, and yet—"

"Simply a woman," I interjected.

"And therefore as lacking in reason as all others of your sex, and as prone to jump at erroneous conclusions. No one in the world knows of what you call your Secret Service save those whom you have met and defeated, and they would be the last to proclaim it."

I felt miserably repentant—what creatures of impulse even the cleverest of women are!—so, smiling upon him, I handed back the fan.

"The vanquished must deliver up his sword," I cried. "I own I was in the wrong, so take a woman's weapon as a sign."

"My dearest friend is in Paris," he said, as he slowly waved the ostrich-plumes, "and in great trouble."

I glanced interestedly towards him as he continued:

"Prince Humbert of Elvirna is the man; the trouble, Prince Ferdinand, his son; the cause, as usual, a woman."

"Cheap cynicism but poorly becomes a man of intellect, much less a diplomat, monsieur."

"Then I will amend the phrase," he answered, contritely, "and say the cause, a woman, and leave 'as usual' out."

"It is strange that man, who owes all that is the better part of his life to woman, should so often make her the object of his sneers," I observed.

"Strange, save that he so often owes all that is the worst," he answered, with a passing shade of irritation. "This young fool, this man, who must marry for the good of the tiny kingdom which will be his own some day, has chosen—"

"To follow his own affections," I interrupted, with a smile.

"Tush! He has chosen to become enamored of the *passée* charms of a third-rate actress—an adventuress searching for youthful fools with simple hearts and simple brains who cannot discriminate between nature and art, and would never credit the brightness of their siren's eyes was due to belladonna."

"He will get over it, *mon cher*. Even you, I doubt not, have had your weaknesses."

Monsieur scowled at my covert allusion, but ignored it.

"Do you think that this wretched play-actress will give him an opportunity until it is too late?" he asked. "He now lives in Arcadia, wanders from morn till eve in leafy woods, whispering sentimental folly and admiring sunsets, living only in the light of his goddess's eyes, cooing with this soiled dove, while his father vainly implores for his return to reason and to duty."

"And the remedy, *mon cher*?"

"Yourself."

"I scarcely comprehend."

"The boy is only infatuated. Infatuation gives way to greater temptation. He would fall madly in love with the first fresh, pretty face he saw."

"Thank you, monsieur!" I cried, with mock indignation, and, rising, I courtesied to the ground before the perplexed gaze of my friend, who shivered at his blunder.

He twisted his mustache with energy, but did not speak; and I, regaining possession of my fan, waved it with an air of lofty scorn, and tried to keep back the smile that, despite my efforts, was breaking round the curves of my lips.

"Let us be serious, and quite frank with each other," he said at length. "I want you to go for a week to the solitudes of the Forest of Lecrese, in the Kingdom of Elvirna, and, winning this young headstrong from his folly, add yet another service to those which have made me eternally your debtor. Show him—it will be so easy!—what poor theatrical blandishments are possessed by this play-actress when compared with the wit and sparkle of a brilliant woman—what faded beauty when nature challenges art. Surely it is to your taste, for is it not romantic?"

"It is romantic," I acquiesced. "But let us, as you say, be frank. Pursue the story further. Suppose the cure prove efficacious—what then? Is there one greater than I who in turn will win him from me? One more beautiful, more accomplished, more fascinating, who will say, 'Again, most simple youth, you are mistaken. Behold! I am the only woman worthy of your love.'"

The diplomatist chuckled. "If," he said, "I thought there could be one possessing such unheard-of charms, I would not dare to say so—but there is no one! I simply ask you to destroy this wretched entanglement, and then, if the Fates decree that he must surrender utterly to your beauty, so be it. It is better for a man to break his heart for love of a good woman than have it broken by a false one. It is a romance with endless possibilities. Do you consent?"

I reflected. It was a peculiar mission, and, moreover, one in which failure would be such a crushing blow to vanity, that my only refuge would be a convent. What if I set myself to fascinate a man and—failed! Yet there was such a glamour of excitement with it. To match myself against this adventuress, to fight for a man's honor, to triumph for the right. All men's eyes confessed me beautiful. Impartially I had scanned myself, posed as my harshest critic—and a woman can be her own severest critic if she will—and I too had finished by saying, however reluctantly, "Yes, *ma chère*, you really are rather pretty." There was something exhilarating in the thought that here was the opportunity to prove myself right or wrong, and men truthful or mere flatterers.

"I consent," I cried, "on two conditions: that, success or failure, Prince Humbert does not meet me in my character study, and that I am allowed absolute freedom of action, whatever course I take."

"Agreed on all things, and I thank you."

We rose, and I placed my hand upon his arm. "Modesty is woman's sweetest charm," he remarked, and I gazed into his face, vainly striving to fathom the meaning of an observation so apropos of nothing. "Why mention failure?" he continued, and we returned to the ballroom.

The Woods of Lecrese, bathed in the glowing fire of an audacious sunset, were enough to awaken sentimental yearnings in the breast of one even more worldly than I. A long, undulating road swept far into the purple distance, losing itself among the trees that interlaced above; on either side a cool vista of virgin greensward spread from the carriage-drive, only relieved by the crimson splashes of the fallen leaves that foretold the coming autumn, and yet not so severely as to make one dread the winter. All was solitude and peace. A dangerous hour, and a dangerous place, I told myself, for a foolish youth and a designing woman.

I stopped the carriage, and stepped out on to the roadway.

"Knock out the axle-pin," I cried, "and throw it into that thicket; then take a horse each, and ride for assistance."

I spoke in the same tone as I might have ordered my coffee, but who, save my own servants, would have carried out such inane orders without an implied protest? "Go to the blacksmith in the first village you come to."

So they left me, and I, like the lost princess of a fairy-tale, stood by my broken-down carriage, and awaited the Prince, for I knew he must ride this way, and it pleased me that we thus should meet.

A glance in the mirror of my travelling-case stilled any doubts I might have had. I was free from the dust of travel; indeed, I had driven but five kilometres that it might be so. An ostrich-feather-trimmed cloak of silver gray suited me to perfection, and the evening light, with just the fading glow in the sky, was most becoming.

Presently the cantering of a horse upon the road told me of the approach of him whom I awaited. I wearily rested my head upon my hand, and leaned against the carriage, and so absorbed did I become in my woman's thoughts as to what manner of man he would be, that it was his voice that roused me to the knowledge of his presence.

I glanced upward, and he pleased me well. A man rather above the average height, well knit and athletic, with clear-cut, sensitive features, a slight mustache, a kindly look of good-temper in his frank, blue eyes, and a cap set jauntily upon the side of his head of curling hair. Scarcely the man, I thought, to be the easy dupe of a vulgar adventuress; but the world is so strange.

He vaulted lightly from his horse, and, cap in hand, walked towards me; and I saw the look that I have seen in the eyes of other men come into his.

He did not crave pardon for speaking. He came as a man of the world to a woman in distress; came and counted there could be no offence.

"You have had an accident," he said; "can I be of service to you?"

"It is nothing," I answered, with a swift glance into his eyes; "my servants have gone to seek a blacksmith, or a coach-builder."

"The nearest is twenty kilometres away: we are far from civilization at Lecrese; you cannot wait until they return."

"And the nearest village?"

"Five kilometres."

I gazed around in some perplexity up to the sky, where the rosy tints were fading from the fleecy clouds, and then back into his face for inspiration. "If you are riding that way," I said, "I will ask you to send me a carriage from there."

He laughed a merry, good-tempered laugh, as though a child had asked for the moon, and again reminded me of our distance from civilization.

"Can you walk five kilometres?" he asked, with such a serious look upon his face that I smiled with amusement.

"Of course," I answered; "do you take me for an old woman?"

"No," he cried, with boyish emphasis; "only I thought, perhaps—"

"Perhaps I was one of those poor creatures to whom exertion is purgatory. Show me the road, please."

"It is the one I am taking myself."

"Which, although an interesting announcement, scarcely suffices to indicate the direction," I murmured.

"I mean, if you will permit, we will walk together."

"For the moment, at least," I cried, "circumstances have made the highway our joint property: then let us share companionship for mutual benefit;" and I drew my cloak about my shoulders, while he, laughing a strange little laugh, as though he scarcely understood me, swung his horse's bridle on his arm, and we strolled along together.

What need to recount what happened upon that walk, for have I not said that it was a dangerous place for a foolish youth and a designing woman?

What need either to speak of other days when we met by chance again, and I saw a glow of pleasure in his face; what need to speak of his moments of gloom, when, even as we talked, the light went out of his eyes; and I, who have felt the pulse of love so often that I know its every beat, told myself that he was wondering how he was to break with the other woman, the one whom I had never met.

And I, too, felt ill at ease; the country is so different from the capital. In the life that I had lived, to-night's dangerous *tête-à-tête* was forgotten in the rush of to-morrow's engagements, but here it was different; I yearned for finality, and a release from a position that was becoming embarrassing.

Deprived of the company of my cavalier, I walked alone in the woods of Lecrese, priding myself that victory was mine, and in yet a few days I might say to him that I journeyed to Paris in full confidence that he would follow me.

Then, in the silence of the sultry afternoon, I heard his voice, and another in reply, that told me that if I chose to play the eavesdropper I might behold my rival, the actress; and I did choose, because I was upon a diplomatic mission, and—because I am a woman.

Through a cluster of bushes I gently forced my way, sighing as a jealous thorn caught me and ripped a strip from my silken mantle; and then, drawing the branches upon one side, I looked into the glade, where she was resting upon the trunk of a fallen tree. He sat by her side—and—angels defend us!—held her hand.

Though it be against my desires, the truth is the truth. She was not painted, neither was she old, or even plain, and, worst of all, as she sat listening to him there was a look upon her face that spoke faithfully to me that she loved him.

And he looked back at her with the reflection of the same light within his eyes.

Yet, what a clever little adventuress she was. I laughed scornfully to myself as they continued their conversation.

"What are these distinctions that the world calls difference of class?" she said, in a thoughtful voice. "Who has ordained that this man and that woman shall marry because they are on the same social scale?"

"Why talk of such things?" he answered. "How can it affect us? I am a poor student—"

"And I a poorer girl," she interrupted, "on a visit all too brief."

"On a visit that must last forever. I worship you, and you love me."

"I have not said so," she murmured, so softly that I could scarcely catch the words.

"Your eyes have told me; you will not sacrifice our love."

"Oh, if I were only a man," she said, placing both hands upon his shoulders.

"What, then, my love?" and he would have embraced her.

"Nothing," she answered, and the look in her eyes restrained him. "Let us go."

They passed on together, and I could not but smile at the manner in which the wretched little flirt pretended to keep him from her, and yet with every action strengthened the chain that bound him.

Then as they moved onward I discreetly followed, for I had fixed in my mind that I would spoil this rustic love-making, and show her that I knew her for what she was.

Not a poor girl, as she was pleased to term herself, but a common actress from some booth of Montmartre, a skilled adventuress, who had set herself to delude a foolish boy, knowing what was to be gained thereby. And in truth he was a foolish boy, a most annoying one, a most deceitful one, for I had made no progress when I had counted all was won.

He left her at the gate of a tiny cottage, and, as soon as the bend in the road had hidden him from view, I walked through the garden, and, lifting the latch, boldly entered.

Mademoiselle had removed her hat, and stood resting her head against the latticed window, gazing up the path that he had taken.

She turned as I entered, and stood looking towards me, and yet not with so very much wonderment, for suddenly she broke into a smile.

"You have entered to rest a while," she said. "You are welcome; we are not altogether strangers, for I have heard so much of you."

"Heard of me?" I queried, rather sharply, for this girl seemed to have the manners of such as myself.

"Certainly," she replied, still smiling; "you are the *grand dame* whose carriage broke down, and who is so charmed with the rustic delights of Lecrese that she prolongs her stay indefinitely," and there was a tinge of becoming satire in her voice.

"How do you know that?"

"You are the only one who would walk in the woods in a costume fit only for driving in the Bois de Boulogne," she answered, and I flushed with annoyance, for she looked so cool, while I was hot with the glowing of the sun and the burning of my temper.

"We cannot all pretend to rustic innocence, mademoiselle."

"Nor succeed, if we did, madame," she retorted, and then the flash of anger left her face. "You will forgive me," she cried, taking my hand. "I forget myself; you will rest and take tea with me."

I would have bargained my soul for a cup of tea, but I ignored the offer, and continued, "I have come to speak with you on a matter of importance."

"Be seated," she answered, coldly, and she, too, sat and waited.

She plagued me because of her calmness and dignity, the air of superiority she assumed towards me.

"Don't you think this farce has been played long enough, mademoiselle?" I asked, scornfully, and she merely raised her eyebrows, and maintained her unruffled composure.

"This Arcadian love-making," I cried, reddening with vexation, "this whispering of paradise, this thistle-down entanglement. Don't you think it is time to say good-bye?"

"Quite," she answered, with supreme contempt. "Good-bye," and she returned to the window.

Then something—who can follow the subtle changes that occur in a woman's heart?—something came into mine, and instead of anger I felt a pang of pity for the girl who so disdained me. I walked towards her, and laid my hand upon her arm.

"You know it must be so," I said.

"Yes, it must be so."

"He is of one world and you of another."

"You know that?" she said, in surprise.

"Yes, I know who you are, and who he is. Your words in the wood an hour since were romance, and romance is out of date. It is impossible. Your paths lie asunder: you must take yours, and leave him his."

I had placed my arm around her shoulder, and somehow the contempt I felt for this play-actress had vanished, and my eyes were misty as she turned hers towards me. Then in a second she was crying softly in my arms.

"You will say good-bye," I whispered.

"Yes," she answered, her face still hidden, "I will say good-bye."

"To-day?"

"Yes, to-day—within an hour he will return, and then, with courage taken into both my hands, I will say good-bye. I have been sadly foolish, and now I will break his heart because I wasted wisdom until too late."

I did not tell her that men's hearts, and the hearts of princes in particular, do not break so easily. Neither did I say that the heart that fluttered against my own was nearer breaking than his would ever be, but I kissed her again, and so we waited until we heard his Highness's whistle, as he approached the gate, and, gaining no response, walked up to the door and knocked.

"Come in," I cried, for her permission was so choked that it could not reach him, and he entered and stood gazing in annoyed bewilderment.

"You, madame?"

"I, monsieur."

"What does this mean?"

She walked across and took his hand, holding it tightly between both her own.

"Only this, dear," she whispered, "we have had our dream, and now the awakening comes. It was all my fault, and you must leave me, and forget we ever met—but, no, do not forget; remember me as the wickedest woman whom you have ever known. The one who falsely won your love, and then spurned it, and left you with only a bitter knowledge of the evil of the world."

"You mean that you have fooled me, and do not love me?" he said, stonily.

"Yes, I have fooled you," she answered, and she seemed to shrink beneath the lie that her love told her would teach him the sooner to forget.

"And you do not love me?" he repeated, his face growing gray in the glowing sunlight.

"I do not love you," she answered, and the boy believed her.

"Good-bye," he said; "shall I murmur my gratitude for the few hours of happiness in my fool's paradise?"

Then, while the sneers still hovered around his lips, while I counted all was ended, she flung her arms around him, and drew his head down, until his cheek touched hers.

"Not so, my own," she sobbed, "not so; we must part, but not like this. I cannot live if you should think me so worthless. We must part; you must go one way and I the other, but I love you, dear, I love you."

"Mademoiselle," I cried, sharply, "this is mere childishness, this is the weakest folly;" and she, with her eyes glistening, turned again from him, and answered, wearily:

"Yes, 'tis folly, 'tis madness—good-bye."

"No," he cried, wildly, "you shall not go!"

"She must—she shall," I answered, angrily.

"Are you bereft of reason that you would so disgrace yourself—your State?"

"It is no disgrace to marry the noblest woman this world has seen," he retorted, hotly, and I admired him for the blaze of passion in his eyes.

"You speak like a child," I cried. "She says good-bye because she knows that you must part. Prince Ferdinand of Elvirna cannot wed a nobody."

"Prince Ferdinand!" she gasped, and, stepping back a pace, gazed through her tears into his face.

"Eh! Prince Ferdinand," he answered, in scorn, "and curse the day that made me so. I am no struggling student. Curse the day that made me Prince, I say! Curse the day!"

"Prince Ferdinand," she repeated, and I thought the girl must be bewitched, for she smiled.

I caught him by the arm and drew him towards me, for I could see by the look on her face that she was no scheming adventuress.

"If there be disgrace," I cried, witheringly, "it is yours. You came with deceit and falsehood. You won her heart, pretending to be such as she, no better in the world's eyes, and no worse."

"Were I Prince a thousand times over, and a thousand times on that," he answered, softly, "I would give it all for her."

"Happily, there must be two to the bargain, and she is too true a woman to hold you, when she knows it means your social ruin."

"On the contrary, madame; now I know he is what he is I will marry him."

Her face was wreathed in smiles, smiles that had chased away the mist of sorrow's tears, and I shuddered as I realized that I had brought about the very end that I came to prevent.

"You will marry him?" I gasped.

"*Oui*, madame," she replied, and courtesied to the ground. "You know me. Are we not what the world calls eligibles?"

I could only gaze in bewilderment.

"Tell the Prince who I am," she cried, with a roguish laugh; and then, as I still stood silent, she courtesied again to the ground before him.

"René, only daughter of the Comte de Pontiers, may it please your Highness," she murmured.

He would have taken her to his arms in a rush of delight, but she ceremoniously waved him back.

"Present us with all due form and etiquette, madame."

It was a strange introduction, for three times did they bow with court formality to each other, and then the rustic lovers came to life again, and he clasped her in his arms.

"If you knew he was such an exalted personage, and knew me not to be a poor actress upon a visit, as I pretended," René cried, turning towards me, "why did you insist that I must break away from happiness because of my position? Surely we are what our world calls eligibles?"

And while I, in a generous instant, would have confessed the whole truth, a flush came over her face.

"My father must never know of this foolish masquerade," she said, gravely.

"You never met Prince Ferdinand until two minutes since," I answered. "Is it not so? We will say that his Highness's infatuation for an actress died the natural death of most infatuations; and then, a little later, make known his coming alliance with no less a lady than René, daughter of the Comte de Pontiers."

So ended Prince Ferdinand's entanglement. So ended my romantic mission that was such a successful failure; and now sometimes when I admire that diamond necklace I wonder if an accusation might not be formulated against me for obtaining jewels under false pretences. And yet—why?

A DEAL WITH CHINA

For the moment the exhilarating fascination of "Le Pole Nord" had absolutely enthralled the heart of feminine Paris.

To skate for an hour and then sit and sip one's coffee, to hold an informal reception among one's own particular enemies, or to flirt with one's dearest friends for the remainder of the afternoon, was now the amusement upon which Society had set its approving hall-mark, and for once in the way the craze that fashionable Paris had smiled upon was something in the nature of pleasure, and not a task.

It was delight to glide across the ice to the strains of that excellent orchestra; it was premature paradise to know that one's tailor-made gown, edged with fur to maintain an illusive suggestion of winter, need not await a frost before it could pique one's bosom companion; it was new life to feel one's blood tingling with the glow of health and new elation; to realize that one had successfully mastered the intricacies of double grape-vines and Canadian eights; and it was fashionable, for did not the Duchess de Maussapet, the Countess Venezia, and all others we poor women have been taught to imitate, grace the assembly almost every afternoon?

We had danced a quadrille upon the ice, and as the final bars died away my eyes met those of my diplomatic friend Monsieur Roché, as he leaned against a pillar, and there was a look upon his face, a peculiar gesture as he bowed to me, that told me why so staid a man had joined the frivolities of "Le Pole Nord."

Yet it went against my heart to dismiss my companion, for he was the most handsome instructor that "Le Pole Nord" possessed, an Apollo in his fur-trimmed jacket and jaunty cap, and all my feminine friends were dying to skate with him. It went against my heart to give him up to a woman who would only bore him.

He sighed as he unfastened my skates, and I sighed too, and walked to where Monsieur Roché was waiting.

And the poor man did look so absurd in his silk hat and conventional frock-coat compared with my late companion; but that man was now skating with a woman I detested, and I promptly dismissed him from my thoughts.

"I have looked everywhere for you," Monsieur Roché exclaimed, as he took my hand.

"There is only one place where I could be, monsieur, and that is here. To be away from 'Le Pole Nord' at this time of the day is to be out of the world. Would you care to cultivate the art with my assistance?"

"I wish for your guidance over something even more slippery than ice," he answered, as we seated ourselves upon a lounge.

"Well?"

"You know that we are entertaining an envoy from China, who presumably tours the world on a voyage of pleasure and enlightenment."

"His Excellency Hun Sun?"

"Precisely." Monsieur Roché leaned towards me until his lips almost touched my ear. "This

journey of pleasure is a subterfuge. The Ambassador comes from China to France."

"And the object of his visit?"

"To gain a pledge from France for defensive, or even offensive, protection."

I pursed my lips, for who in the world did not know that England and Russia would have to be reckoned with?

"There are powers in China," Monsieur Roché continued, "who have offered such inducements to tempt this protective alliance that we cannot resist them. Who those powers may be, whether the Emperor himself or those who do not love him, concerns you nothing. Hun Sun came to me and gave the message by word of mouth, but because of the secrecy which must be maintained in such a matter, no writing was to pass between France and China which, if by any chance intercepted, could be brought up against"—Monsieur Roché paused—"those who had sent him."

"We civilized nations are far behind the heathen in diplomacy," I murmured.

"Far behind," he acquiesced. "Many a man would be happier if he had never learned to write. There was to be no writing between us that could incriminate. Hun Sun gave me the message, asked for a witness, and before that witness, who was Gaspard Levivé, my chief secretary, handed me a small gold seal. If France agreed, our answer was to be a mere interchange of diplomatic courtesies, sealed with that seal, and all would be understood."

"It seems over-elaborated and cumbersome caution, *mon ami*, for surely the man trusted to bring the message could be trusted to take the answer."

"Except that as it is he can never know the answer, *ma chère*. However, it is not the methods of this diplomacy that I wished to consult you upon, but this: when his Excellency handed me the seal, I placed it upon the table by my side; five minutes afterwards he left, and when I turned to the table it was gone, and no one but ourselves had been near it. By 'ourselves' I mean Hun Sun, myself, and Gaspard Levivé. There seems to be no possible reason for his Excellency to steal what he need not have delivered; there would be no sense in my concealing what no one need know I have received, and so—"

"There is only Gaspard?" I sharply interjected, and I felt my pulses throb with indignation, for who knew better than I, since the affair of the abducted Ambassador, that the man I was honored in calling my dearest friend was as true as any who served our country.

"There is only Gaspard," monsieur repeated.

"Then you insinuate that your secretary, my friend, has stolen the seal?" I cried, angrily.

"I insinuate nothing," he answered. "I come to you, because you have solved many difficult problems, to help me in this."

"And I refuse, monsieur. You are a poor diplomat to attempt to gain a woman's sympathy by attacking one whom she esteems and admires."

"I think not, for I have already aroused your deepest interest in my unfortunate position."

"Indeed!"

"Certainly; because one is implicated whom," Monsieur Roché glanced into my face and smiled, "you esteem and admire."

"I repeat that you are a poor diplomat," I cried, angrily, "and I will prove it. Because you have chosen to insult my friend, because you have chosen to insinuate that he is a traitor and a thief, I renounce my position. I refuse this commission and all others, and I have the honor to wish you good-day and good-bye. Now, monsieur, have I proved that you are a poor diplomat? A child in what you count yourself a master?"

I had risen, and stood looking down upon him, and I felt there was a tinge of scorn and perhaps contempt in my glance, but he took my hand and gently drew me down to the lounge beside him.

"You have only proved," he said, "what a woman's true regard is worth. *Mon Dieu!* how could any man be a traitor whom you have placed so high in your esteem?"

"Then I have misunderstood you," I quickly answered. "I take back to myself all that I have said. I become a penitent, I accept this and all other commissions, and think you, monsieur, absolutely the best and nicest man in Paris."

He looked at me with almost a twinkle in his eyes, and then, "Am I not a good diplomat?" he mildly interjected.

"You are a most unscrupulous politician," I answered. "You never suspected Gaspard?"

"Never. I was merely quickening your interest in the position. Am I not a good diplomat?"

"You're the most irritating middle-aged man in France."

My companion shrugged his shoulders, smiled for a moment, and then leaned towards me. "I did not steal it, and Gaspard did not." He raised his eyebrows.

"Hun Sun stole it himself."

"Precisely my own opinion," Monsieur Roché murmured, appreciatively. "He, although a chosen envoy to France, is against us. He was bound to deliver his message, but in the same instant he rendered it futile. We cannot own that we have lost the seal, and without it we cannot accept."

"And your object in seeking me at such an hour is to ask me to regain the seal?"

"Yes, *ma chère*, you are the one woman in the world who is brilliant enough to do it, because—"

"Not so much sugar, if you please, monsieur. Thank you;" and I took my cup from his hand, leaving him to apply my remark in its double sense, and smiled with satisfaction because I noticed that Paul was cutting figures and flourishes in solitude. I knew that empty-headed woman would bore him.

"But I may count upon your assistance?" Monsieur le Premier plaintively interjected.

"To regain the seal is utterly impossible," I quietly answered.

"Impossible?"

"Altogether. The man who could rob you before your very eyes is too clever to allow himself to be robbed in turn. I do not care for missions without a hope of success. There is but one thing you can do: bribe Hun Sun to come over to the side of France."

"Unfortunately, Hun Sun has departed for the land where bribery is unknown."

I sat forward in my seat in amazement; even monsieur's diplomatic manner of putting it did not completely hide his meaning.

"When did it happen?"

"Late last night. He returned from his appointment with me to his suite at L'Imperatrice Hôtel, and, after transacting some business with his secretary Ling Wen, retired for the night, and forever. Living diplomats mourn a talented man, who has gone to join the politicians who have preceded him—or, at least, some of them."

"And that being so, *mon ami*, I undertake the mission. You may make your plans, for I promise you shall have the seal within twenty-four hours—unless," I added, "it was never taken to the hotel."

"You mean it?" he cried, a flush of pleasure chasing the sallow lines of worry from his face.

"In spite of cheap masculine cynicism, *mon cher*, a woman sometimes means what she says. I think I can regain it for you. Where is the—"

"The body was removed secretly in the early morning to the Chinese Embassy."

"And no one knows of his Excellency's death?"

"Outside those pledged to silence, no one."

"Let me see," I murmured, reflectively; "his secretary's name is—?"

"Ling Wen, with, say, twenty odd additions."

"Ling Wen will be sufficient. At seven o'clock to-night, monsieur, you will send an imperative message that you must see Ling Wen at once, and—No, that is all you need do. You will not skate? Then, *mon ami*, *au revoir*."

It was ten minutes past seven when my *coupé*, drew up at the door of L'Imperatrice Hôtel, and I requested to be conducted to the apartments of his Excellency Hun Sun; and I felt pleased with myself, for my much-tried milliner had obliterated volumes of misdeeds with a gown and cloak that were perfection. A shade of perplexity gathered upon the face of the waiter as he heard my request, and that perplexity was deepened in the features of monsieur le manager, when he was called and listened to my desire.

"His Excellency Hun Sun had only just departed."

I had serious thoughts of recommending that man to Monsieur Roché as an uncultivated diplomat.

"And"—he seemed prepared to sink into the ground at the humiliation of disappointing me—"his Excellency's secretary, Ling Wen, had also just been called away."

"It did not matter; I would wait;" and because my own countrymen can refuse a pretty woman nothing, I gained my point, and was conducted by the gentleman himself to the suite of the envoy, to await, as he again so diplomatically put it, "the one who should first return."

There were three rooms—a reception-room, a bedroom, and a study—and I trembled with excitement as I realized that the object of my visit, the stolen seal, was somewhere in those rooms, and in a few minutes I might be passing out of the hotel, and all would be over.

An obliging bunch of keys lay invitingly upon the study table, and rapidly I opened drawer after drawer in that apartment and the bedroom, and became more and more irritated, as my search

proved ever fruitless.

The reception-room only was left, and my vexation evaporated in a laugh of approaching triumph, as I realized that a cunning man would hide what he had to hide in the most open room, and not in the most private.

There was only an ormolu writing-table with fancy drawers that refused to yield to the persuasion of my keys, but a broad-bladed Oriental knife tempted me, and, thrusting it into the edge, I pressed upon it, and forced the front from the drawer.

It came with a sharp snap, and a quiet chuckle caused me to turn with a start.

His Excellency's secretary, Ling Wen, was sitting in a chair, his hands upon his knees, smiling blandly at me.

I did not speak. For the first time in my life I could not find the right words to say, but could only gaze into the face of Ling Wen, who sat there, his long fingers spread out over the knees of his yellow, embroidered silk robe. I glanced at the clock. I had been at work over an hour.

"You are searching for something," he said, quietly—"pray continue;" and the invitation was too gracious not to be accepted. I swept the contents of the drawer upon the carpet.

There were only a few bundles of official-looking papers. I pushed them aside with my shoe and frowned in annoyance.

"So it is not a paper you seek, madame?" Ling Wen suavely murmured. "That is good."

"It is a trifle," I nervously answered; "a trinket that I mislaid when I stayed here last."

Ling Wen, with his hand upon his chin, nodded; but I did not like the nod, for with it oozed a smile that seemed more a compliment to my readiness of invention than belief in my veracity.

"A trinket?" he said, rising from his seat, his sharp, narrow eyes directed full upon me.

"One I valued greatly, your Excellency."

"Women are ever careless of what they value most," he answered; "allow me to help you."

And then I could not restrain a half-cry of annoyance, for he commenced his search where I should have done an hour ago; and taking a Sèvres vase from the mantel-piece, turned it upside down, and something glittering in the light rolled out upon the carpet.

It was the seal I sought, a large ruby cut with a monogram and mounted in filigree gold.

"You have found it," he said, with a guileless smile, as I picked it up.

"I can never thank you sufficiently," I replied, and then, as he shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly, I, in the elation of my victory, bestowed my most dazzling smile upon him and begged him to forgive my unceremonious intrusion.

"You ask too much," he replied, with a glance that made me feel how well I was suited by my gown—"you ask too much, madame; my privilege must be ever to remember it."

The seal was in my hand as he gently placed my cloak around my shoulders, in my left hand as he raised my right to his lips, still there as he bowed again and again to me, and I walked towards the door, tried it, and found it locked.

"The door is locked!" I cried, sharply.

"Exactly," he murmured, blandly; "the door is locked."

I walked across the room again, and, throwing back my cloak from my shoulders, sank upon a lounge, while he seated himself opposite me, and, with his hands again spread out upon his knees, watched and waited for me to speak; but I would not, and presently he broke the silence.

"I caught sight of that trinket when it dropped," he said, smoothly, "and it seemed to me that I have seen it once before in the possession of my master, his Excellency Hun Sun."

"Well?" I demanded, spitefully, for it was bitter to see my victory dwindling to failure, to know that I had been frustrated, and my boast to Monsieur Roché was idle.

"Well, what then?"

"That being so, I ask to examine it more closely."

"And if I refuse, your Excellency," I sneered. "Even the Chinese, I presume, do not use force to a woman."

"Even the French," he answered, "do not, I presume, permit barefaced theft."

"I tell you the trinket is mine, and that should be sufficient. If you knew me you dare not doubt my word."

"You are but a grudging courtier of your own charms," he answered, with a ceremonious bow. "Who could once see Madame Lerestelle and ever forget her?"

I placed the seal upon a Moorish stool by my side, and he nodded approvingly.

"Let us consider the matter from a diplomatic point of view, your Excellency."

"I have the most profound respect for diplomacy, madame, for I am ignorant even of its rudiments."

The idea that first came to me when Monsieur Roché recounted the incident had grown in my mind until it became fixed as the truth. I determined to force this bland heathen into submission, or at least acquiescence.

"Ling Wen."

"Madame."

I leaned impressively towards him and sank my voice to a whisper.

"Why did you remove Hun Sun?"

Only a slight in-drawing of the lips followed my question, a twitch for the fraction of a second passed over his expressionless features.

"You are aware, then, that his Excellency is dead?"

"Yes. Why did you murder him?"

"This is childish, madame, and outside the point at issue."

"Neither the one nor the other, Ling Wen, for because I know this you are going to hand me that seal and conduct me to my carriage."

"You will be pleased to prove it, madame."

"Undoubtedly. Hun Sun was sent with a message to be delivered by word of mouth to France. A message that dare not be written."

Ling Wen nodded ever so slightly.

"It may be so, madame; I do not know."

"A man who knew what Hun Sun did was too dangerous to be allowed to return to China, for he might hold even the Emperor himself within the hollow of his hand."

"I follow your reasoning, madame; it is excellent."

"The life of a man in China is always counted as insignificant. Is it not so, Ling Wen?"

"Who could be so ungallant as to contradict you?" he suavely responded.

"Hun Sun was sent with the message, and you, Ling Wen, were to kill him when he had delivered it."

"Well, madame?"

"Because I know this, you will give me the seal and conduct me to my carriage."

Ling Wen shook his head.

"No, madame, the price is too high for a series of deductions, clever though they be. His Excellency died from natural causes."

"You are sure the physicians will say so?"

"Their opinion will not be asked. The French government cannot insult our illustrious dead. Hun Sun is dead. That is sufficient."

"But because of the part you have played, Ling Wen, I demand the seal as the price of my silence."

He rose from his seat and paced the room, and when he spoke again his voice, for a Chinaman, had grown strangely incisive.

"I should not be swayed by a threat, madame, but if I can grant you a favor, I will."

"Call it by which name you please," I cried, seeing signs of his wavering.

"Why do you want the seal?"

"Are you for France or Russia, Ling Wen?"

"I am for China," he answered, quietly; "even a heathen has patriotism. Why do you want the seal?"

I sat and pondered. How much must I tell him, and how much hold back? I looked anxiously at the seal as it lay upon the stool, and he interpreted my glance.

"For the moment," he said, "it is on neutral ground, and shall remain so until we have diplomatically solved the problem."

I still hesitated; but there was no other way, and so perforce I took the only one open to me.

"It is to seal an alliance between France and China."

"Ah!" He smiled with delight, nodded his head approvingly, and spread out his long fingers, as though he warmed them at a fire.

I took new courage to my heart.

"Hun Sun delivered it to Monsieur Roché, and the instant after purloined it and rendered his mission futile. Hun Sun was in the pay of Russia."

"Ss's the dog!" Ling Wen hissed; "I always suspected it. The dog!"

"But you, Ling Wen, will make amends for the deed of this traitor?"

"Gladly," he cried; "the neutrality is broken." He bent over, took the seal in his fingers, and I extended my hand to receive it.

"You are as clever as you are beautiful," he said, "and deserve to succeed, but unfortunately you cannot."

He dropped the seal into the open pocket of his loose silk robe.

"What do you mean?" I cried, starting in passionate amazement from my seat.

"You have much to learn, madame, before you become a skilled diplomat; you are too trustful, too confiding, and, as others of your lovely sex, you talk too much. I, too, am in the pay of Russia."

I drew my breath through my closed teeth, and clinched my hands, for I could have killed him as he stood and blandly smiled. I had been tricked and fooled. I had failed, and worse than failed, for I had dealt an irreparable blow at my own country.

"You play a rash game, Ling Wen," I cried, with cold rage.

"But a successful one, madame."

"France's representations to Peking will secure your disgrace for the part you have played in this affair."

"Tush! France can make no representations with his Excellency Hun Sun's mission unanswered."

"We can at least show how we have been cajoled."

"And if it were believed, the desire of China for alliance with a power which had proved so stupid would vanish; but it would not be believed; they would say you were scheming for delay. You had better take defeat with a pleasant grace."

I smothered my rage, and smiled a thin smile.

"Very well, Ling Wen," I answered; "I will learn diplomacy from you, and put a good face upon the matter."

"It is the truest wisdom to accept the inevitable with complacency," he murmured.

"You may see me to my carriage."

"I would that our ambitions were the same," he said, as he unlocked and opened the door. "I am humiliated in refusing you."

"Where there are victors there must be vanquished," I answered, as one who spoke a platitude, for I was disheartened and wretched at my failure.

He took my hand, and raised it to his lips.

"*Au revoir*, madame."

"Perhaps France can pay more than Russia, Ling Wen?" and I looked at him inquiringly.

"No country can pay better than Russia for secret service, madame," he answered; and then a dull sparkle came into his narrow eyes, and he pushed the door to, and laid his hand upon my arm.

"Sit down," he said, and I walked with him, my eyes cast down upon the carpet, fearful lest he should see the triumph glowing in them; with a grain of fortune, the victory yet was mine.

The inspiration came to me, clear as the noonday sun, when he opened the door for me to leave.

I trembled lest he should detect the new color rising in my cheeks, and with my glance still cast down, I took my seat again, and waited.

He stood beside me, and rested his long, thin fingers lightly on my shoulder.

"No country can pay better than Russia for secret service, madame," he repeated, with emphasis.

"It is not to be thought of," I answered, hesitatingly.

"Think what Russia would pay for your services, you in the heart of the secrets of diplomatic France."

"Not sufficient to destroy my patriotism," I said, lest it should seem that I yielded too easily.

"The ardor of one's patriotism regulates one's price," he responded. "Think what would they not pay you."

"Tush!" I cried; "this is foolishness. You wish to tempt me to place myself in your power, for fear I may yet prove dangerous. What authority do you possess to make promises for Russia? It is childish; I will go."

I moved to rise from my seat, but he restrained me.

"You are a clever woman," he said, "and that is why I would have you on our side. I tell you frankly that your value would be incalculable to Russia—to the Russian party in China. On behalf of Russia, I can make the payment whatever you desire."

"It is difficult to believe, *mon ami*," I replied, with a laugh, and I looked him in the face now, for a little excitement was pardonable. "The protestations you made earlier in the evening have proved too false to inspire confidence."

"That may be so," he exclaimed, with a quiet chuckle, "but if I can show you an official document of the Russian government proclaiming me what I say I am, giving me such powers as I say I possess, what then?"

"Then we will discuss the position diplomatically," I answered. "Where is the paper?"

"In the adjoining room," he said, and again I bent my eyes upon the ground.

"It is made jointly to Hun Sun and myself. We were the two great Russian allies in China, and we, by strange coincidence, were chosen to deliver this message to France. Your deduction that I killed Hun Sun, although clever, is wrong. The Emperor of China does not guard his secrets quite so barbarously. Hun Sun was advanced in years, and died a natural death."

"Then let me see this paper and I will believe you, and perhaps—"

He smiled and turned away from me, and I rose from my seat.

"I will bring it to you."

"We are not allies yet, Ling Wen, and I do not trust you. I will come."

"As you will," he answered. "I admire your caution, for it tells me how invaluable you will be to us;" and with a bow he crossed the room, and held the door of the inner apartment open for me to enter.

I half advanced, paused irresolute, and then drew back.

"You may precede me," I said. "I will again be candid. I do not trust you;" and I stood aside for him to pass, and took the handle of the door, which opened towards me, in my left hand.

He laughed quietly again, and turned and faced me.

"An excess of caution is bad diplomacy, madame," he said, "for it creates suspicion. If I did not know how impossible it was, I should think you still had designs upon the seal."

With another soft chuckle he passed on and entered the doorway; and then like a flash, the instant his back was turned, I caught his silk embroidered robe in my right hand, and with my left flung to the door and locked it.

There was a guttural exclamation from within as he tried to tear his gown free, but my glance fell upon the Oriental knife that I had used before, and, holding the silk in my hand, with a slash I cut it through, and the seal, which lay in the corner of the deep pocket, was again in my possession.

Ling Wen was beating furiously upon the panels, so I took the precaution of locking the outer door as I departed, and descended the stairs, elated with a feeling of supreme contentment, for was not my promise to Monsieur Roché amply and well fulfilled?

MONSIEUR ROCHÉ'S DEFEAT

"*Mon ami*, you jest!"

"I never jest," Monsieur Roché snappishly replied. "Before the week is through Paris will have a sensation, the ministry will be defeated—more than defeated, disgraced. I have been deceived, miserably betrayed, and by the man I trusted most. A friend of yours, madame—Gaspard Levivé."

"It is not true," I cried; and the blood mounted to my cheeks in anger, for truly Gaspard Levivé was a friend of mine, one whom I delighted to call my greatest friend.

"It is only too true," Monsieur Roché gravely answered. "I am disgraced, and the young fool is

ruined. At least not ruined," he bitterly continued: "doubtless he will be rewarded by the new ministry."

"If this be the prelude to a commission, monsieur, I refuse it."

"There is no commission, madame; the day is hopelessly lost. I have been betrayed by my own secretary."

We had met crossing the Place de la Concorde, and had stayed talking by the Luxor Obelisk, and now I deliberately obscured Monsieur Roché with my sunshade, and gazed up the vista of the Champs-Élysées to the Arc de Triomphe. Suddenly I turned, closed my parasol with a vicious snap, and looked angrily into his face.

"I accept the commission, monsieur; tell me all."

He placed his hand upon my arm.

"You are angry, *ma chère*, and so am I. You are wounded, and I am also. Let it pass; there is no commission."

"Some mystery," I cried.

"No mystery and no solution; all is too wretchedly clear. You are anxious to defend Gaspard, so am I; but it is useless; he stands self-condemned, and we had best forget his very existence."

"Tell me," I said, stonily.

"He has stolen a document from my safe and sold it to those who can, who will, use it to disgrace and overthrow me."

"It is false."

"A month ago France was insulted—deliberately insulted in such a manner that it became almost a declaration of war. It was equivalent to a challenge for war, and yet one that we dare not take up. War to France would mean ruin. She would inevitably lose, and sink to the condition of a second-rate power."

"Well!"

"We decided we could not go to war. We must diplomatically ignore the slur, at least until we were more prepared; but it was a matter for France, and not for the ministry alone. If our course of action became known, it might be the first step towards revolution. There was no help for it, and I privately conferred with the head of the opposition, my greatest political enemy, Monsieur Desormes."

"One of the most unscrupulous men in France."

"One of the greatest diplomats."

"The terms are frequently synonymous, monsieur. Proceed."

"Wonderful to relate, he was with us. War was impossible—we dare not declare it, we must accept the distasteful position—but I insisted that his support of that policy should be given me in writing, that he should bind himself to an adhesion to our views, so that he could not withdraw; and he agreed, and wrote a confidential document in which he declared that he stood firm with us for peace. That document has been stolen from my safe by Gaspard Levivé, and returned to Desormes, who now laughs in my face, sneeringly announcing that he will publicly charge my ministry with degrading France in the eyes of Europe, and crush us."

"You go too fast, monsieur; why stolen by Gaspard Levivé?"

"Because he for a few hours had the key of my safe in his possession. It is he or I."

"I would sooner suspect you, monsieur."

"Last night I left my keys with him. This morning before I arrived he had a mysterious visitor, a woman—"

"Well, monsieur, what of that?"

"When I opened the safe the letter was gone, and a blank sheet of paper substituted; that is all."

"And his explanation?"

"He refuses any. Declines even to say who the visitor was, or why she called."

"I see no case against him," I said, soberly, but my heart was chilling because of this unknown woman.

"That is not all," Monsieur Roché continued, "for I know who she was—the Countess Renazé, the closest friend of Mlle. Desormes, one of the most bewitching women in Paris, beautiful enough to tempt any man from his duty. I found this handkerchief with her monogram and crest in his room."

"Good-day, monsieur."

"Good-bye, *ma chère*; we've both made a mistake—good-bye."

I did not want to talk with my diplomatic friend; I did not want to talk with any one. I left him, and walked towards the Boulevard des Capucines, the words ringing in my ears, "We've both made a mistake." I hated myself, I hated diplomats, and I wondered if I was so wretched because Gaspard was false to France or because he had been false to me.

Then as I strolled, a little scene came back to my mind that I had witnessed that morning upon the platform of the Gare du Nord. The Countess Renazé was departing for London. I could see her now as she leaned from the carriage window. So it could not be she who had called upon Gaspard, and Monsieur Roché's reasoning was at fault in that particular. Why not in more than that; why not in all?

But my next thought condemned Gaspard almost beyond appeal, for I remembered that, as the train started, the Countess dropped her lace handkerchief from between her fingers, and, too late to hand it back, her friend, Mlle. Desormes, the daughter of Monsieur Roché's enemy, picked it up. It was she who had called upon Gaspard immediately afterwards, and had coaxed or tricked him into delivering the paper to her; and I, who would have given all to prove Gaspard's innocence, had found evidence to condemn him even more strongly.

I stopped in sudden surprise, for the man whom I would have avoided stood before me.

"You have heard I am ruined and disgraced," he said, for he could not but perceive the constraint in my manner.

"I have just left Monsieur Roché. How could you be so mad?"

His lips twitched even as though my words came as a shock to him.

"I thought one woman would believe me. I was on my way to ask for your assistance."

"Assistance is impossible, monsieur, with half-hearted confidences. A lady called upon you, and you refuse her name."

"Monsieur Roché discovered that it was the Countess Renazé."

"It was Mlle. Desormes," I said, coldly. Gaspard's face turned even a shade paler, and his eyes fell before my gaze.

"You know that?" he said, in astonishment.

"Yes; why did you not tell Monsieur Roché?"

"Because there are circumstances in which explanation may be counted as half-confession."

"Indeed."

"I was appalled at the accusation, and such an admission must have stamped my guilt. Think, the daughter of the very man who had tricked us, Monsieur Roché's implacable enemy. It was impossible, and so I kept silent."

"It was a criminal silence, a worse falsehood than a spoken untruth. Why did she call?"

Gaspard flushed, and after a moment's pause spoke in a voice that was hesitating and constrained.

"I had promised to lend her a government book upon the island of Martinique."

And then—for I could scarce restrain a smile—it was so ridiculous for one of the belles of Paris to take to the study of official reports; he hotly continued: "Now you see why I did not tell Monsieur Roché the truth, for even you do not believe it. It seems too childish, too ridiculous."

"It seems too childish to be false, *mon ami*," I answered; "but are you sure there was not some little—what shall I say when a beautiful woman and a clever man are concerned?—some little—"

"You need say nothing, *Aidë*," he answered, looking me straight in the face; "you know there was not."

And my heart seemed to suddenly grow so light that I forgot the serious business that troubled us.

"Well, *mon cher* Gaspard, I think it is a mistake; a promising diplomat ought to have tendencies towards matrimony, because it is so respectable."

"Only let me get this wretched problem solved, *Aidë*, and then I will give you a commission to find me a wife. But I am hard to please," he laughed. "She must be the most beautiful woman in Paris, the most brilliant, and the most accomplished."

I think there must have been just a tinge of heightened color in my cheeks, and we were both smiling, forgetful of misfortune; but I had promised to find this paragon, and so I lightly laid my hand on his, and murmured, "Gaspard, *mon cher*, she is the very woman you shall marry."

I believe it was in his thoughts to say more, but I stopped him. "Let us get back to serious realities," I said. "Mlle. Desormes called upon you ostensibly for the Yellow Book that you promised to lend her. Was she left alone in your room?"

"For five minutes, perhaps, while I went to fetch it."

"And your room communicates with that of Monsieur Roché?"

"Yes."

"Then it is simplicity itself; in that five minutes she stole the paper."

"It is not simplicity itself, Aidë; far from it. Last night I locked the safe. Monsieur Roché went early, and left the key with me, and I saw the letter there when placing other documents in the safe. This morning before he arrived I unlocked it, took some papers out, and locked it again, and Monsieur Roché found it so when he arrived. So it is impossible to believe that Mlle. Desormes could have accomplished the theft."

"It seems impossible, Gaspard, because we do not know the method."

"There is but one key, and that did not leave my possession. The packet was to all intents and purposes intact this morning, the seal Monsieur Roché stamped upon it a month ago unbroken, but the contents had been stolen."

"She may have substituted a counterfeit for the original," I answered. "It is a favorite trick with a woman," and I smiled as I recollected a similar affair that had occurred between ourselves.

"And forged Monsieur Roché's private seal?"

"My dear Gaspard," I cried, irritably, "what is the use of adopting this supercilious air of obstruction? Papers are not spirited from steel safes. It must have been stolen, and it is for us to discover how, and regain it."

"I only seek to show how inexplicable the thing is," he answered.

"In detail, yes, but on the broad principle it is as plain as sunlight. Why should Monsieur Roché open the packet to-day?"

"Because of Monsieur Desormes's insolent threats of exposure and disgrace."

"Ah! now see, *mon ami*, how easy it becomes. A paper which incriminates Monsieur Desormes, which proclaims in his own writing his complicity in the policy adopted by the present ministry, was in Monsieur Roché's safe. This morning his daughter calls upon you on a preposterously transparent errand. She, one of the beauties of Paris, desires the loan of the recently issued report on Martinique; that necessitates your leaving her, and when she is gone, the paper is missing."

"The inference, on the broad principle, is that she stole it."

"Then that is the inference upon which we will base our work, *mon ami*."

"So you do not credit that in me she had a willing accomplice?"

"Should I be walking with you this afternoon if I did?" I said. "Only one thing I am sure about, and that is that Mlle. Desormes, in some inexplicable manner, stole that paper this morning, and must have it still. I am going to her at once, and next time we meet, *mon ami*, I will hand it back to you."

"You seem confident, Aidë."

"And that is victory half accomplished, *mon cher; au revoir*."

Ten minutes later I entered the court-yard of one of the mansions of the Boulevard Haussmann, and requested to see Mlle. Desormes. We were slight acquaintances, and already I counted that I had forced her to obey me, and to submit, for, although a very pretty and charming girl, she was too young and too inexperienced to be a match for a woman who was fighting for the good name of the man—But why confuse sentiment with diplomacy?

Mlle. Desormes received me in her boudoir with a smile of welcome, and thrust down amid the cushions of her chair, only half-concealed, was that eternal book on Martinique.

"Have you seen your father to-day, mademoiselle?" I asked, quietly, after a few moments' chat upon commonplaces.

"No," she cried, with a start, and then hastily added, "Has anything happened to him?"

"Nothing," I replied, reassuringly; "but have you communicated with him to-day?"

"No," she answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I desire to know," I enigmatically responded, and I could not but admire the clever look of perplexity upon her face. "As you have not done so, the matter is more easily arranged."

"What matter, madame?"

"This, mademoiselle. You called at Le Quai d'Orsay this morning and brought something away with you that you ought not to have done. Now the position is simple. You will give it to me, and no more will be said. If you do not, I shall compel you."

"Compel!" she cried, with a glint of spirit in her eyes. "Compel, madame."

"Compel, mademoiselle."

For an instant she seemed inclined to resent my emphatic demand, but with a careless shrug of the shoulders she turned to me again, and handed me that wretched book on Martinique.

I only drew my breath and gazed at her, my temper rising dangerously as I realized the utter uselessness of the course I had taken with this woman. A sudden surprise, because I had judged her young and inexperienced.

"I will not question your right, madame," she cried, with a fine touch of scorn. "You say you have come for that book, and I have given it to you. Shall we now say *au revoir*?"

"You must be deeply interested in Martinique," I viciously exclaimed; and she flushed until the color spread all over her cheeks, even invaded with a warm tint the whiteness of her neck, and yet, like a school-girl, she hung her head, and answered nothing.

"When the pretty women of Paris take to the study of government reports," I continued, with a sneer, endeavoring to irritate her until she spoke hastily, and perhaps gave me my opportunity, "there must indeed be other reasons in the background. Martinique doubtless possesses unique attractions for you, mademoiselle."

"This is shameful," she cried, springing passionately to her feet, "and from you, Madame Lerestelle, one whom I have always admired."

"Tush!" I cried, impatiently; and I too rose and faced her. "Why did you call upon Monsieur Levivé this morning? Only for a book on Martinique—only that?"

She gazed into my eyes with a strange look of surprise, and then her lips twitched for a second, and as she held her forefinger up to me she had the effrontery to smile in my face.

"*Ma chérie*," she cried, with a laugh; "you're jealous."

"Mademoiselle!"

"Tut, tut!" she cried. "Now don't deny it, because it is the only possible excuse for the way you have been talking to me. But a woman can easily excuse jealousy when she is not in love with the same man."

I was numbed with indignation at the manner in which this *ingénue* played with me, and she had had the audacity to place her arm around my waist.

"Confidence for confidence, *ma chère*," she murmured. "My father discovered that Monsieur Decassé and I loved each other, and had him transferred to Martinique, and," she looked up into my face, "even dry official reports of the progress of the island are interesting to me, because the man I love is there, and may even have written them."

Diplomacy vanished. I felt as helpless as a child in the hands of this innocent, whose ready tongue found such excuses, and with a spasm of rage I caught her by the wrist.

"Let us finesse no more, mademoiselle," I cried, sharply, "for the time is gone. I care for Martinique as much as you do, and you know what I have called for as well as I. Not this Yellow Book you brought away as an excuse, but the paper missing from Monsieur Roché's room. Will you give me that or not?"

"I do not understand you," she quietly replied.

"Give me that document which you, at your father's instigation, stole this morning."

She drew herself away, and her slight, girlish figure seemed to grow in dignity before me.

"How dare you?" she said. "How dare you?"

"I dare anything, when you have ruined the man I love. Give me that paper?"

"You are mad!"

"Mad or not, mademoiselle, I do not leave this house—"

"Monsieur Desormes desires to see you in his study, mademoiselle."

The servant withdrew, and I turned again to her.

"And now," I cried, and my blood throbbed hotly in my veins, "now you will still say you know nothing of this theft?"

"I say nothing now," she scornfully retorted. "You shall come with me and hear what I have to say."

She walked almost unconcernedly towards the door, and then turned and faced me.

"Follow me, Madame Lerestelle," she cried, and in bitter tones added, "and follow me closely, lest a day should come when you will assert I gave my father the clew of what he should speak to you."

And, with no qualms of conscience, I followed her, and so closely that we entered Monsieur Desormes's study together.

He was what those who are foreigners to us would describe as "the typical Frenchman." Though his years must have been fifty, he looked scarcely forty, and his upright military carriage, his dark mustache waxed to dagger points, and close-cropped hair, made him appear even younger still. He was what his appearance proclaimed him, an urbane, clever, and unscrupulous diplomat. He rose and graciously bowed to me, even as though I were an expected guest.

"Your visit is a pleasure as illimitable in its delight as in its surprise, madame," he softly murmured.

"Yet a most unfitting moment for pedantic compliments," Mlle. Desormes warmly interjected; and I marvelled at the rage that still blazed within her eyes.

"I called on Monsieur Levivé at the Quai d'Orsay this morning," she continued, turning sharply upon her father; "why I did so concerns but you and me alone. To-day a paper has been stolen from Monsieur Roché's room, which adjoins Monsieur Levivé's, and I am charged with the theft."

Monsieur Desormes's eyebrows shot upward. "You?" he ejaculated.

"I," she answered, in cold passion. "I am accused of this theft. My name is linked with that of Monsieur Levivé, as the one who tempted him to dishonor. My name—can you realize the stigma, monsieur?"

"I can realize no connection of circumstances," he replied, contemptuously, and she crossed the room, and, laying her hand upon his desk, looked him full in the face.

"It seems that this paper incriminated you," she exclaimed; and I saw that then he started.

"It is a paper that pledged you to support, or, at any rate, not to oppose, the ministry, monsieur," I interrupted; "and it has been stolen."

"I am aware of that, madame. I decided that it was better for France not to keep that pledge."

"But not better for me," mademoiselle cried, "and I am even before France."

"It is your own folly that has caused you to be suspected," he responded.

"It is the devices that men call dishonesty and statesmen diplomacy," she answered; and he put his arm around her waist and drew her back until she was seated upon the edge of his chair.

"Pretty little girls must not use cynical epigrams," he said, softly, as one petting a spoiled child. "Now, come, what is it you want?"

"I want nothing," she burst out, indignantly, "but I demand justice. I demand to be freed from this insinuation of theft. I do not ask, I demand, that Monsieur Levivé, who is innocent, shall be relieved from suspicion, and you shall confess how you have stolen this paper."

"Purloined, *ma petite*," he exclaimed, as he playfully pinched her ear.

"Stolen," she doggedly repeated. "Stolen, not caring whom you ruined, man or woman."

"Tut, tut; what an undiplomatic little girl she is," he laughed, with a wonderful depth of fondness in his tone; and then he rose, and, after pacing the room for a minute, turned to me.

"Madame Lerestelle," he exclaimed, "I am known in political life as the most unscrupulous man in France; that is the reputation I have won, and the one I live to retain. As a man, I admire Monsieur Roché; as a politician, I despise him. I consider that his theories are imbecilic, his policy meaningless, and his ministry an insult to the country—"

"Monsieur, I differ—"

"Madame, I respect you the more. You are a friend of Monsieur Roché's, but, because I think what I do think, I will annihilate him. Because I work for the glory of France, and not for my own ends, I have stooped to pledge my written word only to steal it back."

"Diplomacy," mademoiselle murmured, with a world of scorn, and he shook his head reprovably, then placed his hand quietly upon her arm.

"But my daughter shall not be suspected of connivance with me, and still more, no innocent man shall suffer. Monsieur Levivé is incapable of betraying a trust. Even you, madame," and he shot a meaning glance at me, "could not persuade him to break his faith, and you know it."

I bowed my head, and wondered how it was Monsieur Desormes was not universally admired.

"He shall not be disgraced; no shadow of a slur shall rest upon him, for I, madame, will write an explanation that shall satisfy Monsieur Roché, and you shall give it to him yourself."

I bowed my thanks, and he sat down at his desk, and, drawing a sheet of official paper towards him, rapidly covered it and handed it to me. It commenced with the usual courtesies which we have such an innate liking for addressing one another with, and then the letter continued: "Because others who are innocent, monsieur, have been suspected, I am prepared to place in your possession the name of the man and his method. His name is—"

The writing finished there, and I held out my hand for the second sheet, which he had completed while I read.

"You will not ask it, madame?" Monsieur Desormes suggested.

"As you will, monsieur. I have your word that your letter will entirely free those who are innocent from suspicion?"

"You have the word of a—"

"Diplomat?" mademoiselle interrupted, with her anger still smouldering.

"Of a Frenchman," monsieur finished, as he folded the sheets and sealed the envelope.

"And now," he continued, as he addressed it to Monsieur Roché and handed it to me, "there is a favor I must crave of you. I am an implacable enemy, but, I hope, not a false friend. You must give me twenty-four hours, so that the plans I have matured may not be frustrated."

"I scarcely comprehend, monsieur."

"If a man has been an enemy to Monsieur Roché, and an ally with me, I must protect him."

"That is your only object?"

"You have my word, madame."

"Then you have mine, monsieur. This letter shall not be delivered until to-morrow evening."

He raised my fingers to his lips with a smile of satisfaction, and I, having whispered to mademoiselle that after all it was scarcely worth while mentioning Martinique, and gained a smile of mingled thanks and forgiveness, departed, satisfied with the success of my mission, and happy in the knowledge that I had played for the highest stakes that it had been my lot to know—played and won.

There are Boulevard cynics who would declare that, being a woman, I must be miserable because I did not know the name of the thief or the miraculous method he employed. Others, more cynical still, who would say that I cared nothing, because I counted upon coaxing all from *mon cher* Gaspard; but it would be false. I cared nothing for him who had stolen; my thoughts were all with him whose honor I had saved. For that reason I grudged the delay, but, tried more sorely than ever in my life before, it was not until the following night, enclosed with a note of my own, that I sent Monsieur Desormes's confession to Monsieur Roché.

And as I sat after it had gone, still free from curiosity as to the thief, still proud of my success for Gaspard's sake, the thought, for the first time, came that the Premier was also deeply indebted to me, for his ministry was saved.

I paid fastidious attention to my toilet, for one dared not look anything but one's best at Madame de Voussêt's receptions, and Gaspard was such a frequent visitor.

Yet I never looked worse to my own mind, and all the satisfaction seemed to be with Thérèse.

"*Mais oui! madame, c'est superb,*" she cried, with an exaggerated gesture of admiration; and although she possessed many faults, I never had to chide her for lack of truthfulness.

"Monsieur Roché, madame," she announced a moment later, and I said I would receive him in my boudoir, feeling gratified that he should not be lacking in the swift expression of his thanks.

Yet when I greeted him he seemed perplexed, and taking the packet I had sent him from his pocket, he read aloud my own note: "The enclosed letter from Monsieur Desormes will explain the theft of the paper, and prove the innocence of Gaspard, whom you so unjustly accused."

I nodded.

"Do you know the contents of Monsieur Desormes's letter, madame?"

"Partially. 'Because others who are innocent, monsieur, have been suspected, I am prepared to place in your possession the name of the man.' That is what Monsieur Desormes wrote."

Monsieur Roché gravely shook his head and handed the letter to me, and I took it with a chill at my heart, dreading that I had been deceived.

I opened the envelope and withdrew two sheets of paper—blank.

Save at the bottom of the second sheet, where—as a sign of the writing which in the day that had passed had faded, just legible—could be discerned "sormes."

That was all that was left of the words that a day before covered the sheet. The end of the man's signature. The rest had vanished.

I pointed it out to Monsieur Roché, and the perplexity upon his face grew to startled surprise as he caught my meaning glance.

"The last time I saw those sheets, monsieur, they were covered with writing."

"Ah!"

"Monsieur Desormes has been as good as his word; he has saved an innocent man from ruin. His pledge to you was written with this same ink, and faded away a few hours afterwards, leaving only the blank sheet. He has been as good as his word."

"And as good as his intent," Monsieur Roché responded. "He will overthrow the ministry. But for you, *ma chère*, this is a night of glowing and thrilling victory. Allow me to see you to your carriage."

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